



Photo by Pablo Corral Vega

## *Scholar-practitioner Q & A . . .*

### An Interview with Alma Guillermoprieto

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Mexican writer Alma Guillermoprieto remains one of the most important voices from Latin America today. Her award-winning journalistic career spans nearly forty years, during which she has traveled extensively and written on myriad topics for a variety of publications. Known to readers of English primarily for her articles in the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*, she has also written for Spanish-language media on both sides of the Atlantic, including *Gatopardo* and *El País*, and published a number of books (see list at end).

Born in Mexico in 1949, she attended high school in New York City and pursued at first a career in dance, notably studying with Merce Cunningham and dancing professionally for a decade. In 1970 she spent six months teaching modern dance in Cuba, an experience she later recounted in her 2004 book, *Dancing with Cuba: A Memoir of the Revolution*.<sup>1</sup> Several years after returning from Cuba she accepted an offer to report on the Nicaraguan revolution in English. She has been writing professionally ever since. Along the way she has witnessed the devastating effects of conflict in Central America, observed the violence in Colombia and Mexico wrought by the international drug trade, and interviewed the likes of Subcomandante Marcos, guerrillas of the Shining Path, and Peruvian writer and erstwhile political candidate Mario Vargas Llosa.

Politics and poverty, corruption and inequity, survival and belief, the throes of modernity, and the inevitability of international (and imperial) ignorance and meddling are just some of the themes that emerge from her work. Never flinching from commentary, she crafts essay-narratives that deft-

ly blend description and significance, as in this excerpt from a 2012 story in the *New York Review of Books* on the plight of journalists in Mexico:

Let us say that you are a Mexican reporter working for peanuts at a local television station somewhere in the provinces—the state of Durango, for example—and that one day you get a friendly invitation from a powerful drug-trafficking group. Imagine that it is the Zetas, and that thanks to their efforts in your city several dozen people have recently perished in various unspeakable ways, while justice turned a blind eye. Among the dead is one of your colleagues. Now consider the invitation, which is to a press conference to be held punctually on the following Friday, at a not particularly out of the way spot just outside of town. You were, perhaps, considering going instead to a movie? Keep in mind, the invitation notes, that attendance will be taken by the Zetas.<sup>2</sup>

The reality of the situation and the locus of power cannot be misunderstood; the reader cannot help feeling discomposed. Again and again, Guillermprieto finds ways to trace her subjects with empathy and acuity, enlisting the reader to sense and consider the regions she inscribes.

She and I spoke on August 11, 2014, connecting via Skype between Mexico City and Cape Cod.

**Mileta Roe:** Early on you spent several years in Central America, covering various conflicts for several papers in a sort of accidental trial by fire that ignited your career. Given that you began reporting by chance, in a way, was there ever a conscious moment when you chose writing, or did you become a writer slowly?

**Alma Guillermprieto:** For a long time I had no idea that that was what I was doing. Really. Because it was so unexpected to end up in Central America as a reporter! So I would say that the first time I felt I should think about putting the word “writer” or even “reporter” on my visa whenever I entered or left a country—I was always baffled by that—was when I started writing for the *New Yorker*.<sup>3</sup>

**Roe:** And did you always have an attraction to or a flair for writing, or did you serve a kind of apprenticeship along the way?

**Guillermprieto:** I was always told from a very early age that I should be a writer. When I would write letters to my friends in Mexico at sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old, they would write back and say that I should be a writer. But I had absolutely no interest in doing so. I should say, though, that both my parents wanted to be writers, and that my mother finally fulfilled that ambition by writing a monthly column in a women’s magazine in Mexico. I feel that I am very much her daughter as a writer. She had a recognizable

voice, and I think mine is pretty recognizable, too. But, no, becoming a writer really didn't interest me, even after I had my first story in the *New Yorker*.

**Roe:** Really? Even then?

**Guillermoprieto:** The editor of the *New Yorker* at the time, Bob Gottlieb, called me and said, "When are you going to do another story for me?" And I said, "Oh, I don't know. I was thinking of going to Russia to learn Russian." And I'll never forget, he said, "Wait a minute, I'm the editor-in-chief of the *New Yorker*, and I'm asking you when you want to write another story for us, and you're telling me you want to go to Russia instead?" It was so funny. But even then, it wasn't clear to me that this was what I was going to be stuck doing for the rest of my life.

**Roe:** But that sort of encouragement finally held sway and you gave in to it?

**Guillermoprieto:** I liked Bob a lot and felt that I could trust him. And I felt it would be a nice thing to be writing "Letters from . . ." for him. But I should also say that three or four years earlier, I had written a proposal to Mr. Shawn and it had been rejected with the typical blue slip, or rather pink slip, in the case of the *New Yorker*. So it's true that I always felt that I would be comfortable with the *New Yorker*. It just felt that that was the logical place, and that being a daily reporter had not been a good fit. I wasn't bad at it, but I wasn't outstanding at it either. Or maybe I wasn't so bad, because it did carry me quite a long way.

**Roe:** So was it the kind of writing in the *New Yorker* that gave you more latitude to do the work that you wanted to do?

**Guillermoprieto:** Absolutely. And then after the third story or so, I thought, right, this is what I want to do. It felt satisfying and was enormous amounts of fun and I could make a living at it, which is, of course, not the case anymore for most writers, freelance writers particularly, like me, because of the crisis in print.

**Roe:** That's an important point and I do want to return to that in a minute. Given your incredible style in writing, I'm wondering who some of the writers are whom you admire or who may have shaped your ideas about writing.

**Guillermoprieto:** I should say right off that I don't read all that much nonfiction and I have been a voracious consumer of fiction my entire of life. And that one of the writers I most admire is Dr. Seuss [laughing], you know? I still read him and I am completely enthralled by what he does with language. And I remember reading, as a little girl, *Horton Hears a Who* and just being overwhelmed by how great it was: the rhyme, the patterns, and the rhythm, and of course the story, which affected me deeply.

**Roe:** So . . . fiction.

**Guillermoprieto:** Yes, and I guess I did most of my reading before I was twenty-five or so; then I got busy reporting and didn't do much reading for a very long time. But between the ages of twelve and twenty-five, I read what everybody reads. I loved Nabokov. Loved, loved, loved. And I read Tolstoy over and over again, because he's just a tremendously great writer. If I had to say which three writers? Well, in Spanish, I read a lot of poetry—I think that was very important. But it's fiction and poetry, though I haven't read much poetry in English.

**Roe:** That's so interesting, and yet you write about the real world. And I heard you say in another interview, I think, that it is the real world that truly fascinates you.

**Guillermoprieto:** You know, I had led a—I wouldn't say quiet and I wouldn't say unadventurous—but a routine life, in many ways, although it wasn't a predictable life. But I had a dancer's discipline. What I did was do odd jobs as a waitress and go to class and to rehearsal and that was my life. The excitement of witnessing a revolution sent me to Central America and led to a kind of intensity—adrenalin, really—that switched my life around. In many ways it was a tremendously painful experience, because of the atrocities and the strong reactions I had to that, but on the other hand it was a big world out there, and an exciting one, too. Being a young person, reporting on critical events is exciting.

**Roe:** Sure. And distressing, too.

**Guillermoprieto:** Yes, and also distressing. But certainly at the beginning, it was the excitement for all of us who turned up in Nicaragua, as I'm sure it was for all the people who turned up in Iraq at the beginning. You know you're young and you've set out for exotic parts and suddenly you are given the authorial voice, the authority. It's a big deal. So that was the part I really liked. It wasn't so much the reporting that attracted me; it was the fact of living this big life.

**Roe:** And part of living that life has been being on the cusp or acknowledging your own biculturalism and your interest, primarily through your writing, to bridge North American and Latin American cultures or realities. In that bicultural role that you've taken on in different ways in your career, does it feel different today than it did, say, twenty or thirty years ago?

**Guillermoprieto:** Yes, because now I also have a readership in Latin America. And so, that makes the circle more complete.

**Roe:** How does that affect your writing—having much more of a readership in Latin America?

**Guillermoprieto:** I don't think it has. It just feels complete.

**Roe:** You've lived much of your life in Mexico City and New York, two very different megacities of more than twenty million people each. How have those cities shaped your perspective?

**Guillermoprieto:** Oh, I think I'm cosmopolitan. And a survivor. You can't live in two cities like that without becoming both. And to the degree that cosmopolitanism also implies curiosity about the other, and I'm by nature a curious person. New York and Mexico City have been wonderful places to be.

**Roe:** Now I realize that every article or project has its own parameters, but I wonder how you confront a new project or a story. I think of some of my favorite pieces that you've written, including "Fidel in the Evening,"<sup>4</sup> in which you use that second person "you" to transport the reader to Cuba to imagine virtually an entire life lived under the spell of Castro. It was such an unusual and effective opening. Could you say something about your process and how you figure out how to address a subject, decide what lens to use?

**Guillermoprieto:** One of the things that's most overlooked about writers and writing is how much despair really is the force that drives us [laughing].

**Roe:** Despair!

**Guillermoprieto:** Despair and deadlines. For that Fidel piece, which I remember doing and having great doubts about, it's not like I sat down and thought, now what perspective or what voice do I want to give this? It was more like, what the fuck can I do to start this impossible piece? Because all it is is an account of a late-night interview Fidel gave on the eve of the visit of Pope John Paul II. And that element of scratching around to find some new way of leading into a story—especially such a potentially boring story—is tremendously important for all of us nonfiction writers. Especially because by then I'd been a reporter for many years and had been writing for a while, and there are moments when I get so very sick of my own voice. And there you are; it's eleven o'clock at night, and you need to write one more lead. *How can I possibly start this? What in hell am I going to do?* And somehow or other you come up with some solution. And that one happened to work well, and it was satisfying because I did feel I was taking a risk in that voice. But it was the only thing that occurred to me at the time and it carried me a certain distance. The main thing about a lead is that it has to generate the momentum to carry you through at least the first third of your story, however long that's going to be. And Bob Silvers [of the *New York Review of Books*], bless his great and generous soul, is always willing to take whatever crazy idea I come up with. But really, those things are born of despair, of a writer's despair. Although I do have to say, in retrospect, that writing about Fidel by reviewing one of his rare press conferences was a pretty good idea.

**Roe:** So despair is actually a trade secret.

**Guillermoprieto:** Yes, absolutely. But let me see if I can say something more useful about all of this. I do a lot of my reporting while I'm walking and *not* trying to report. And I try to make time for that, because it's an activity that frees your mind. I find that if I can get a good opening graph while I'm walking and then a good closing graph some weeks later, then I'm ready to write; because once I know I have a point A and a point Z, it's much less painful than roaming around in the dark without even knowing where you're headed.

**Roe:** And the walking is part of your writing process or is it something that happens only while you're in the place where you're reporting from?

**Guillermoprieto:** Well, yes, I try to get those two things done while I'm reporting. Because it's expensive, and that's one of the reasons that real, great long-form journalism is at risk, because it's very expensive.

**Roe:** Sure.

**Guillermoprieto:** The thought on that return plane is that now you're not going to be able to do any more reporting. And so if you feel that you don't have a tight closure to the piece, well, too bad. That country is a thousand dollars away. It's that practical. So the walking is part of the reporting and is part of the writing simultaneously. And the first two, three days, if I have a budget that will allow me that luxury, I don't even try to report. I just try to walk and look around and be open to the feeling of place.

**Roe:** Just take it in initially.

**Guillermoprieto:** Yeah, because otherwise once you start looking for things, you stop seeing.

**Roe:** You know one of the things that intrigues me about long-form journalism is the power of narrative to express multiple aspects of human reality. And when people talk about Latin American history and letters, there's a tendency to talk about the clear connection between poetry and politics in the region. As one looks at some of the literary nonfiction that is from Latin America and about Latin America, could we say there's a difference in the narrative style?

**Guillermoprieto:** I was on a panel last year in New York with Juan Villoro, who is a graceful Mexican essayist and deeply cultured man, and we both do long-form narrative journalism. We do sort of similar things and we have similar sensibilities, except that our method and our process are completely different. The idea of having a fact checker really annoys him, he said—essentially because he feels that he should be free to go wherever his poetic instincts take him. Many Latin American reporters who start out as writers—not that they say falsehoods, I'm not implying that by any means—they feel that their primary responsibility is still toward the poetics of the situation. And my own

responsibilities as a writer of nonfiction for an English-speaking audience—you know I started as a reporter for the English media, I started writing for the *Guardian* and *Latin American Newsletters*—my responsibility is really to the reader. So those are very different starting points.

**Roe:** Yes. And do you think that those “poetic instincts” are a general difference between, say, anglophone and Latin American writers?

**Guillermoprieto:** Well, I would say between that and Romance languages even. And it also has a lot to do with the way I was trained at the *Washington Post* and then subsequently, primarily by my editor at the *New Yorker*, John Bennett: if we can leave the poesy out, we’re going to leave the damn poesy out!

**Roe:** That’s what he said?

**Guillermoprieto:** Well, no, that’s my quote, but I think it could be a Bennett quote. And we’re just very distrustful of that kind of veering into sentimentalism or giving one’s own emotions more importance than the emotions of the subject you’re reporting on; and the more dreadful the situation you’re writing about, the more that’s true.

**Roe:** I’m sure you’re right—there is something to that divide. Since you mentioned the panel you were on recently, I wanted to touch on some of the teaching you’ve done. I know you’ve taught in a number of high-profile places. In working with young or emerging writers and journalists, what are some of the challenges you see them facing?

**Guillermoprieto:** For years, I taught a yearly workshop at the Fundación Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano, which was founded by García Márquez to revitalize the long-form narrative in Latin American journalism. What I’ve done there is workshops for young, professional journalists. But when I’ve taught in the United States, I’ve mainly taught a course on late twentieth-century Latin American history, generally in the history department. Those are very different kinds of teaching.

**Roe:** For the journalists in Latin America, then, what are some of their biggest challenges?

**Guillermoprieto:** Not getting killed—that’s a good start. According to recent official figures, 102 journalists have been killed in Mexico in the course of the last fourteen years. And mostly the journalists who get killed are the defenseless ones, the provincial journalists with almost no training who are called to do five stories a day—literally, five stories a day—who get paid by the word. And whose editors don’t back them. So I’d say that’s been a big challenge for reporters in Colombia, in Mexico, in Central America. In other places, perhaps, avoiding lawsuits—those are still significant challenges to freedom of expression.

**Roe:** Avoiding lawsuits . . . from the private sector?

**Guillermoprieto:** Well, no, from the government. In Ecuador, significantly, the president has sued the hell out of the newspapers for running cartoons that he feels are inimical to his image. That's a real danger. You can cause a medium in Latin America to go bankrupt: newspapers in the region, particularly, are much less wealthy institutions than US media. Much, much less wealthy.

What other challenges are there? Finding a readership now that print media are closing down. Even in Latin America, this has been so. What are we going to do? I don't know. The *New York Times* had two big articles about it today. One by David Carr, who covers media for the *Times* and really tells things straightforwardly. This was the most despairing I've ever heard him be, basically saying the game's up.<sup>5</sup> I'm very happy at the moment because I've just written a 7,000-word story, but that's the longest story I've been given the freedom to write in a long time.

**Roe:** Publishers just can't afford it.

**Guillermoprieto:** They can't afford the paper for a long story. The longest stories I've been doing in recent years are maybe 4,000 words, more often 2,500 words. I just did the 7,000-word story for a new online magazine called *Matter*,<sup>6</sup> and that was encouraging because it's only available online and is betting that maybe people under forty will be reading articles online as long-form narrative. It's a sort of adjunct of an online blog instrument founded by Ev Williams, the cofounder of Twitter. A lot of big media companies and individuals with big technology money have lately been missing serious journalism, and wondering what's going to happen to the world when serious journalism disappears. So you see [Jeff] Bezos buying the *Washington Post* and Pierre Omidyar, the eBay founder, starting up First Look Media, which has interesting ambitions. Then there's the *New Republic*, which was bought by Chris Hughes, one of the cofounders of Facebook, and so on. After doing so much to destroy the printed word, many online wizards are now concerned about what will happen if people are no longer reading in depth. Because to read at length means to read in depth, and it calls for a different thinking process than reading short BuzzFeeds. And I'm not being sarcastic. It's just different.

**Roe:** And it's interesting that along with some of these new digital magazines that are popping up, we're seeing websites specializing in long-form pieces that they then anthologize or catalogue.

**Guillermoprieto:** The problem is, where is the money going to come from to pay for the reporting that aggregator sites like to anthologize? That's why I thought *Matter* was so encouraging, because they were willing to make

a commitment: they paid for a month's worth of reporting in Rome.

**Roe:** That *is* exciting.

**Guillermoprieto:** That's a huge deal—I could write a proper piece with proper reporting.

**Roe:** The other thing that strikes me as interesting is the explosion of self-publishing and self-publishing platforms, or at least where one has access to technology and no worries over censorship.

**Guillermoprieto:** You know it's a great thing, but you come back to the same thing: who pays for the reporting? And who pays for the editing?

**Roe:** Right—there's no filter, no support.

**Guillermoprieto:** People who seem to feel that this is a brave new world in which self-published reporting will solve all problems don't really take into account a) who defends the author? And b) who helps the author and the reader read a better piece? Media in the United States have long had skillful and committed editors, and this is unique to US journalism. Not even English journalism, but a specific form of US journalism. Who pays for the fact checkers? They are essential if you are talking about journalism. And particularly essential now that we have so much information and pseudo-information on the web and it's so very hard to distinguish one from the other.

**Roe:** What is your next step?

**Guillermoprieto:** Well, *my* immediate next step is to teach for a semester at a university in the United States.

**Roe:** An entire semester? That's a long time for a writer.

**Guillermoprieto:** Most of us now who write long-form journalism are doing this. It takes time away from the actual job of thinking about what the next story should be, the proposal, and getting the answer back, doing the reporting, and then writing. I don't do three or four stories a year anymore. It's a real issue, and it all comes down to economics, and it's a crisis. I wouldn't be going on endlessly about any of this, if it weren't an absolutely critical moment for journalism.

**Roe:** So it remains to be seen what will happen.

**Guillermoprieto:** I don't even think it remains to be seen. I feel quite pessimistic about it right now. There will be individual entrepreneurs or maybe even *mecenas*—sponsors or patrons—like Ev Williams, let's say. But then also the question is, how are they going to find readers out there in this enormous web? These self-publishing journals that you've mentioned before that anthologize long-form narrative—do they have 10,000 readers, 50,000, 100,000? However many it is, they remain outsider publications, and unavoidably elitist. This is the great loss that the collapse of the great middle-brow media implies. What is vanishing is the great plaza, the agora where all

kinds of thinking and contrary opinions can meet with all kinds of readers. Plus, there remains the problem of where all that great content they're going to aggregate is going to come from; who's going to produce it?

I realize that this all sounds terribly pessimistic, so I should perhaps modulate this perspective: Whenever I do a workshop, I realize that there are whole flocks out there of the smartest, most idealistic, and talented kids in the world, who have not been told that journalism is a dying craft and that we're all going to hell, and fast. These are the young people who will create the journalism that the new era and the new technology require, I'm quite certain. Perhaps they will create more visual ways of reporting and thinking. No doubt they'll incorporate much more technology. Or perhaps not; the students I've had seem to harbor an unnatural love for the magic of the written word. Whatever form it takes, though, and however hard this transitional period may be for those of us who started reporting before the Internet, I'm quite certain that journalism and long-form nonfiction narrative will survive. We all need to know about the life that exists beyond our doorstep, and for those of us who are born hungry for the world, there is no more marvelous way to be immersed in it than to go out and write about it. It's a great, great privilege.

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## Notes

1. Guillermoprieto, *Dancing for Cuba: A Memoir of the Revolution*, trans. Esther Allen (New York: Pantheon, 2004).
2. Guillermoprieto, "Mexico: Risking Life for Truth," *New York Review of Books*, November 22, 2012.
3. Guillermoprieto's relationship with the *New Yorker* dates to 1989, when "Letter from Bogata" was published in the October 16 issue.
4. Guillermoprieto, "Fidel in the Evening," *New York Review of Books*, October 22, 1998.
5. David Carr, "Papers Are Down, and Now Out," *New York Times*, August 11, 2014.
6. *Matter* can be accessed at <https://medium.com/matter/franciss-holywar-70a382606c0d>.

### Selected Works

*Samba* (New York: Knopf, 1990).

*The Heart that Bleeds: Latin America Now* (New York: Knopf 1994). Published in Spanish as *Al pie de un volcán te escribo*, trans. Alma Guillermoprieto and Hernando Valencia Goelkel (Mexico: Plaza & Janés, c2000).

*Los años que no fuimos felices: Crónicas de la transición Mexicana*, trans. Angela García Rocha and Juan Manuel Pombo Abondano (Mexico: Plaza y Janés, 1999).

*Looking for History: Dispatches from Latin America* (New York: Pantheon, 2001).

*Dancing for Cuba: A Memoir of the Revolution*, trans. Esther Allen (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

*Desde el país de nunca jamás*, trans. Margarita Valencia (Madrid: Debate, 2011).