

Buscando un traductor:
The Joys and Challenges of Translating
Alberto Flores Galindo

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About ten years ago, Carlos Aguirre of the University of Oregon and I happily accepted an offer from Stuart Schwartz to translate Alberto Flores Galindo's classic, *Buscando un Inca*, for Cambridge University Press. We knew the book and the author well and Carlos and I had worked together before. We believed that we could translate and edit the book in our free time between teaching, research, and other projects. Both of us had experience translating short texts and we had also done simultaneous translation.

As Carlos and I probably knew deep down, the work proved to be more time-consuming than we had expected. Translation requires great concentration and patience. It is not a task that you get done late at night or during gaps between classes and office hours. So after years of making little progress, we recruited Willie Hiatt, then a graduate student at the University of California at Davis. Willie had the desired qualifications: he was bilingual, he knew Peru, and he had great writing and editing skills. Willie and I divided up the translation and Carlos and I worked together on editing the text and writing the introduction, although he carried a heavier load. The book is now in production and will be released in Fall 2010.¹

The translation was a personal undertaking for Carlos and me. We both knew Alberto Flores Galindo and had benefited from his support and guidance. I met him in Lima in 1982 just after I had finished an M.A. in Latin American Studies. A course I had taken with Richard Morse on urban history and my interest in José Carlos Mariátegui intrigued him. He gave me much more time than I

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deserved and pushed me to spend more time in the archives and to live outside of Lima. He subsequently encouraged me to go to graduate school at the University of Chicago because he admired Friedrich Katz and John Coatsworth, despite generally disliking American academia. Flores Galindo had also helped Carlos Aguirre when he abandoned his training in engineering and became an historian. Curiously, “Tito” as everyone knew him, was the one who first told me about Carlos and his incisive articles on urban history published in a Lima newspaper, which was the initial step in our long friendship.²

We also deeply admire Flores Galindo. Carlos has deemed him Peru’s “last public intellectual.” His commitment and his presence in intellectual and political circles were astonishing.³ Besides his work on the “Andean utopia,” he wrote and edited key books on Tupac Amaru II, José Carlos Mariátegui, eighteenth-century Lima, Arequipa, mineworkers, and other topics before he died of brain cancer at age 40. *La agonía de Mariátegui*, about Mariátegui’s search for a socialism rooted in Peru and his concomitant struggles with the Comintern, and *Aristocracia y plebe*, about eighteenth-century Lima, both deserve translation. In fact, scholars debate which of these is his finest book.⁴ He also mentored students, gave countless talks, engaged in political and intellectual debates in Lima’s then flourishing left-wing press, edited journals, and helped create a collective intellectual center, SUR: Socialismo, utopía, y revolución. This productivity is even more astounding in light of the fact that he never lost his deep humanity, or his ability to empathize, laugh, and to disagree.

Besides our deep admiration for the man, we were also motivated by the fact that so little scholarship from Latin America has been translated into English. I have thought about this a great deal. What explains the fact that books written in English on Latin American history are translated into Spanish more often than Spanish language books are translated into English? I don’t think anyone would argue it is a reflection of the superiority of United States and English publications. Many monographs on Peru published in English are translated in Lima (or, in fewer cases, Cusco or other “provincial” cities). I applaud this and strive to get my own work published in Peru, but I also wonder about fairness. Many academic publishers in Peru request a subsidy that most scholars based in the United States can afford. I worry that these books gain preference over those written by Peruvian scholars who cannot afford to pay a subsidy to publish their books. In other words, it is easy for university professors in the United States to come up with a couple thousand dollars to subsidize a book—they can justify it as a means to disseminate their work or to advance their careers. This points out a lack of balance—why is more work in Peruvian history (I can’t speak for Latin American trends) translated from English into Spanish than from Spanish into English?

One answer is that Latin Americanists in the United States read Spanish. Thus, the demand for translation is not that great. However, I have increasing doubts about this. Historians working on Spanish America in the United States and England generally speak Spanish and will often even prefer to read a piece in its original language. Nonetheless, it is difficult to access books published in South America. Although this could change in the future, using foreign books for classroom use—where money is made in academic publishing in the United States—is nearly impossible. We have to turn to the copier-scanner. When faced with the choice between the ease of ordering for classes from the bookstore or messy photocopying, most of us pick the former.

It might also be a question of style and classroom adaptability. Students want relatively short books (250 pages or under) with clear introductions and conclusions and links between each chapter. They also complain about books that assume too much background; i.e. the author should explain terms such as the Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution, or even World War II. Latin American (and European) scholarship does not necessarily follow this mold. Publishers in the United States desperately want books that both please specialists and can be used in the classroom. They cringe at proposals that pitch a book that will be mandatory for all experts in such and such a field but won't interest anyone else—they want to reach undergraduate readers (consumers). I am in no way arguing that Latin Americans write books that are not classroom-friendly. I believe, however, that there are classics in Spanish and Portuguese languages that don't work that well for undergraduates and that professors often play it safe by ordering readily available and inexpensive paperback monographs in English. Nonetheless, I also think that there are many Latin American works that would work well in translation.

Translation into English obviously broadens readership. A work such as *In Search of an Inca* should interest scholars in Cultural and Subaltern studies and the increasing number of scholars who work on Memory studies. In my collaboration with the lively interdisciplinary group, Latin@American Cultural Studies, at the University of California, Davis, it strikes me that the texts in the “canon” are read in English. Everyone in the group knows the work of quite different scholars such as Ángel Rama and Néstor García Canclini quite well. Both scholars have landmark books in English.⁵ It might be the case that key authors get translated. I increasingly think that those authors whose works are translated become the key authors. In other words, translation increases readership in two ways, both based on heightened visibility and availability. First, it allows readers who don't speak Spanish to enjoy the work. Second, it makes the author better known (and perhaps easier to understand) for people who do read Spanish but haven't read, and won't read, the original. Why won't they? Again,

it's a combination of reasons, especially access to the book and challenges posed by the Spanish. I do think that graduate students and professors often are drawn to the newest, hottest book published in the United States while older works and those from Latin America remain at the bottom of their to-do list.⁶

It is clear that translation confirms the author's status, and increases visibility, a reality that underlines the need to translate more Latin American authors.⁷ I would love to have some of Jorge Basadre's work available in English, to give a Peruvian example, and I am distressed by the fact that only one of Tulio Halperín-Donghi's books has been translated into English.⁸ In general, the data on translation into English is depressing. In her recent book *Why Translation Matters*, Edith Grossman points out that in England and the United States only two to three percent of books published are literary translations whereas the number ranges from twenty-five to forty percent in Latin America and Europe. She also cites Andre Dubus III for another telling statistic: "50 percent of all the books in translation now published world wide are translated from English, but only 6 percent are translated into English."⁹ Although she is discussing literature and this essay is history, the logic and depressing reality seem parallel. This is a debate for another day, but I would be delighted if Alberto Flores Galindo received a broader audience with the appearance of his book in English.

Buscando un Inca differs in several ways from most monographs published in the United States. It is a passionate book that chronicles Flores Galindo's quest for understanding "lo andino" in Peru, past and present, and the role that the Incas have played in various political movements over the centuries. His search for new models of socialism energizes the book. He moves back and forth between first person (singular and plural) and third person, and makes his own views clear in the midst of chapters, and he also attacks an enemy here and there. This subjectivity, an unusually strong authorial presence that contrasts with most U.S. publications, does not trouble us; in fact, it is among the reasons that the book is important and engaging.

The writing style differs from that of most academic press monographs. Flores Galindo was a fantastic writer, with wonderful metaphors and clear prose. He built on the best of the *ensayista* style, without eschewing serious research and archival work. Yet his affinity for short, even verb-less, sentences and rhetorical questions does not translate easily. In many cases we flipped sentences around or combined two or three short sentences into a single one. In the end, I believe that we did our best work when we modified sentence order or used more direct verbs. Edith Grossman stresses the active role that translators play—they are not silent technicians converting one language into another. She claims that the divide between "originalist" and "activist" translators is artificial and says that all translators actively create a new work out of the original.¹⁰

We were careful to clarify for non-specialists. Flores Galindo wrote for a Peruvian audience and so we had to include author's notes in the footnotes and add detail in the text when he was referring to an arcane aspect of the Conquest or the specifics of the Shining Path and the Dirty War. Our familiarity with Peru helped us understand and appreciate his text, but we had to be especially careful about assuming knowledge. We know what an *ayllu* is or who Belaúnde was, but not all readers will. As a reader myself, I loathe when an author takes for granted that I am familiar with an event or a phenomenon. It can be insulting and pedantic. We tried to avoid this without being too interventionist. We found that the guidelines about this follow those of good writing: include everything that is necessary for the reader but make it as lean and unobtrusive as possible. No one wants dozens of footnotes or parenthetical comments.

Flores Galindo's training in France influenced his writing, as did his love of literature. Some have warned us that talented writers are more difficult to translate than stodgy, highly organized social-scientist writers. They are correct. At times the author failed to substantiate his assertions and it is true that some sections do feel hurried. This is a reflection of his astonishingly productive, busy, and short life. As mentioned, he was a public intellectual, giving talks, writing in countless newspapers and magazines, advising students, editing journals such as *Allpanchis* or *Revista Andina*, and leading SUR. Despite this, he published half a dozen books.

In Search of an Inca is thus not always the consistent, almost standardized, work that university presses produce in the United States at an alarming rate. The chapters vary in length and style (some might say also quality, but I would differ) and are thus "uneven." While never losing sight of the "Andean Utopia," it touches on an astonishing number of topics as it moves from the fifteenth to the twentieth century.¹¹ Nonetheless, the author's erudition, creativity, passion, and fine prose ensure its quality and relevance.

The book is dated—in the best sense of the term. He wrote it in the 1980s, a vexing time for progressives in Peru. On the one hand, the country counted on a large, heterogeneous left that had surprised many with its strong electoral showing (the election of Alfonso Barrantes as mayor of Lima in 1983, for example) and its presence among intellectual circles. Yet dark times were on the horizon. The Shining Path emerged seemingly out of nowhere in 1980. Its violent campaign targeted NGOs, unions, and community leaders while it also awakened the seemingly dormant right. At the same time, the rise of Neo-Liberalism challenged the assumptions of the left. In *Buscando un Inca* and elsewhere, Flores Galindo confronted these interlopers from the Maoist left and the right. Chapter ten, "The Silent War," written in the midst of the sinister campaigns of the Shining Path and the armed forces, is a brilliant precursor to subsequent work by scholars and

activists, synthesized by the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission.¹² Conservatives equated his denunciation of mass violence by the armed forces in the Ayacucho region as support for Shining Path, absurd in light of his equally robust critique of this group. His understanding and denunciation of the violence of the early and mid-1980s, including his deconstruction of the term *terrorist*, proved prescient. His distaste for authoritarianism pushed him time and time again towards Mariátegui, the heterodox Marxist of the 1920s, who, like Flores Galindo, died astonishingly and tragically young.

The book captures the rich boom in Peruvian historiography of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly the shift towards regional and subaltern history.¹³ Flores Galindo was a key figure in this eruption of studies on previously neglected areas and on the lower classes. He wrote books on Arequipa, Cerro de Pasco, and the Lima plebe. He also mentored or collaborated with other historians and sociologists working in this field. In *Buscando un Inca*, Flores Galindo synthesizes much of this work and uses it to address large questions about utopian ideas and dissident intellectual and political movements. His broad reading and knowledge of French history and the British social Marxists such as E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm helped raise the theoretical level of his work. This is another key attribute of his work—his ability, almost obligation, to link Peruvian debates with a variety of theoretical schools of thought.

The work of translation proved to be more challenging yet more enriching than expected. This assessment would not surprise most translators. We debated long and hard over sentences and words. For example, *pueblos andinos*: should it be Andean people or peoples? The plural is perhaps the more correct translation as it indicates the plurality or heterogeneity of the Andean world. Nonetheless, it does not sound right in English and we stuck with the singular. *Imaginario* was one of his favorite expressions, a reflection of his French training. We struggled and ultimately explained it the first time it appeared in the text and used the word “imaginary”. We also debated the passive voice. Willie and I are trained to avoid it at all costs but Flores Galindo relied on it, especially in short sentences that followed much longer ones. It conceals who did what, which can be advantageous in a book about collective mentalities that stretched over the centuries. In the long history of the Andean utopia, not every decision was conscious and not every social movement had clear leaders and followers. Carlos Aguirre, a native Spanish speaker, was much more sympathetic to the passive voice.

Translating constitutes a rich immersion into language and ideas. All too often as writers we rush past decisions about words and word choice, conjugations, tonality, differences in meanings, and other linguistic riddles, in our hurry to finish a text and move on. Translation, like poetry, forces one to think about words, their relationship with the words next to them, and the varieties

and richness of meanings. We also had to linger over paragraph rhythm—did our division of a long sentence into several short ones break up the nice flow that Flores Galindo always found, his grouping together of shorter, declarative sentences, rhetorical questions, and longer sentences? Although experts on time-efficiency would probably disapprove, e-mails among us about how to translate terms such as *lo imaginario* or whether to keep the first person proved to be wonderful intellectual exercises. When translating, I would often think about phrases long after turning off the computer and ideas would come to me at odd moments. I remember watching a movie when suddenly I saw how I could improve a particularly convoluted sentence. This is the frustration and satisfaction inherent in almost any writing. In collective terms, it was enjoyable and productive to air our doubts via the phone or e-mail. I was delighted to watch Willie improve my English prose or to learn from Carlos some of the nuances in the original text. It was time-consuming but enriching, both in terms of the final text as well as our own intellectual interests.

I mentioned that *Buscando un Inca* is in some ways dated. As a public intellectual, Flores Galindo was engaged in all the key debates of the period: the role of the new left in the post-1980 democracy, the rise of the Shining Path, mass Andean migration to Lima, etc. He saw his work unconditionally connected to the *actualidad* (itself a Spanish term that does not have an easy English translation). The controversies and debates that raged in Peru influenced many of the chapters, particularly the later ones. Yet they do not overwhelm his larger search for understanding how different groups, from the sixteenth until the twentieth century, have understood the Incas and incorporated them into their ideology or platform. Translating *Buscando un Inca* led me to realize that this is what defines a classic: a book that engages the debates and explorations of its time but also addresses universal issues in brilliant and original ways. If we have done our job well, readers will capture Flores Galindo's stunningly smart and engaging quest.

NOTES

- 1 Alberto Flores Galindo, *In Search of an Inca: Identity and Utopia in the Andes*. Edited by Carlos Aguirre and Charles Walker; translated by Willie Hiatt and Charles Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). The first edition of *Buscando un Inca* was published by Casa de las Américas (Havana, 1986). For our translation, we used Alberto Flores Galindo, *Buscando un Inca, identidad y utopía en los Andes*. Lima: Sur, 2005, volume 3 of *Las obras completas* de Alberto Flores Galindo.
- 2 For testimony about Flores Galindo on the twentieth anniversary of his death (March 26, 1990) by several scholars, including Carlos and myself, see "Alberto Flores Galindo

(1949-1990). Homenaje y testimonios”. <http://historiaglobalonline.com/2010/03/alberto-flores-galindo-1949-1990-homenaje-y-testimonios/>.

- 3 Carlos Aguirre, “Cultura política de izquierda y cultura impresa en el Perú contemporáneo (1968-1990): Alberto Flores Galindo y la formación de un intelectual público,” *Histórica* (Lima) 31, 1 (2007), 171–204. See also our introduction to *In Search of an Inca*.
- 4 Alberto Flores Galindo, *La agonía de Mariátegui. La polémica con la Komintern* (Lima: DESCO, 1980). Alberto Flores Galindo, *Aristocracia y plebe. Estructura de clases y sociedad colonial, Lima 1760–1830* (Lima: Mosca Azul Editores, 1984).
- 5 Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, 2d ed.); Angel Rama, *The Lettered City* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).
- 6 I should thank my colleague, Arnold Bauer, who always insists that his students prioritize understanding Latin America—past and present—before concerning themselves with English-language academic trends. He would tell them, “read what’s being published in Mexico City or Buenos Aires first.” I think many historians sympathize with this viewpoint but focus on English books in qualifying exams, job-talk preparation, and other rites of passage.
- 7 It would be fascinating to study how translations affect the demand for the book in its original language. I assume that it increases due to the new visibility. In other words, when Rama’s *La ciudad letrada* appeared in English, some students would read it in Spanish for courses and other Spanish-reading scholars would learn about it and seek it in the original. The demand for it increased.
- 8 For example, I would like to see translated Jorge Basadre, *La multitud, la ciudad y el campo en la historia del Perú*, 3d ed. (Lima: Ediciones Treintatrés & MoscaAzul, 1980). Tulio Halperin Donghi, *The Contemporary History of Latin America*, translated by John Chasteen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
- 9 Edith Grossman, *Why Translation Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 27-28 and 51-52. While explaining the importance of translators, Grossman offers a splendid analysis of parochialism and insularity in the United States. The Dubus quote is from Andre Dubus III, “Introduction” to *Words Without Borders: The World Through the Eyes of Writers*, ed. Samantha Schnee, Alane Salierno Mason, and Dedi Felman, xi-xvi (New York: Anchor, 2007).
- 10 Grossman, *Why Translation Matters*.
- 11 The always acute Eric Van Young told me years ago of his admiration for the book, but criticized its unevenness.
- 12 The final report of the Comisión de Verdad y Reconciliación, a remarkably thorough and thoughtful analysis of Peru in the late twentieth century, is available online. <http://www.cverdad.org.pe/ifinal/index.php>
- 13 For reviews of the historiography, see Paulo Drinot, “Historiography. Historiographic Identity and Historical Consciousness in Peru,” *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe*, 15, 1 (2004): 65-88; Charles Walker, “La nueva historia y la historia de siempre: El impacto de las nuevas corrientes historiográficas en el Perú Actual,” en Carlos Aguirre y Carmen McEvoy (eds.), *Intelectuales y poder. Ensayos en torno a la república de letras en el Perú e Hispanoamérica (ss. XVI-XX)* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Andinos/Instituto Riva-Agüero, 2008, 479-510).