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From “Home” to Interdisciplinarity: An Interview with Cristina Alcalde

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Eds. Juan Fernandez Cantero and Sharrah Lane

**From “Home” to Interdisciplinarity: An Interview with Cristina
Alcalde**

Cristina Alcalde, Juan Fernández Cantero and Sharrah Lane

University of Kentucky

Sharrah Lane (SL): Thank you so much for giving us the opportunity to interview you.

Cristina Alcalde (CA): Thank you for coming and inviting me to do this.

SL: So, as you know, our issue this time around is related to migration and intersectionality. We were just wondering how you approach migration in your work and how you use an intersectional lens in your work.

CA: Why don't I tell you first a little about the research that I do so that we can talk about how I approach it.

SL: Ok.

CA: So, for my latest project I was looking at Peruvian migrants who have lived or who live in Germany, Canada and the U.S. and I was looking at why they stayed there and why they decided to return to Peru, and specifically to Lima. So, in that case, my approach to migration was to look at middle-class and upper-class migrants and that's against the background of most of the research being done on migration which is about economic migrants who are lower-class, and that's really important, and that's also a lot of the research I've done in the past. But I think to be able to understand migration, we need to look at it holistically and middle-classes and upper-classes are the ones that often dominate and have the power to change the discourses. And so I wanted to explore the sorts of discourses coming from

the middle and upper classes about what it means to be Peruvian and how that changes when you migrate and when you cross borders. I was interested in how ideas about national identity--again this would have to do with my approach to migration which is about identity-- and about experiences, about inequalities, about racialization and about gender. And so that's how intersectionality comes in. I think when any of us cross borders, we really fundamentally shake up and question who we really are, and so I wonder, what happens when you're coming from a position of privilege? We know more about what happens when you come from a position in which you've been oppressed in some ways, but when you come from a position of privilege and that privilege isn't recognized, what does that do? Do you then take on a new identity? What do you do? And in this case, what I found is that people sometimes hold on to these ideas of who they are, which are very hierarchical, and at the same time they hold on to ideas of themselves as being very open. And so, there's that contradiction of how they view themselves and how we view ourselves as very open people and then our own actions and discourses and prejudices as we try to hold on to some sort of power. Because as immigrants, we are all in an often-ambiguous situation so that's the power we have sometimes. With Peruvian migrants sometimes it was referring back to what school they went to, to show they were of a certain class. Though, how do you control power? So, my research is intersectional, because it looks at power from different perspectives and the different identities people have; with upper- and middle-class Peruvians sometimes it was that they employed discourses that were discriminatory and that's in a way to uphold their own status. Even at the same time that they're being discriminated against by others because, as is the case with many Latin Americans, it's the first time that they were racialized and seen as an Other. To me that's fascinating, both from a personal perspective because I'm an immigrant and I've experienced that, but also because that's when I think we can really find out, as an anthropologist I'm interested in what it means to be human and how these experiences show us patterns of behavior.

SL: Using that question as a basis for further inquiry, how would you see power and sexuality intertwining with the migration experience?

CA: Well, in the research I've been doing specifically, because in general it intersects in so many ways because some people leave because of their sexual identity, because they're oppressed and because there's violence against them. I was interested in seeing specifically how Peruvians who

identify as queer, if they decided to return, how the experience of return migration would affect them. In their self-identification as Peruvian, depending on where you live because of different laws and different forms of protection. What I found is that oftentimes the home and the family is where a lot of the oppression is. I'm always interested in looking at oppression at multiple levels: the level of the family, the level of the community, the level of the society. So what I found is that to return home for LGBTQ Peruvians, unlike for other migrants who were Peruvian, it often meant having to put up with violence, whether it's verbal violence or the violence of being constantly told that you don't belong or that you only belong if you suppress part of your identity. And that's not something that heterosexual or Peruvians who identify as heterosexual really experience. For me it was interesting to see how sexuality was the one identity that stood out and that made people more vulnerable to violence. Not necessarily physical violence, but more verbal and emotional violence, like being told that... There was one person I interviewed who, when anything that went wrong, his family was like, "Oh, it's because you're gay," so it's this constant, "Well, it's because you're that," that you're Other in some other way, so it was a way of marking them as Other. Even though in his case, as in many others, he felt that the only place where he felt truly comfortable was with his family in Lima, yet it was his family in Lima that was the one that was most oppressive and which really rejected who he was.

SL: And in terms of the migratory experience, you've talked about the decision to return as related to sexuality, but in terms of the actual decision to migrate from the community and living in a new community, for instance abroad, did you find that people you interviewed thought that they were able to be more open about their sexuality in the places they were able to migrate to? Or was that also problematic in leaving the home community and going to the receiving community?

CA: I interviewed a large group of people and only a minority identified as LGBTQ. In those cases, what I found that was interesting to me, even though migration research typically talks about how migration can be a form of liberation, you can be away from your family and all these forms of oppression, but really to belong oftentimes as immigrants, we look for those immigrant communities. And so what would happen is that immigrants are looking for those immigrant communities so they're once again in these, in the middle of these oppressive discourses about what it

means to be Peruvian, so the first question would be for a woman, “So who did you marry?” and “Well, I didn’t marry anyone,” or, “Why don’t you have children?” in the cases in which they didn’t have children or if her partner’s a woman it would be this total disavowal that that’s a legitimate relationship. So then in some cases what it was is that the Peruvians I met with didn’t feel comfortable in those immigrant communities. So again, that’s a violence against their own belonging as Peruvians, so migration doesn’t mean you become totally isolated and in those cases in some ways they had to choose between feeling like they belong to this community of Peruvians, which Peruvians come from all classes, all sexual orientations, everything, but in those cases, the ones that were very narrow in their focus, or the community outside in which they wouldn’t have this much surveillance.

Juan Fernández Cantero (JFC): I was thinking that some immigrants look for communities of immigrants, which is similar to looking for home outside of their home countries, but their home can also be seen as their return and going back to those patterns of oppression. In your opinion, what’s the tension between home as a safe place and home as factor of identity?

CA: That’s a great question. In my previous research I worked on intimate partner violence, one of the first things I approach my research with is that the home, we shouldn’t assume that the home is a safe place. And I also apply that here. The home is not [necessarily] a safe place, so the new home that you might migrate to or the home you come from is not necessarily a safe place. It might be one of the most violent places. I think either one can be home, but I think as with all immigrants, the idea that we can have multiple homes and that having more than one home doesn’t diminish our attachments to another one, but it does change our way of viewing the world. Sometimes we have to have one home, like, “Where are you from?” or “Where is home?” or “Are you going back home?” all these questions are very binary, so a lot of the research I’m interested in really challenges those binaries of home and abroad. If you can be at home in both places, but in reality, you might not feel fully at home in either one. Because there is no perfect home.

SL: You spoke a little about your work with intimate partner violence and mentioned being an advocate in your previous research, and we’re wondering how you see your work in academia contributing to your work

as an advocate and vice versa. Would you have any advice for young scholars regarding academic work and advocacy?

CA: I wish I could be more of an advocate. When I was working on intimate partner violence, one of the things I did was volunteer at a shelter. Individually, I tried to do different things. As an academic, one of the things that research has allowed me to do, both the intimate partner violence and immigration research, is that from time to time I'm called on to be an expert witness for asylum cases, so that's for me the most significant way in which I can be an advocate. Apart from serving on community organizations or organizing events for the university about migration or teaching classes, because that's a form of advocacy because that's education a well. But the real life, more urgent cases, especially now of asylum, those are the ones that I feel are more advocacy. They'd be impossible without the work that I've done on intimate partner violence and migration, and that's why I can help with that. In those cases, that helps me bring it all together. And you said also advice for scholars? It would be to do something that you truly believe in and that it's ok to change as you move through your career; there are always things to advocate for. But I think it's critical to be able to look at how your research is going to have an impact. It's not always going to have an impact in the real world, or the outside world, but if it does, it's important that we pursue those possibilities.

JFC: How do you see your work interpreted or used across disciplines?

CA: That's another awesome question. Because I'm in Gender and Women's Studies and students from different disciplines take my courses and what I teach isn't necessarily what I write about. And I keep learning how what I write is interpreted because of the questions I get, like in graduate seminars, like my methods and my methods have become more and more interdisciplinary because I'm an anthropologist but I've been in a Gender and Women's Studies department for over a decade, and so my methods have changed. So, whereas before I would do more field research, then I started doing more focus groups and then more textual analysis and discourse analysis. So, for the latest book project on Peruvian migrants, I read novels. I mean, I've always read novels, but I used this also as a source of information, so [I used] novels, interviews, online surveys. I feel comfortable with using different methods in a way that I didn't when I was a younger scholar and I think that helps me because I'm always trying to learn more. So, the people in my classes and the other people that I work

with, they tell me how they interpret my work. I also have reading groups with other faculty who are from other disciplines, so that's really helpful. They'll read it and they'll ask me questions that I hadn't thought of. That keeps it exciting and challenging.

SL: Speaking of reading groups, we were curious if you could recommend a book or article that you think has really changed or contributed to your work regarding migration and intersectionality?

CA: One book, I wouldn't say it's a central book, that I was thinking of is *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* I think that's women academics telling stories – they're very intersectional – in academia. I think I used that for the first time a decade ago in a class and I think that it helped me and it helped a lot of us think through how our identities are connected to the work we do sometimes and how our experiences can be someone else's research interests. So that's always interesting to look at. I can't think of a single book. But constantly reading new books, that's what keeps me thinking. Reading new books that come along and reading novels, that means I get a lot of ideas just from reading books from different disciplines. I'm always cautious to not say this book is the best.

JFC: I was reading an article you wrote, one which is really self-reflective about –

CA: Oh, yes. About being a feminist anthropologist and doing field research?

JFC: Yes. Is it a common practice for those people who work with migration to be self-reflective?

CA: I don't think so. I think that's more of the feminist anthropologist, and it's something both difficult and challenging to do. I don't enjoy writing about myself that much, but I think sometimes it's useful because it helps show your positionality. I think also, since I'm interested in power and racialization, all those have to do with how people perceive me. What I do is talk to people, so people react to me. So, to exclude me from the equation would be a disservice to the person reading what I'm writing, right? But it's rough because you have to be self-reflective and anything you write anybody can interpret it any way. So, you also have to be conscious of that and really think about how your position informs what you're doing. I think

that migration research is done from all different perspectives, so some are very self-reflective, some are not. Just as with any other topic. I think it's the feminist research that informs my reflexivity and positionality.

JFC: Since we are publishing this issue regarding migration and it also happens to be the Year of Migration at UK [University of Kentucky], how's it going? How are students benefiting from it?

CA: The Year of Migration is a whole year of events. We've had several events, such as Migration Stories Around the World, which was eighty minutes of telling your migration story. Undergraduate students told their migration stories; that was really exciting. We've had all sorts of events having to do with food, some more scholarly, some more community driven, some having to do with music. So, it's really all about trying to understand how migration is a part of our lives and how we can approach it as scholars but also as individuals and in our community. I mean, we have such a diverse community, so it's also about bringing people in from the community to talk about that. So we're beginning to plan, or we have been planning things for the Spring now, so there are going to be all these events. And we're about to put a calendar together and our hope is that people will put those events in their syllabi so that students can come if they want or the community can also come. The idea is to learn from this. The Year of Passport Series that this is part of typically focuses on one area of the world, but this year we wanted to focus on something that covers a lot of different areas and that's really contemporary, so you don't have to be an immigrant or have a mother or grandparent or great-grandparent that's an immigrant to be able to relate to it. It's really about who we all are so we thought it would be a good way to get to that, both educationally and even beyond.

JFC: Do you have any future projects lined up?

CA: I'm still working on some data from this project on migration, so I'm working on that. I've been working on a couple articles and I'm working on some new projects, so I'm trying to think of the contours of the new project. But it's going to be on Peru and I'm looking at the possibility of looking at Chinese migration to Peru and to Lima and looking at middle class and belonging.

SL: Thank you so much for your time!