

# Diane M. Nelson, “Lizard Queen”

by **Carlota McAllister** and **Elizabeth Oglesby**<sup>1</sup>

*Enter the wild with care, my love*

*And speak the things you see*

*Let new names take and root and  
thrive and grow*

*And even as you travel far from heather,  
crag, and river*

*May you like the little fisher, set the stream  
alight with glitter*

*May you enter now as otter without falter  
into water*

—“**The Lost Words Blessing**”

Renowned cultural anthropologist Diane M. Nelson passed away at her home in North Carolina, USA, on April 27, 2022, surrounded by her family. She was 58. The cause was pancreatic cancer, diagnosed mere months before her death. “She left us like a comet,” wrote a colleague, as tributes to Diane poured in from around the United States and Guatemala, where she spent her career writing about state violence and Indigenous politics and world-making. The many remembrances cite not only Diane’s creative and important scholarship, but also her wit, generosity, and luminous presence.

“Diane was a force of energy, full of enthusiasm and warmth, with an amazing sense of humor,” the 300-member Guatemala Scholars Network wrote on its Facebook page on April 28. “She was a brilliant anthropologist who led the way for many of us, and a loyal member of the GSN.

Diane made critical contributions to scholarship and praxis, mentoring and supporting many younger scholars through the GSN and beyond.”

Diane possessed an inimitable talent and intellectual flair as an anthropologist. But she also made conscientious decisions throughout her career about the kind of anthropologist she wanted to be, leaving us a legacy of impassioned engagement to carry on. She maintained a decades-long commitment to collaborating with Guatemalan scholars and activists and to nurturing those transnational networks. And she did it all with unforgettable sparkle and joy.

## A gringa in Guatemala

Diane Nelson was born in 1963 in Oxford, Ohio, USA. With an early theatrical bent, she performed in plays and show choir and sang soprano. Her lifelong love for Latin America began in 1980, when she was a high school exchange student in Mexico.<sup>2</sup> In 1981, she began university studies at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, where she was galvanized by Latin American struggles against military dictatorships. At a time when Ronald Reagan was intensifying US intervention in Central America, Diane became active in Central American solidarity movements in Boston, and the education in anti-imperialism she acquired there shaped her academic concerns and activism for the rest of her life.

Majoring in anthropology at Wellesley, Diane met one of her early mentors, Chilean anthropologist Beatriz Manz, who remembers her as inquisitive,

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<sup>2</sup> “A Celebration of the Life of Diane M. Nelson,” <https://sites.google.com/view/diane-m-nelson> (accessed June 18, 2022).

perceptive, and empathetic.<sup>3</sup> While much US solidarity in the 1980s was focused on El Salvador and Nicaragua, Beatriz Manz drew Diane instead to Guatemala, where hundreds of thousands of people, mostly Maya, had been displaced by the Guatemalan army's "scorched earth" repression in the early 1980s. In 1985, Beatriz sent Diane there to research conditions faced by the displaced, along with another recently graduated student, Paula Worby. Guatemala was still under a military dictatorship, and for five months Diane and Paula quietly documented human rights abuses in northern Huehuetenango and Quiché. That research was included in Beatriz Manz's book, *Refugees of a Hidden War: The Aftermath of Counterinsurgency in Guatemala* (SUNY Press, 1987). Shortly after, Diane completed another study of Guatemala's army-run "development poles," where displaced populations were being resettled, published in 1988 by the Mexico-based Centro de Estudios Integrados de Desarrollo Comunal.<sup>4</sup>

Her early experience in Guatemala gave Diane her enduring nickname: Lizard Queen. One day in Nebaj, a group of kids ran up to her, shouting, "Diana, ¡la reina de los lagartos!" This was a reference to a character in a science fiction series called *V* playing on television in the town's cantina, in which alien lizards disguised as humans (and ruled by their queen, Diana) threaten to take over the world, while resisters mount a valiant guerrilla struggle. For Diane, this moniker hailed her interest in popular culture, as well as the incongruities of the multiple boundary crossings she experienced and documented doing fieldwork.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout her research, Diane was rigorously self-reflexive about the embodied legacy that being a gringa, and particularly a gringa anthropologist, carried in post-genocide Guatemala. Guatemala has provided generations

of foreign anthropologists with field sites, particularly in Maya communities. They have generated a stream of ethnographies that furnish rich descriptions of the cultural and symbolic forms of Maya life, while all too often failing to consider Guatemalans, Maya and otherwise, as historical actors or theorists of their experience. The revolutionary mobilization of Maya communities in the late 1970s, and the Guatemalan state's genocidal attack on them, forced some rethinking of this tradition. In the 1980s, however, the state violence wrought on communities and against Guatemalan intellectuals had a devastating impact on Guatemalan social science research, while foreign academics felt the urgency simply to bear witness to the violence.

Diane's early years in Guatemala coincided with a cautious rebuilding of social science research in the country. Among the engaged intellectuals who influenced Diane deeply was the Guatemalan anthropologist Myrna Mack, who had cofounded a research institute with Clara Arenas and others in 1986, the Association for the Advancement of the Social Sciences (AVANCSO). Before starting graduate school, Diane expressed to Myrna the ambivalence she felt about entering the academy. In a meeting in Guatemala City in September 1990, just days before she was assassinated by state security forces, Myrna gave Diane her blessing. "Go get trained," she said. "And then bring that training back here."

Diane took Myrna's advice to heart. With her commitment to reflexivity, her command of Marxist, poststructuralist, and feminist theory, her talent for fieldwork, and her friendships and collaborations with Guatemalan colleagues, Diane became an active participant in the reconstruction of critical intellectual life in Guatemala.

<sup>3</sup> Beatriz Manz, remarks prepared for Diane Nelson's memorial service, Carrboro, North Carolina, June 12, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Centro de Estudios Integrales de Desarrollo Comunal (CEIDEC), *Guatemala: Polos de desarrollo: El caso de la desestructuración de las comunidades indígenas*, vol. 2 (Mexico City: CEIDEC/Editorial Praxis, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Diane M. Nelson, "Maya Hackers and the Cyberspatialized Nation-State: Modernity, Ethnostalgia, and a Lizard Queen in Guatemala," in Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 245–282.

## Contributions to anthropology

After completing her PhD at Stanford University in 1996, Diane took a faculty position at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon. In 2001, Diane joined the cultural anthropology department at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.

She brought her deep commitment to Guatemala, along with her characteristic energy and playfulness, to the extraordinarily rich body of work she published in succeeding decades. Her ethnographies include *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala* (University of California Press, 1999), published in Guatemala as *Un dedo en la llaga* (Cholsamaj, 2006); *Reckoning: The Ends of War in Guatemala* (Duke University Press, 2009), published in Guatemala as *Saldando cuentas* (Ediciones del Pensativo, in press); and *Who Counts? The Mathematics of Death and Life after Genocide* (Duke University Press, 2015). She also wrote scores of articles and coedited two books that were collaborations among Guatemalan, North American, and European scholars and activists: *War by Other Means: Aftermath in Post-genocide Guatemala* (Duke University Press, 2013, coedited with Carlota McAllister); and *Guatemala, the Question of Genocide* (Routledge, 2018, coedited with Elizabeth Oglesby), published in Guatemala as *El juicio histórico: genocidio en Guatemala* (Cholsamaj, in press).

Each of Diane's ethnographies takes up a theme of post-genocide life and its processes of dispossession and reanimation across varied scenarios. At the core of *Finger in the Wound* is the problem of solidarity—or “fluidarity,” as Diane reconceptualizes it in one of her many revelatory twists. Interrogating the operations of power within the supposedly stable identifications of solidarity, she takes the Maya movement that emerged around the quincentenary as the site for a brilliant ethnography of the post-genocide Guatemalan state and the harshly racialized and violently enforced political possibilities it offered, refusing to condemn “Maya hackers” for joining the state, but also interrogating the complicity of various agents, including gringa anthropologists, in the state's workings. *Reckoning* looks at

the various forms of accounting for the past. She focuses on anxieties about duping, or *engaño*, that proliferated after the end of the war, analyzing how colonialist discourses of the “two-faced Indian” were redeployed as counterinsurgency rhetoric, and also how the postwar state itself masks two faces, one giving life and the other taking life. Diane shows how struggles to account for violence, loss, and the disappearing future destabilize taken-for-granted notions of identity and the positions we might want to stake in them. The final book in her trilogy, *Who Counts?*, examines accountability through riffs on the “math” portion of genocide's aftermath, in which peace enabled a ramping up of capital accumulation and neoliberal logics of quantification and audit. Diane resists the urge to denounce counting itself as the problem. Instead, she shows how the hopes that various actors resisting dispossession invest in quantification may also produce qualities, or a more emancipatory transformation of life, which is counting's utopian, if elusive, end.

Diane's rethinking of the political subject and the practices of politics resonates far beyond Guatemala. Latin Americanist anthropology has often treated a particular variety of emancipatory politics as natural, seeing resistance, history making, and collective action as defining features of the ethnographic landscape. There are good historical reasons for this: emancipatory projects marked much of the second half of Latin America's twentieth century. But the defeat of those projects and the very real costs of defeat make it urgent to denaturalize the assumptions that undergirded them. While remaining unwaveringly committed to emancipation, Diane insisted on subjecting her own and other actors' senses of what emancipation might entail to rigorous, ongoing critique, the better to help bring it about. In the process, she sketched a social space whose tensions and emergent qualities pose enormous challenges for description and analysis. Her capacity for sitting within the discomforts of this space, and the skill and humor she brought to rendering these discomforts have made her a lodestar for fellow scholars.

## Defending joy

Diane was intensely attuned to how people reconstructed their lives in the midst of what was destroyed, and to the pleasures as well as the sorrows that reconstruction offered. She would go into the tiny video parlors in villages and towns and watch movies with people. She chatted about dragon tattoos, danced, and played *futillo* at the *ferias*. She listened, intently, to everyone whose paths she crossed, and they, delighted by her interest, told her their stories. She told jokes, and people reciprocated with more jokes. “She had that quality of inserting herself into whatever rhythms we had,” conveyed Maya Mam community leader Maudilia López Cardona. “She was always smiling, always close to people.”<sup>6</sup>

Joy, in short, was a methodological commitment. State violence in Guatemala was not only about suppressing a revolutionary movement; it was about crushing people’s visions for the future, trying to eradicate the idea that a different future was possible. Diane wanted to illuminate how people were reanimating their worlds and futures after genocide, even in the midst of ongoing violence and dispossession. In 2013, she wrote: “I am interested in the conditions of (im)possibility that both produce and limit what is imaginable in the post-war world as well as what is enthralling. What allows people to once again feel something like eager interest or zeal?”<sup>7</sup>

Enthralling! Such a Diane Nelson word. This re-enchantment of life, which flowed to and from Diane, suggests why she’s esteemed in so many circles in Guatemala.

“Friend, teacher, companion, and accomplice of projects and dreams, you have no idea how much I will miss you,” expressed Maya K’iche’

anthropologist Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj, one of Diane’s closest collaborators. “You were the engine of several of our groups. . . . Now you go on to shine in another space.”<sup>8</sup>

Guatemalan intellectual and human rights institutions describe Diane as a “brilliant star,” an anthropologist with “great sensitivity and intellectual capacity” who “put her work at the service of others” and was “committed to the social causes and revindicating efforts of the Maya peoples.”<sup>9</sup> “She was my favorite gringa,” said Pepe Cruz of Madreselva, an environmental organization she was accompanying during her recent work.

“Thank you, Diana, for walking with us,” wrote Anastasia Mejía Tiriquiz, a community radio journalist and Maya K’iche’ spiritual guide in Joyabaj, where Diane did much of her fieldwork. “Thank you for your courage, for showing how we could let go of fear and heal a little by telling our story to the four winds.”

Diane’s commitment to Guatemala did not flow from careerist ambitions, says Maya K’iche’ historian María Aguilar, but instead from love for the country and its peoples. Her wordplay makes her prose difficult to translate into Spanish, but her scholarship is nonetheless essential to understanding Guatemala’s post-genocide state and society, Aguilar insists.

But even more, adds Aguilar, “I keep her smile, her joy, the memory that she only wore one earring, which led her to tell me that every time I lose an earring to think of her. Diane taught me that the academy should not take away our humanity or individuality . . . the most important thing is to defend joy and not lose our essence.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> “Voces de Mujeres Miércoles: Recordatorio a Diane Nelson,” Programa de La Cuerda y Voces de Mujeres, Facebook Livestream, May 11, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/periodicolacuenda.guatemala/videos/307379898229615/> (accessed June 19, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Diane M. Nelson, “100 Percent Omniflife: Health, Economy, and the End/s of War,” in *War by Other Means: Aftermath in Post-Genocide Guatemala* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 287.

<sup>8</sup> Irmalicia Velásquez Nimatuj, “Diane M. Nelson, 1963–2022,” *El Periódico*, Guatemala, April 30, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Social media tributes to Diane Nelson by Ediciones del Pensativo, the Association for the Advancement of the Social Sciences in Guatemala (AVANCSO), the Myrna Mack Foundation, and Cholsamaj, April 28, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> María Aguilar, “Diane M. Nelson,” *El Periódico*, Guatemala, May 2, 2022.

Diane brought this same critical lesson of joy to her teaching. With her theatricality and enthusiasm, she was a life-changing professor for many students. In 1998, she was named Oregon Teacher of the Year, and she won still more teaching awards at Duke. Students recall that sometimes she would begin class by bursting into song. Former Duke student Lyndsey Beutin remembers Diane's classes as "legendary . . . it was a secret passed down that if you worked together you could stage a class revolution to overthrow her final, and she'd play along. My year, we tied her to a chair and demanded she listen to our manifestos, written as if from aggrieved parties and revolutionaries to dictators, corporations, and the CIA."

### Riparian worlding

Building on her work with communities affected by transnationally owned gold mines and their effects on water, Diane began to follow their insistence that "water is life" down riparian currents. At the time of her death, she was researching hydroelectric power in various configurations: as a nationalist developmentalist project; in relation to wartime counterinsurgency; as small-scale community controlled projects of "development from below;" and, increasingly over the 2010s, as a project of resistance to the large-scale hydroelectric projects of international, elite, and narco-trafficking capital. Her next book project was entitled *Riparian Worlding: Mayan Life and Anti-extractivism*. Riparian worlds matter, Diane knew, because learning to sense and act with rivers can help us think differently, across complex relations of horizontality and verticality, human and nonhuman agency, to better understand how exactly water is, gives, and becomes life.

As always, she saw this project as part of larger conversations and collaborations, with her friends and colleagues but also many other creatures and entities (fluidarity redux!). As Diane and Carlota McAllister wrote in a grant application to form a network for sharing experiences of river activism and scholarship in the Americas:

Rivers serve as natural pathways for multiple kinds of transport and communication, moving through beings and worlds at different altitudes, latitudes, and scales, as they course through different temporalities. They foreground the relation between Life and Non-Life, because water is life but is not itself alive. Rivers are where geological time most clearly meets human time, and thus provide a particularly rich site for contemplating biopolitics and geontology together. Above all, engaging the riparian requires thinking dialectically, as it is always the *interactions* of water and land, stone and plant, sand and animal (both human and non), air and organics that make, sustain—or destroy—rivers as life-worlds.

And as always, her commitment to these questions was not just theoretical but lay at the heart of how she lived. When she was very close to dying, she wanted us to know that water was still the most deliciously life-giving thing.

### To be remembered, give yourself away

Diane had many facets. As everyone knew, she adored Madonna. She sang in an acapella group in Guatemala. She loved to frolic with kids, particularly her nieces and nephews and her goddaughter Sonya. She was serious about her yoga practice. She kept beehives (Diane's nephews Ben and Lucas ask us to plant pollinator gardens in her memory). Along with her sister and brother, she helped care for her mother, while attending to her webs of activists, scholars, students, and friends, with labors of care large and small. First and always, she was deeply in love with her partner of 35 years, Mark Driscoll.

Diane, it's so hard to write about you and not *with* you. We remember a joke you told; you heard it from a Quechua guide in Cuzco. The guide was showing you Cuzco's solid pre-Columbian structures, saying, "this one was built by the Incas," and "this one was built by the Incas." Then, when you got to a crumbling, post-invasion Spanish church, the guide quipped, "this one was

built by the Inca-paces." We are truly *incapaces* (incapable) of accepting your departure, but we will try to honor your legacy.

In a final commitment to ecology, Diane was interred at a green burial site in North Carolina. We're reminded of how she used to quote William Bryant Logan's *Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth*: "Hospitality is the fundamental virtue of the soil. It makes room. It shares. It neutralizes poisons. And so it heals. This is what the soil teaches: if you want to be remembered, give yourself away."<sup>11</sup>

You gave of yourself without measure, Diane, and you will always be remembered. Diane Nelson, chronicler, theorist, teacher, ally, mistress of wit, teller of "so jokes," companion of bees and rivers, partner, daughter, sister, aunt, friend, colleague, fairy godmother, and Lizard Queen, *¡presente!* //

<sup>11</sup> William Bryant Logan, *Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995, 2007), 19.