

## Gala Dinner Keynote Address, May 28, 2016

by ALMA GUILLERMOPRIETO

This is a happy reunion, and I'd like to thank everyone involved in the organization of such a historic event for the privilege and honor of participating in it. I'm sure many of us would like to thank Milagros Pereyra Rojas and, most importantly, Gil Joseph, an admirable scholar, book editor, enthusiast, teacher, who doesn't normally spend his time choosing menus or coordinating rush-hour-size gatherings. The program is 197 pages long! There are 1,326 events! Everything you ever wanted to know about Latin America without even realizing it is all here, and then some! So thank you, Gil, and everyone on the LASA staff for putting in the time and enormous effort to make this week's brilliant reunion possible.

There are a great many Latin Americanists here tonight whom I would like to thank for their illuminating thought, the originality of their perspective, their commitment and focus on Latin America. All of them have made it possible for me to think better, report better, and, I hope, write better. But there are also many—so many!—who are no longer here to be thanked.

We all have our own list, but, for me, the list of those I remember begins with Friedrich Katz. Something very strange happens when I think of his monumental study, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa*. I don't see the book pages, I see the landscape in all its harsh surfaces. I don't see the words in print; I see Doroteo Arango on the run, the church towers in Torreón, the hacendado's stockhouses filled with grain. Katz helped me to walk directly into Villa's life and, through him, to see my country with new eyes.

I still can't think about the Peruvian anthropologist Carlos Iván Degregori without feeling sorrow that he died so

soon. I talked to him for only an hour one afternoon in Lima, and doors opened in my understanding of terror and that freak accident of history that was the fourth sword, *la cuarta espada*, of Peru's ruin. But I also remember from our conversation the admiration I felt for his intellectual stance; the bemused horror, the appalled wit, the determination to apportion responsibility for the tragedy of Shining Path with honesty, and fairness, and, above all, the decision to live life fully as an intellectual of his time.

The Austrian expatriate archaeologist Gerhard Reichel-Dolmatoff spent the second part of his life—his reincarnation in Colombia, you might call it—in the expiation of the dreadful crimes he committed as a youthful member of the Nazi SS. Essentially, he founded Colombian anthropology, taught and mentored, and as an archaeologist produced beautiful work. Reading his text on gold and shamanism was a paradoxical experience in filigree intellectual discipline and an almost shamanistic flight into areas of human spiritual experience that people in academia are generally reluctant to touch. I remain grateful for the way he expanded my understanding of our many human dimensions.

This is what you do, all of you—historians, anthropologists, sociologists, scientists—you make the world bigger. You take a flat, colored map in a book and breathe life into it, give it history, volume, dimension, reality. The body of work produced by Latin Americanists born everywhere from Banff to Puerto Montt, from Tomsk to Norman, Oklahoma, has traced the life history of a land. Thanks to you, we can learn that there existed on the blurry Uruguayan-Brazilian border a great movement of revolutionary caudillos. We, the readers, have been able to imagine

a *maloca* deep in the Brazilian Amazon where the tribespeople spend the night sleeping and dreaming in short shifts, and contemplating the starry sky. We have followed the unlocking of the mystery of the great Maya cosmic tree and the ongoing exploration of the ruins of Templo Mayor. We have had the opportunity to consider what can be done to improve incarceration practices in Colombia, and learned about the extraordinary intertwining of Communist Party agitators and the CIA with artists, writers, and intellectuals, as the cultural Cold War played itself out south of the U.S. border. These are great gifts.

I might have wished for a career as an archaeologist myself, but life is one long accident. Out of a combination of willfulness, political idealism, and a taste for adventure, I started out as a reporter in Nicaragua and lived through the never-to-be repeated euphoria of the national uprising to overthrow Anastasio Somoza. Without really deciding that journalism might be something I could do for the rest of my life, I went to live in San Salvador. It was during the nightmarish year of 1980, when the Salvadoran government connived with death squads to violate every known principle of human decency, before the actual war broke out, that I came across the scene that brought journalism to me as a vocation. I was crossing the street toward a little amusement park in an empty lot—a merry-go-round and a Ferris wheel—on the big avenue that leads to the Camino Real. It was a particularly hot, harsh day; the asphalt was glittery and I couldn't be quite sure of what I was seeing, but I came closer and saw that it was a campesino woman—brown skin, shabby dress, apron, neat black hair—standing in the still, despairing pose that had become so familiar in that wretched time; holding herself tightly around the waist with one hand, cupping

her face with the other. Then I realized that the *bulto* at her feet was in fact a young man. He was dead, he had been shot, but someone—that is, his mother—had cleaned him up, washed him, and dressed him in a clean shirt. Next to him there was one of those large yellow tins dried milk used to come in, Leche Nido, and I understood that it was placed there in the woman’s hope that people would drop enough coins in it to allow her to take her son home and bury him. And of course no one was going anywhere near that spot.

It was at that moment, watching a woman whose child had been killed at the hands of perverts smiled on by their government, and ignored in the pieties mouthed by the government of the United States about the government of El Salvador, that I took on reporting as a commitment for the first time. Because who else but us journalists could try to ensure that that woman and her grief were noticed, recorded, known? Who else could try to make sure that her son’s murder was factored into the lying statistics the embassy liked to throw in our face back then? If not us, who?

Both LASA and many of the individuals at this meeting came to Latin America in a fiery time. In 1966, when LASA was founded, Ernesto Guevara, known as Che, wasn’t even dead yet. He hadn’t been born into the afterlife of a culture hero to end all culture heroes, but the ferment created by the Cuban revolution and his own example had already changed our attitude to life and politics in Latin America forever. Some of us, perhaps even a majority of my contemporaries at this meeting, were caught up in the passion of those times, and for a while abdicated from all common sense. Others chose to keep their distance. And U.S. government officials viewed Latin America as “problematic,” like a child with a behavioral disability on which different

cognitive, behavioral, chemical, or negative reinforcement therapies must be tried. In every case, the approach was partial, uncomfortable, blinded by ideology, and unsustainable.

It is one of your great tasks as Latin Americanists, whether born in the region or in the *gigante del norte*, to figure out your own stance vis-à-vis the United States, whose territory we are not in right now, I duly note. Now that over 40 percent of LASA members are actually *from* Latin America the question of the proper stance has become both more complex and more necessary. But whether you are Mexican archeologists working in Cahokia (I have no idea if there are any, but wouldn’t it be terrific if there were? Wouldn’t that enrich the field immeasurably?), or U.S. anthropologists in the Chaco, this relationship has to be worked out with due skepticism, but also with equanimity and respect.

I often wonder what Latin America might have looked like today if it hadn’t been for the Cold War, if it hadn’t been for the Contra war, and the Salvadoran conflict, and the Guatemalan coup.

I think about what Latin America might have looked like today if it hadn’t been for the drug wars, launched by Richard Nixon in 1971 and reloaded by Ronald Reagan ten years later. What would our countries be like without a 45-year-old conflict with no identifiable enemy, no workable strategy, no hope of victory, and hundreds of thousands of victims?

It is one of the most hopeful developments of the last decades that the rhetoric that kept alive the war on drugs is at last bleached of all conviction, even among the drug warriors. The same is true of the ideology that fueled an even longer

conflict in Colombia, where with any luck we may soon see a peace treaty signed between the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia. (The world’s longest-lasting guerrillas—what an epithet!) The longest-running meaningless confrontation of all, the Cold War in Cuba, has ended at last. We can be cheerful about the return to common sense in all these conflicts even as other countries seem to be sinking yet again into a familiar cycle in which assorted scoundrels, demagogues, populists, and ideologues mistake democracy for a piñata and bring their country down around their ears with their blows.

But I worry too that huge ongoing crises like the drug wars have kept us from paying due attention to the slow-moving, radical changes, both positive and awful, that affect our lives just as much. I worry tremendously that no one in either the scientific or journalistic communities—or, I believe, in the social sciences—seems to understand that environmental ruin is a crisis with historical, political, and societal components. What will happen, for example, when the last of the glaciers melt in Bolivia and Peru, not long from now? Where will the entire altiplano region get its water from? The correct answer is nowhere. There is no alternative source of water other than the melting of the icebergs. The melting used to be seasonal, now it is constant.

As a reporter I must always be on the lookout for long-range effects, because I must constantly ask myself the question: am I looking at the right story? Am I asking the questions that will prepare me to understand the future? Here’s another story, one that perhaps tells me, eternal pessimist that I am, that there is hope. Over the course of four decades I’ve spent a lot of time in a little town a couple of

hours outside Mexico City. Forty years ago, when the men there still wore white cotton pants and shirts, and sandals with tire soles, one had to drive carefully in case there happened to be a man lying across the road, dead drunk. Thirty-five years ago a heavily pregnant woman in this town knelt before her drunken husband—who, sober, was a wonderful man, I should point out—and begged him not to shoot the child she was carrying in her belly, as he was threatening to do, hunting rifle in hand, in the conviction that she was *poniendole los cuernos*, deceiving him with another man.

That child survived, and now he has his own children. One of my great pleasures these days is watching Angel with his kids. He changed their diapers when they were infants. He is divorced now, but he picks up his children every morning and walks them to school. He is as proud of his two little girls as he is of the little boy. He talks constantly of his hope that, unlike him, all three will grow up to be highly educated professionals. And on weekends he can be seen, along with what I think is a majority of the younger fathers in this town, sitting in the churchyard or at the *helados* shop, chatting with the neighbors and watching his kids grow up. Who ever saw that before? How could this change come about in just a few decades, following centuries of poisonous machismo? To me, this new relationship between fathers and their children is as important as the melting of the Andean glaciers, because it means that we, as human beings, are capable of real love, even in societies where love has been hobbled by prejudice; of hope for the future, like Angel's hopes for his children, even in a traditionally pessimistic culture like Mexico's; and of positive change.

Latin America is new, changing, remarkably optimistic, critically environmentally endangered, and at a democratic

crossroads. What all of this means is that when this wonderful gathering, with its wellspring of information and critical thought comes to a conclusion, we will have to work harder than ever in order to understand. What fun! Nothing could be more challenging, nor more rewarding, nor more worthy of another 50 years of devoted effort by the members of the Latin American Studies Association. Long may it live, long may it prosper!

Thank you. ■