

From the President

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A Taste of Culture

A number of years ago a comparative literature graduate student came to my office in Cornell University to inquire about possibilities for funding research she hoped to pursue in Mexico. I asked her what specifically she wanted to do there, and she told me, “Honestly, what I really need to do is to breathe the air and eat the food.” I told her she needed a more compelling academic justification in order to satisfy the evaluators.

Years later, looking back on this incident, we might well ask if the student had a point, undertheorized but implicit in the blunt statement of her underlying need, something that sounds—on the face of it—all too distant from the objective, academic work we are taught we ought to aspire to. I pondered her comment again as I was thinking about what I wanted to share with you in my first column as president of our association. Why (and how) can we argue that it is necessary to spend time in-country, even for natives of that country, not just reading in the archives, but eating the food, speaking to the people? How does that make us better writers, thinkers, scholars? Why, conversely, is it also essential to scholarship to leave our home spaces, to share our ideas in international fora like the LASA annual conference, and participate in debates with people from other cultural contexts?

Many years ago, in “Problemática de la actual novela latinoamericana,” Cuban author Alejo Carpentier argued that the novel as we know it is a late-blossoming genre, an urban, middle-class, European phenomenon that does not necessarily transfer easily to other contexts or cultural environments. When it does make the transatlantic voyage, the novel needs to evolve to effectively narrate the spaces and

people in the American continent for Latin American readers as well as to translate Latin American realities for consumers from other parts of the world. In this 1964 article Carpentier enumerates a series of cultural, geographic, and ideological contexts that will require a fundamental rethinking and reshaping of the genre for Latin America. He takes into account racial formations, economic structures, political and social realities, considerations of distance and proportion and light. He also considers nature and foodways: “Nankín huele a salsa de soya como el Asia Central huele a grasa de carnero y pan sin levadura, en tanto que muchas ciudades mexicanas huelen a chile, mole y tortilla de maíz . . . porque la cocina Mexicana responde a una filosofía, a un sistema, a un discurso de método” (30). Only a few of the world’s cultures, he says—debatably—take food so seriously. More profoundly, he provides a reasoned context for the student who needed to go to Mexico to eat the food; according to Carpentier, to understand the Nanjing massacre, one needs to breathe the air of that city; to understand Mexican literature, one needs a basic grasp of that nation’s philosophy of cooking.

In his further elaboration of his theory, Carpentier argues why this kind of profoundly grounded research is even more crucial in the global south than it is in the north:

Enrique Heine nos habla, de repente, de un pino y una palmera, árboles por siempre plantadas en la gran cultura universal. La palabra *pino* basta para mostrarnos el pino; la palabra *palmera* basta para definir, pintar, mostrar la palmera. Pero la palabra *ceiba*—nombre de un árbol americano al que nos negros cubanos llaman “la madre de los árboles”—no basta para que las gentes



de otras latitudes vean el aspecto de columna rostral de ese árbol gigantesco, adusto y solitario, como sacada de otras edades, sagrado por linaje, cuyas ramas horizontales, casi paralelas, ofrecen al viento unos puñados de hojas tan inalcanzables para el hombre como incapaces de todo mecimiento. . . . A centenares de metros de allí . . . crecen unos papayos, herbáceas salidas de los primeros pantanos de la creación, con sus cuerpos blandos, cubiertos de medallones grises, sus hojas abiertas como manos de mendigo, sus ubres-fruta colgadas del cuello. (34–35)

Carpentier’s description of the trees, with the plain “pine and palm” set against the lush *barroquism* of the ceiba and the papayo, makes his stylistic point. Furthermore, in this paired juxtaposition of the pine and palm vs. the ceiba and papaya tree, in each case the first tree of the pair represents a symbol linked to primordial sacred practices while the second tree provides exotic or everyday fruit, depending on the geography—dates, perhaps, or papayas.

In the twenty-first century, globalized markets make papayas (a sad, much diminished replica of the udder-fruits Carpentier evokes) available to consumers across the globe, but they cannot speak to the conjunction of the ceiba and the papayo, or capture the fragrance of the *selva* or the taste of freshly picked fruit in the mouth. (The same cultural observation can go in the opposite direction, though Carpentier does not speak of this aspect; a Puerto Rican student once observed that

she never understood the attraction of eating an apple until she came to the United States.) How does a North American explain cranberries to someone from other latitudes without talking about Thanksgiving and the history of that maligned, celebrated holiday in the United States? In what way does the now-common practice of decorating plastic Christmas trees across the entire American continent speak to the omnipresence of Heine's pine? How does one talk about the ceiba without telling the story of Africans in the Caribbean (I am thinking, for example, of Roberto Burgos Cantor's brilliant 2007 historical novel set in Cartagena, *La ceiba de la memoria*), or of the deep Maya respect for the world-tree, now hybridized with European Christian overtones in "traditional Catholic" practices?

Burgos Cantor's novel ranges from the travels of a post-9/11 Anglo-Texan to the horrendous forced journeys of the Middle Passage and captures the polyphonic layerings of memory in new settlements. One of the characters muses:

Me aferro a mi nombre Analia Tu-Bari.
Atrapo mi memoria joven. A penas
comenzaba a poblarse con la historia de
los míos, mis aventuras recientes, el
sendero del cual vengo, mi lugar en la
aldea, esa pertenencia de la cual nos
vamos nutriendo, en la cual crecen las
raíces que nos sujetan y nos alimentan y
nos hacen fuertes como las ceibas que
nacieron de semillas de ceibas untadas
de lluvia y de tormentas. (73)

Just before writing this column, I was in Chiapas, Mexico, where Argovia coffee plantation owner Bruno Giesemann, a third-generation German-Mexican, pointed out to our combined group of students from the Tecnológico de Monterrey and

Cornell University some of the ways he was reinvesting in the selva, by listening carefully to elder knowledge, observing the ways of plants, and (he is a businessman, after all) finding at least three ways to capitalize on each product. We had just come from breakfast, with the taste of Argovia coffee, Argovia star fruit jam, and Argovia cardamom honey butter still in our mouths. Of no clear economic value but nevertheless a source of immense pride is a venerable ceiba—one of the oldest denizens on his land, over 200 years old, the sovereign of his carefully husbanded landscape. Carpentier or Burgos Cantor help bridge these mysteries for us.

Yale graduate student and poet Melissa Castillo-Garsow (LASA member and my daughter) was also on this trip to Chiapas; her response reflects another kind of intellectual engagement and scholarly reflection. Here's an excerpt:

The Ceiba

Attention: talent is why they keep us. Down.
We weren't always this poor
3,000 years before Christ
we wrote poems then too
...

I dig my hand deep and pull out
roots of my culture.
...

It's like the ceiba tree reaching
roots from the underworld
to the leaves. We grow. Cut us
and we grow again. From prickly
youth to pregnant trunk.
There's a reason why the ceiba tree
full grown looks like a pregnant woman
in her second trimester.

We glow.

References

Burgos Cantor, Roberto

2007 *La ceiba de la memoria*. Bogotá: Planeta.

Carpentier, Alejo

1967 *Tientos y diferencias*. Buenos Aires: Arca.

Castillo-Garsow, Melissa

2014 "La ceiba." Unpublished poem, cited with permission from the author. ■