

Border-Crossing as a Latin American Scholar of Asia: A Year Back in an (Un)likely City for Asian and Southeast Asian Studies

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My roots are grown but I don't know where they are
—The Head and the Heart, “Cats and Dogs,” *The Head and the Heart*, 2011¹

As a Peruvian national studying Southeast Asia at a University in the United States, serial border crossing has become a constant in my life. I spent three years doing coursework at the University of Washington, Seattle, then half a year carrying out archival research in the Philippines, before finally returning to Lima, Peru. For a country sharing the Pacific Ocean with numerous Asian countries, and being one of the major destinations for Chinese and Japanese immigration in Latin America, Peruvian academia has neglected the study of Asia. Only but a handful of scholars have undertaken original research about the largest and most populous continent. What place could a Southeast Asianist have in such an environment? Fortunately, despite my initial concerns about the kind of future I could have in Peru, 2018 turned out to be a great year for Asian Studies in my country. It is hopefully a portent of what should be Peru's destiny as a major hub of Asian Studies in Latin America.

Besides teaching a class on Maritime Southeast Asia at the *Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú* and giving a handful of talks about the

region in a couple of cities outside Lima, the highlight of the year was the Conference of the *Asociación Latinoamericana de Estudios de Asia y África* (ALADAA or Latin American Association of Asian and African Studies) held in August 2018. In a way, it is an “AAS-in-Latin America” for Latin American Asianists. According to Ricardo Sumalavia, one of the organizers of the event, this was the largest ALADAA Conference in recent times—my count comes close to 500 presentations. There is, however, one caveat: Asian (and African) Studies in Latin America is still largely focused on Latin America itself; the gaze, as it were, is internal. Slightly more than half of these papers consisted of what could loosely be described as pertaining to “Asian-Latin American” Studies or “African-Latin American” Studies (about 40 percent and 12 percent, respectively). These include the study of Asian and African migrant communities in Latin America, cultural influences from Asia and Africa, or commercial relations with those continents. While they all are perfectly legitimate areas of intellectual inquiry, it still highlights the fact that under half the papers focused only on those regions themselves. The border-crossing, so to speak, remains incomplete.

What lies behind this continued rootedness in Latin American Studies? I believe that there are at least two factors at work. The first may be the—perhaps unconscious—expectation by paper presenters that a Latin American audience needs to connect to their own region to find relevance in a topic, thus prompting potentially “pure” Asianists to relate their research to Latin America. In this sense, they would be crossing “back” to Latin America. While comparative work is certainly legitimate—my own dissertation project studies the Philippines and Peru—it seems to me that a stronger, less-than-ideal factor is in play: most scholars-in-training in Latin America simply do not have the resources—educational or financial—to become bona fide Asianists. In most cases, their universities lack specialists to train them and fall short in language training. Even when scholars and language training are available, the expenses of traveling to Asia to do research can be prohibitive for scholars hailing from a region like Latin

America, where funding is extremely scarce. Thus, the large proportion of papers on Asia whose primary research was carried out in Latin America. Circumstances prevent them from fully crossing “out” of Latin America and becoming full-fledged Asianists. This is something we must continue to improve on for future generations.

Nevertheless, it still delighted me to see that Lima hosted several Southeast Asianists during the conference. Some scholars based in Latin America were Natalie Gómez Dunker (*Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso*), who studied the trajectory of Malaysia’s Orang Asli and Myanmar’s Rohingya in comparative perspective; John Marston (*Colegio de Mexico*) presented on the Cambodian monks who studied in India during the 1950s and 1960s; Evi Siregar (*Colegio de Mexico*) talked about recent developments in Indonesian higher education; and Maricela Reyes and Dora Cabezas (both at the *Universidad de Colima*), who presented on microloans in contemporary Vietnam and Mexico. Some Southeast Asianists based outside Latin America were Matthew Galway (now at the Australian National University), who compared Lon Nol’s Neo-Khmerism with Hugo Chavez’s Bolivarianism; and Benjamin Moseley (University of Hawaii at Manoa), who presented on the role of baptism in the formation of relations with the Portuguese in Eastern Indonesia in the early modern period.

And there was I, stuck in a constant state of in-betweenness, talking about the Filipino and Indonesian coverage of the Russo-Japanese War. Born in Lima and temporarily based there when the conference took place, while getting my Ph.D. at a university in the United States, it was difficult for me—and it still is—to identify my place in this matrix. Being in my hometown made me experience a different, albeit analogous, version of what happens to country specialists who travel to the United States and suddenly find themselves identified as “area specialists.” Those specializing in the Philippines become Southeast Asianists, those who study Argentina become Latin Americanists, all by virtue of crossing that border. By crossing it in the opposite direction, this Southeast Asianist became an Asianist,

daunted by the prospect of having to answer for a region vastly broader than what I had trained for. It does not help that there is no Spanish-language term that rolls off the tongue as smoothly as “Southeast Asianist” does—and that is saying something. I write these lines after crossing another border, staying in Manila once again, where I became a Latin Americanist of sorts, in the middle of a calendar year in which I will live in two or three cities, never spending more than three months in each. Constant border crossing and redefinition, such is the life of the U.S.-trained Latin American Asianist. May there be many more to come.

End Note

¹ This is a song. The Head and the Heart refers to the name of the group, while the italicized version, *The Head and the Heart*, pertains to the title of the album.