

Title: Lucía Martínez Valdivia on Unifying and Divisive Identities
Episode: 38

Transcript

[Music]

[Welcome to *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, featuring conversations with scholars and authors and ideas from diverse perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: My guest today is Lucía Martínez Valdivia, assistant professor at Reed College in Oregon. Some of you know her as the professor whose lecture was effectively cancelled by student protesters who didn't let her speak. That incident was covered by The Atlantic, The Economist, and The Washington Post among others. She also talked about that experience at Heterodox Academy's 1st Conference—you can find that talk on YouTube by searching for Heterodox A View From the Academy

Today I'll be talking to Lucia about how to use and misuse the concept of identity. We'll be talking about how people have multiple identities that go beyond what college typically ask you to focus on. And we're going to discuss how the identity of student or learner can unify the students on a college campus.

Chris Martin: Hi Lucia.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: Hi Chris.

Chris Martin: I would like to start by talking about the humanities sequence before we jump into the conversation about diversity. Some of our non-US listeners and maybe even some of our American listeners might not know what humanities sequences are.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: Yeah, of course. First, thank you so much for having me on the *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*. I'm really pleased to be able to talk with you about this. So a little bit of background for the uninitiated. Humanities 110 or we just tend to call it Hum 110 on Reed's campus is the required course for all incoming first year students. It's a yearlong course requiring about six hours of classroom time every week. Of those six hours, three are in lectures, which the first year class attends at least in theory as a whole.

So this means that in addition to the shared reading experience, the syllabus, the assigned readings, they're getting a shared experience by

listening to the same set of lectures delivered by the 25 faculty who teach in the course.

Our faculty are pulled from departments specializing in all the humanistic disciplines taught at Reed including the modern languages and literatures, political science, history, art, classics, philosophy, religion. You get the idea.

So that in any given semester, you might hear a political scientist lecture on the Apadana Complex in ancient Persia or an early modernist from the French department interpreting the construction of gender in *Medea* or an art theorist's take on book 10 of Plato's *Republic*.

Those are all lectures I've heard in my time at Reed. The other three hours of class time of the six hours are spent in discussion groups, which at Reed we call conferences. Each one of those conferences is led by one of the faculty members teaching on the course.

So in these breakout sessions, students talk about lectures. They talk about the readings and they also write seven papers over the course of the academic year.

So it's a fairly intensive course. But believe it or not, it used to be even more intensive because when it was first organized in 1943, those discussion sections met five days a week instead of three.

The syllabus began – and this was back in '43 – with Babylon and Egypt and then charged through Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, the medieval church and monarchy in Europe, the renaissance, the reformation, commercial revolution, parliamentarianism, the 17th century, the state and society then, science arising in the 18th century and social philosophy.

So it was a massive syllabus in terms of its historical range.

Chris Martin: So that was about as broad as you can get in a course. I think of our sequence at Davidson College; it was a four-semester sequence there because that made it more manageable to get through that whole time period.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: Yeah, exactly and even it's – I think one could hardly even call it a time period. It's just this historical sprawl. So over the decades, the course evolved as sort of most long-lasting core courses do.

Sometimes it would take a more limited and at other times, it would take a more expansive view of history, sometimes focusing only on the ancient world, sometimes veering into the modern world.

In the '80s, I think it was, that it was divided into a few cluster courses. So a few professors taught different sort of topics and that lasted for about a decade before the course was reunified in the '90s. So when I arrived at Reed, which was five years ago, we started with *Gilgamesh* and ended with Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*.

Currently we're still beginning with *Gilgamesh* and now we're ending with Ralph Ellison. So this is all to say the course changes constantly in terms of its content. Regardless of those changes though, I think the goals have remained roughly the same since 1943, which are to introduce students to the various humanistic disciplines that they can study at Reed, to teach students to think and write critically and with care and to teach them to ask questions about the way in which culture shapes the individual and vice versa. Or at least those are my goals for my students, right? Every professor has their own sort of set of desired outcomes. But I think open-mindedness and critical thinking are something that we all share.

Chris Martin: So given the controversies around the course, there have been discussions now at Reed on what to do with students who feel like they are marginalized on the basis of their identities. Tell me a bit about what kind of shape these discussions have had.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: Yeah. I mean I think the – an internal level at least, those discussions have been ongoing and constant. I think lately – and this doesn't just have to do with Hum. I think this has to do with Reed in general is that the discussion has started to focus on questions of inclusion, of how we can help students, new students arriving at Reed, regardless of what majors they plan on taking, regardless of sort of which classes they feel more comfortable in. How can we help students feel that they belong? I think that's almost a way of addressing something that is now I think beginning to become a common part of the discussions around academia and its structures and its strength and its weaknesses, which is impostor syndrome. How can we help students sort of battle that – or even better, I think idealistically, right? How can we get rid of impostor syndrome altogether?

I don't know how realistic that really is as a goal. I think it's sort of human nature in many ways to just constantly be questioning yourself or at least if you're aware and you have a good sense of yourself in the world and what you could do and what you are doing, you're usually going to feel you could be doing better.

So for me, I'm a third generation PhD with sort of degrees, with three different sets of degrees. I've always done well in school and even I never quite feel that I am good enough, that I really sort of belong.

Chris Martin: Yeah. Well, there's a lot of pressure in general I think in American life too to monitor the impression you're making on others and some data I've seen show that that has been increasing in the last 40 to 50 years. So cell phones with cameras embedded in them and the selfie-taking culture certainly hasn't helped.

So I think we're just more aware that we are constantly making impressions on other people and maybe in high pressure atmospheres like academia you're likely to have almost no one who doesn't have impostor syndrome at some point.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: Oh, absolutely. I think that's the thing. It's sort of one way to deal with that is to say, "How can we get rid of it?" I think another way to do that is sort of say, "Well, this is normal. This is a way of being in the world. This is a way of being a political animal for better or for worse."

This is – as you said, sort of especially because of social media, we are more networked now in some ways than we used to be. So whereas maybe 10, 15, 20 years ago, if I had been in the position I am now, I wouldn't know, sort of not easily at least, how many of my colleagues at other universities were publishing articles or at what rate they were publishing and things like that.

Now because people have the opportunity to – I think rightly to self-promote and to celebrate their successes, that also sort of puts us in contact comparatively with those successes and we keep questioning ourselves and judging ourselves and measuring ourselves in relation to those successes of other people. So it's a double-edged sword.

Chris Martin: So the discussions around identity and around inclusion, have those been focused primarily on race, gender and sexual orientation and how those identities – essentially what I'm saying is, is there an assumption that those identities of race, gender and sexual orientation are somehow more central than others?

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: I think at Reed, those together with low socioeconomic status or first generation student status have been foregrounded or emphasized. But I find it striking that you're talking about identities, which I think is important because we all do have these

sorts of multiple identities that combine in different ways to create sort of the unique animal that each one of us is.

The way it tends to be talked about at least on Reed's campus though or at least the way I tend to hear it spoken about is identity, singular, right? What student with this identity or that identity – how can we help that student with that identity feel like they belong at Reed?

I think the answer is in part to avoid speaking about it in the singular and to speak about it in the plural to emphasize that fact that we all have different identities, different sort of expertise of being I guess maybe. It's one way to think about that. Different experiences that we bring to the table and that those need not be hierarchized. That some of those might be easily visible, so that I can look at somebody's skin color and say, "Oh, you're that identity," or I can look at somebody's gender presentation and say, "Oh, you're probably that identity."

I think those are – what they ultimately end up doing is that they create these hierarchies of which identities are more or less oppressed, which ones are more or less valuable, which ones are more or less included.

Instead of we move away from that focus on singular identity to thinking about the plural identities that every person has, we can start seeing them each as individuals instead of as part of a group.

I think the flipside to that, maybe ironically, maybe paradoxically, is that the way in which or one of the ways in which we can address this question of belonging, of how we develop senses of belonging in our students, is to foreground one identity, which is one that I don't think gets raised that often in discussion, at least not in terms of what we've heard, what faculty have heard from the student services side of things.

This is an identity that I haven't heard mentioned and that is the identity of student, the identity of learner. I think were we to focus or foreground that identity, we could get a lot of good work done in terms of making students belong or making students feel like they belong and affirming that belonging in a certain place or in a certain community.

I think by virtue of having multiple identities in different context, in different rooms, in different spaces with different people, we foreground different identities.

I think when you've chosen to go to college, when you've chosen to pursue a degree, at least when you're in the classroom, you're choosing to foreground the identity of learner. I think if we can put an emphasis on that and say everybody who's in this room has said that they have

something to learn about the world, has said that there is some kind of gap in their knowledge or their experience that they want to fill, that there are answers that they are looking for, that there are questions they want to learn how to ask, I think if we foreground that posture, that way of being in the world, that could do a lot to unify students, to make them feel like they belong and then in turn, once that's established, once you have that canvass, that identitarian canvass if you will, then you can practice things like heterodoxy. You can practice and express difference in a way that feels not explicitly threatening. Unsettling maybe. It's always sort of unsettling to expand your view of the world because it sort of reorients you in it, right?

Chris Martin: Right. Well, what you don't want to foster is an adversarial relationship unless that's absolutely necessary.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: Yes.

Chris Martin: When you do get people locked into this idea of identities, it's very likely that that's what you're going to foster.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: Yeah. Well, that's the thing, right? Identities tend to – and this is one of the things we talk about in Hum. How are communities formed? How are identities established? How are they expressed? It's usually in terms of us not them, right? That there is some kind of difference that you set up, a binary that you set up by virtue of which you can then say, "I am American and not European," or "I am an English speaker and not a Chinese speaker," or something like that, right?

So I think by shifting that a little bit to what is our shared identity in this room, right? Not against one another. But what have we all – by virtue of choosing to be an us, what are – what is that us? What is it constituted of? What are its characteristics? What are its shared experiences?

Chris Martin: And by talking about very distinct identities, you're setting up a situation where there's just a higher probability that there's going to be an adversarial relationship.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: Yeah. Well, by virtue of talking about identity, you're already – as we said, you're establishing a difference from another person or from another group of people in order to assert X or Y or Z identity, right? So which is essentially setting up the two groups of people or the two individuals in an adversarial posture because they're focusing on difference in I think a binary way. At least that's often the way in which it gets practiced, right?

You are either of color or you're not of color. You are either of sort of minority gender or you are not. So that sets up this adversarial relationship and also I think contributes to the sense of one person or one group being the in group and the other group being the out group, which sort of needs to be incorporated. It needs to be brought in as opposed to always already essentially being part of a larger group identity.

Chris Martin: Right. I think it also makes the out group so to speak feel like they are a commodity and they've been brought into campus to fill the diversity quota. When I was an undergrad at Davidson College. I was really grateful for the scholarship I got there and I had excellent professors and in fact, I had one professor named Zimmerman. He was a Reed College professor and then became a Hum's college professor at Davidson.

But one disadvantage of being an international student there was the times you felt like you were a commodity that had been brought to campus. So that instead of being 99 percent white, it was something like 91 percent white.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: Yes, exactly. It's much better that way, right? I've had – well, I don't know that it would be a similar experience. But I was – it might be an analogous experience. I went to Florida State as an undergraduate and my scholarship was also sort of a special scholarship. But it was a special scholarship for several thousand students because it was based on the national Hispanic scholar sort of ranking that you get from taking the PSAT.

So my floor of my dorm was – in large part, it was an honors dorm and it was Hispanic students, some visible, some not visible. Sort of some who were [0:15:41] *[Indiscernible]* and had no sign of visible Hispanicity in either their names or anywhere else and Hispanic was the term that they were using then, right?

Obviously now we think about sort of Latino and Latina identity. But they were from Texas. They were from Florida. They were from California. Sort of a concentration of people from these states being – and I'm not sure what the motive was and that would be something I would be curious about, what the motive was for funding this to the degree it was funded at Florida State, to the degree it was funded by the university.

Was it meant to – rather than sort of diversify the institution just for the sake of diversity on its own, was it meant to create a sort of fair representation or an accurate representation of the ethnic makeup of the

State of Florida? Was it an effort to sort of create balance in that way, to create equity in that way? I don't really know.

But there were so many of us that I didn't feel tokenized in a way that I think I would end up feeling tokenized at a much smaller institution where you are sort of one of maybe twenty or thirty or forty.

Chris Martin: Right, right.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: Right. And not only tokenized but potentially sort of – I think that can be a way of raising questions about impostor syndrome. Do I really belong here or have I been brought in to fill certain numbers, to make the optics better? That's something that I think about as a faculty member too, right?

Was I hired as part of a diversity initiative or was my hiring the result of an open search that turned out the way it did because I was the best qualified for this particular job? As we all know, sort of higher ed faculty searches are in some part qualification and some part luck and then some part I think – sometimes there's a little bit of administrative cynicism.

Chris Martin: Right.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: At work. And all I can say, speaking from this sort of ad hominem of – from my own perspective is that I am really, really, really glad that my hiring was the result of an open search. That I know that it wasn't sort of – they were looking for somebody of X identity to fill a post but they were looking for a good teacher and a good scholar of what it is I do and that I got that job. That might be again I think a sort of optimistic or idealistic version of diversity practices in hiring. They've created incredible benefits and they have done incredible work over the decades to create a more representative faculty population, to create a more representative student population, one that mirrors or comes closer to mirroring or tries to get there, right? In terms of its relationship to the general population.

But I do constantly wonder sort of. If I knew that only people of color had been invited for my position, which is a position that has nothing to do with race or ethnicity, how would I feel about my own work? How would I feel about my own – about confidence in my work both as a teacher and as a scholar?

Chris Martin: Yeah, I came from a department or at least where I did my PhD where they did have diversity hires and I don't know how those people felt. I mean the academic job market is so competitive. I'm sure

you feel glad just to have found something. But at the same time, you do feel like you weren't hired in an open search. I don't know what that's like.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: Yeah, I don't either.

Chris Martin: Yeah. So when it comes to feelings of exclusion, what do you do if a student comes to you and says they feel like they don't belong or they feel like they're excluded at Reed or in the Hum's course?

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: That's a really great question. For me, I usually try to provide context for that student rather than calling attention to – or rather than sort of asking them questions about their own sort of frame of mind and those ideas, which I'm not really – I'm not a trained psychologist. I don't really – other than sort of based on my own experience, I'm not really sure in my own empathy.

I'm not really sure how to deal with those things and so what I try to do rather than focus on telling them how they should feel about X or Y or Z situation, I try to turn the attention to again that shared experience in the classroom, to the fact that believe it or not, many of your classmates are feeling the same way. Believe it or not, there are people also struggling all around you, which isn't to say that your struggle doesn't matter. But it's to say that it's OK to struggle and that it's normal to struggle and that it's normal to feel sort of displaced and uncertain of where you belong in the world.

Especially I think if you're taking a course like Hum 110 because it is exposing you to things, to ways of thought, to other people's experiences, to cultures that you haven't necessarily thought of before and by virtue of doing that, it is expanding your view of the world. When your view gets expanded, your perspective necessarily shifts. You necessarily are in a different position relative to the horizon than you were five minutes before you read that text, thirty seconds before you had that idea.

That is fundamentally destabilizing. That raises questions about who we are and whether we belong. So again I try to focus on the fact that it's OK to not know and the fact that it's OK to be somebody not knowing aloud in the space.

I think if a student comes to me with evidence of discriminatory experiences, that I will absolutely sort of try to address. I have in classes where I have seen that arise where people have say dismissed a religious point of view in reading the bible or something like that as sort of – oh,

how could they possibly? Ha-ha! Like these crazy fanatics, right? Try to reframe if instead of well, let's think seriously about the role religion plays in practice in our day to day lives regardless of whether or not we believe in it. The role in which – the role religion has taken in shaping our sort of political structures, the ways in which it has a very real and very serious impact not only on us but on other people who maybe also do not believe in God, but who are nonetheless surrounded by or living in communities that are shaped by thinking that is fundamentally religious.

So I try to – when that happens, rather than say, “You shouldn't say that,” or “You can't say that,” to instead say, “You need to, we need to take this seriously and these are the reasons why and this is why that is a responsible way in which to encounter difference, to encounter things that are foreign or strange to us,” as opposed to sort of taking a posture that constantly distances and alienates those things from us.

I feel like I'm talking in contradictions because on the one hand, we shouldn't look at people who are different from us and only try to find similarities.

On the other hand, awareness of those similarities makes a – and I hate to use this phrase – a safe space or a sort of a space from which we can comfortably and openly think about differences.

Once we have figured out what we have in common, we can sort of expand from there and point to those differences also while maintaining a connection with one another in the classroom or while maintaining a connection with our [0:23:48] [*Indiscernible*] study.

Chris Martin: I teach a course on happiness at the moment and one of the nice things about teaching that is I can draw as much as I want from any discipline. So I can draw from history and talk about in a way one thing that unites all of us is that really regardless of where you're from, about 500 years ago, your ancestors were living in a small village in a community. It was a pre-capitalist system. So we all have similar roots. All of our societies are still dealing with the fact that the world has been shaken up by the Industrial Revolution and capitalism and globalization and regardless of where you are, you are slightly confused by all of these things.

I also talk to them about how in some fields, there really are incentives only to talk about what people don't have in common. So if you look at anthropology for example, there's a fascinating anthropologist named Alan Fiske, but almost all of his publications and his contributions have been in psychology or at least appreciated within psychology and

anthropology itself is a bit of pariah because he mostly talks about what people have in common around the world.

So I try to draw attention to the fact that when students are studying in a particular discipline, they have to be aware of the fact that that discipline was shaped by incentives that they don't see.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: Yes, exactly and constantly calling attention to not only the sort of different factors that shaped each of our disciplines but also the different biases that each discipline brings to bear on their objects of study because you can have two different perspectives, two different disciplinary perspectives looking at the same object and they will look at it in very different ways.

I think that's something to constantly draw attention to and foreground especially as students are first encountering these disciplines. That they need to understand them as constructions and ways in which we sort of decide to see the world.

Chris Martin: Well, I think that's a good place to wrap up. Any final thoughts?

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: Well, I have a question for you which is, "What is it like to teach a course on happiness in America in 2018?" I don't know that that's a pertinent question. But I'm really, really curious.

Chris Martin: You know, there was one semester when I taught it. It was actually the semester of fall 2016 when I talked quite deliberately about politics and about understanding on a global scale why in every country you go to, there are some conservatives and some liberals and how to understand the difference between them.

Then I also talk about the particularities of the Republican Party and the Democratic Party and how the Republican Party has really changed substantially thanks to Newt Gingrich and the succession of leaders in that party. So you can't really understand America just through the lens of conservative versus liberal.

I talk about how there may be other countries where the Liberal Party has become the more radical party at countries where both parties are quite radical. So I don't try to stigmatize conservatives in any way. I do point out there's that sort of diversity. But I spend a lot of time talking about things that have happened on a larger scale too. So I talk about economics and how there's just divergence now where for the last 40 to

50 years, people in the middle and lower percentiles of the income distribution haven't really experienced much growth.

So I talk about larger scale issues rather than just things that are relevant in this decade. Then I go back to much wider timescales and talk about how humans have a sense of community and sometimes people can have a lot of money but still not feel community because those draw on different parts of our brain. I'm actually drawing to some degree on Alan Fiske's research, something I just mentioned.

But it's – I mean I feel very fortunate to teach this course because I can draw from every social science and philosophy and religion as well.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: Yeah, I know. That's fascinating. I was also thinking about sort of the rhetoric of happiness and where that gets expressed on the political spectrum in 2018 in America as opposed to say the rhetoric of safety or the different ways in which those different ideas get deployed in different moments by different political sort of interests. But yeah, that was just a personal curiosity on my part.

Chris Martin: Yeah. Well, I do talk to them about self-compassion. There's a scholar named Kristin Neff who has done a lot of work on self-compassion which is an idea she drew from Buddhism and one component is common humanity. So when you feel like you've been struck by something really extraordinary in terms of bad fate, you can remind yourself, if you distance yourself a little bit, that what you're facing is probably something that everyone has faced. It's probably not unique, even though in the moment you might be tempted to think that you have been uniquely cursed with whatever it is.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: It's a unique instance of a very common sort of feeling.

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: A very common conflict.

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: I think that's a nice way of finding it again of sort of thinking in terms of commonality while at the same time having that then become a way in which you can examine or think about the sort of particulars, the particulars of that instance, the differences, the distinctions of that instance of commonality.

Chris Martin: Right. Well, it has been great having you on the show. Thank you again for joining us.

Lucía Martínez Valdivia: Oh, thank you so much. I really enjoyed it.

Chris Martin: In the show notes, you'll link to the text of Lucía's lecture on the relevance of the humanities course, and some other relevant article. There's also a link to her Twitter page. Her Twitter handle is @luciascans.

Coming up, we'll have a Thanksgiving episode shortly with guests hosts Deb Mashek and Richard Davies interviewing author A J Jacobs, author of several books including Thanks a Thousand: A Gratitude Journey, The Year of Living Biblically, and My Life as an Experiment.

And in late November, there will be an episode featuring Tania Reynolds, social psychologist at the Kinsey Institute for Sex, Gender, and Reproduction.

If you have any comments about today's episode, you can contact me at podcast@heterodoxacademy.org or tag me on Twitter @Chrismartin76. Thanks for listening.

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