

How to lick Roland Barthes' tongue: an interview with Paloma Vidal

Paloma Vidal (UNIFESP)

Interviewers:

Márcia Cristina Fráguas (UERJ/CAPES)
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In this dossier which deals with artists' writings, *Palimpsesto* – student journal of the Postgraduate Program in Literature at UERJ – had the opportunity interview professor, translator and writer Paloma Vidal. PhD in Literature from PUC-Rio, she currently teaches Literary Theory at the Federal University of São Paulo. Born in Buenos Aires, she lived in Rio de Janeiro from the age 2 to 25 years old. Her experience between Brazil and Argentina is reflected in her theoretical and literary production. As a researcher, she has dedicated herself to work on contemporary Latin American literature and issues of literary theory, linked, among others, to narratives of exile, migration and travelling; to literature written under dictatorships; to the writings of the self and performance; to diaries, notebooks, and other forms of notetaking; to issues of translation and living between languages. A prolific writer, she has published several theoretical essays, novels, short stories, poetry, among others, in addition to maintaining her blog “Places where I'm not from” ([www. Escritosgeograficos.blogspot.com](http://www.Escritosgeograficos.blogspot.com)).

Our conversation started out with Paloma Vidal's relationship with the writings of Roland Barthes, whose work was the subject of the author's research and with whom she dialogues in her poetic and essayistic work. At the end of 2023, she released the essays book *Not Writing [with Roland Barthes]* through Tinta-da-China publishing house.

PALIMPSESTO

1) Paloma, you understood Roland Barthes' “non-writing” process particularly well. It seems that the critic put off a novel project his entire life, which, however, can be seen in some of his works, such as *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, which, by bringing together different authorial voices, ends up slipping into literature. There are also works such as

Camera Lucida and *Mourning Diary*, in which it is possible to notice the presence of the literary. We would like you to comment a little bit about this and the relationship with your book of essays *Not Writing (with Roland Barthes)*.

PALOMA VIDAL

This delay that you both mention was the beginning of a rapprochement of mine with Barthes' work – which I read a lot at the beginning of my graduation, as a Literature student –, because I was moved and worried by the ghost of paralysis and failure, linked to a moment of mourning. Ever since I read the course *The Preparing the Novel* I have been touched by the effort to transform this ghost into fantasy, through a fantasised novel that one wishes to prepare. But I also felt strange about his need name it as a “Novel”, delimiting a form, whereas I saw him writing other texts that would not fit within this demarcation, but that went in the direction of the novel. Mobilizing a “non-writing” in Barthes meant meeting what he wrote while he was not writing and writing myself based on these writings above all.

PALIMPSESTO

2) The tension between the first and third person, the fictional voice and the critic's voice, is a central issue in Roland Barthes' work, which appears in the presence of the fragment, in the critical annotation with a confessional tone, made at the foot of the page so that someone else could read, the pleasure of the text. How is this “Barthesian passion” articulated in your process of literary and critical writing?

PALOMA VIDAL

An idea which influenced my rapprochement with Barthes was that of a “toolbox”, in the sense that I started to realize that I learned a lot from what he did in several of his texts, with a series of procedures, such as the mix between first and third person in *Roland Barthes on Roland Barthes*; or the montage of text and image, in different ways, in this book, in *Empire of Signs* and in *Camera Lucida*; or the use of alphabetical order in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, and so on. Getting closer to him like this also had to do

with the pleasure of a writing process that is like a laboratory in which you work with different types of materials, like on a worktable, in a very manual and amateur way, which was characteristic of his way of working with writing.

PALIMPSESTO

3) Your literary work, which consists of more than 20 titles, moves between poetry and prose with visible intensity. Based on this, how does your creativity process happen: is it continuously or does it take place through intervals during writing?

PALOMA VIDAL

On the one hand, reflecting on the books I have already published, I would say that I work in a discontinuous way, because each book is different, with its process and procedures, and I dedicate myself to them as to an object, thinking about the text in relation to the peritexts, the layout, circulation, etc., seeking a dialogue with the editors, whose work I value very much in this sense. So, entering a book is entering a world, which involves writing and these processes around it, from which at some point I need to leave, and it takes me some time to enter that state again. On the other hand, writing is a continuum for me, which always accompanies me, as daily writing, notes, which involves book projects, but not only that, because it is also intimate writing, as a support for life.

PALIMPSESTO

4) There is a statement of yours in a 2015 interview that caught our eyes. On that occasion, you declared that you do not have any type of “allegiance” to literary categories. In your opinion, do you feel that literary criticism insists on placing your works within categories with which you do not identify?

PALOMA VIDAL

I would not say so. I believe that, in fact, in the sense of the readings that are made of a work, any work, there is not “the” literary criticism, but several readers, who read

based on their own needs and desires, as I do myself while working with different authors. I do not remember what statement that was, but perhaps I was responding to one of these readings, specifically, in the sense of coming up with a lame excuse, because I am actually interested in a more expanded and non-specific idea of writing or text, which concerns a continuous practice, as I said before, which materializes into books fulfilling their own needs and not pre-established categories, such as literary genre.

PALIMPSESTO

5) In this process of “licking Roland Barthes’ tongue”, in Caetano Veloso's words, what were the pains and delights of writing (or not) which you learned from the French critic?

PALOMA VIDAL

I have learned so much from Barthes since I started reading his works that it is hard to answer... But I would say that, from the moment he became a kind of fictional character to me, it was a great pleasure to work with him, in the border between writing and not writing, as in a kind of a clumsy *pas de deux*, in which the mistakes I could make (and I'm referring to a lack of fidelity to him, which is at stake when we approach a figure with the importance he has got and this generates a lot of anguish) would be incorporated into my writing around him, making it all much more amusing.

Paloma Vidal: Born in Buenos Aires in 1975, she is a writer and Literary Theory professor at the Federal University of São Paulo. She dedicates herself to writing fiction and criticism, and she has already published novels, plays, short stories, essays and poetry, including: *Somewhere* (7Letras, 2009), *Mar Blue* (Rocco, 2012), *Three Plays* (Dobra, 2014), *Double Exposure* (Rocco, 2016), *Wyoming and Menini* (7Letras, 2018), *Being in-between: essays on literatures in transit* (Papéis Selvagens, 2019), *Prehistory* (7Letras, 2020), *La banda oriental* (Tenemos las Máquinas, 2021) and *Not writing [with Roland Barthes]* (Tinta-da-China, 2023). She has translated to Spanish names such as Clarice Lispector, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Lina Meruane, Sylvia Molloy, Margo Glantz,

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