

A Conversation with June Carolyn Erlick

Michael J. LaRosa / Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Michael LaRosa (ML): It's the 8th of August and we're in Cambridge, MA with June Carolyn Erlick who's the director and editor of *ReVista*, the magazine that's put out three times a year by the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard University. And I just want to start out with a simple question. Can you tell me a little bit about your background? Where you were born and raised and your educational background...that would all be very helpful to start out.

June Carolyn Erlick (JE): Well, I'm a consummate New Yorker. I went to Barnard and Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. I'm a journalist by profession. I spent five years in the United States covering Cuban refugees and Mexican migrant workers and consumer affairs in New Jersey and Florida. And then I went to Colombia where I lived for ten years and then to Nicaragua where I covered the Sandinista Revolution and eventually to Berlin, which made me decide that my real love was Latin America.

ML: Well, that's interesting. So Berlin made you realize that? Being in Germany?

JE: Yes. It made me realize that my identity was not as a foreign correspondent; it was as a Latin Americanist.

ML: I see. Okay. And, you've already answered this to some degree but when did you discover that journalism was your calling? Was there a specific moment, like, "aha"? Was there a course or a professor or something you read?

JE: I loved to write poetry and short stories when I was young and I figured I couldn't make a living writing poetry and short stories and I thought that one could make a living doing journalism, or maybe one could at that time. So, I decided, well, I could work with words and become a journalist. So my love for journalism came out of a love for words and language.

ML: I guess you already said you lived in Colombia for ten years. Can you, since this is a largely Colombian audience that's going to see this or read this, can you tell us a little bit about that process of arriving there? I mean, why did you decide to go to Colombia? How did that happen? And when?

JE: Well, I didn't decide anything. It happened. The story is, and I recount this in my book, *A Gringa in*

Bogotá, published by the University of Texas, that I had worked on a newspaper in Florida for three years. It was owned by the *New York Times*, and there was a threat of a printer's strike and they were training us to use computers— as scabs. And when the printer's strike didn't come off, they decided that they would like to ask for voluntary layoffs. And they were offering three thousand dollars. Well, I had never taken that trip around Europe that many people took. So, I decided I would take a trip around Latin America and took the buyout. I traveled through Central America but I discovered that I didn't really like to travel without a purpose and I found that Central America was kind of boring because it was going from, here is the church, here is the museum, here is the town hall, here is a bookstore, and I just found it all kind of too small and purposeless. My traveling felt purposeless. I met some people in Honduras who had friends, three Honduran women studying philosophy at the Javeriana in Bogotá, in Colombia. So when I got to Bogotá, I looked them up and they gave me the insider's view of Bogotá, which of course is a big city, and I'm a big city person. And I fell in love with the city. I remember standing in front of the Parque Nacional at sunset after having spent all afternoon at the Bucholtz which was this large—I don't know if you remember this—five-story building in downtown Bogotá filled with books and then walking past this park smelling of eucalyptus and swaddled with the pink and greens and purples of the sunset. And I just thought, "What other city has these bookstores and these sunsets and these mountains?" But I moved on because I was traveling and left the Hondurans behind, got to Cali, met a guy who worked for *El País* of Cali, and he offered me a tour of his newspaper. I walked into an office where there were, as he put it, *paisanos*, except they turned out to be English, and they were running this English language supplement of *El País*. A guy looked at me, and he said, "Are you looking for a job?" And I wasn't, but I said yes. I told him my experience and he said, "Well, we have a job, but there's a real problem with it." And I thought the problem might be my visa or it might be that I had to write in Spanish, I thought all sorts of things. And he said, "Well, it's an editor's position, but it's in Bogotá." And I said, "Oh, what a shame that it's not here in Cali," thinking of the story of Br'er Rabbit and throwing you back into the briar patch. And that's how I ended up in Bogotá. And because there were so few English

language journalists, I was constantly being offered gigs and I finally got offered a job as Latin American correspondent with the *National Catholic Reporter* and left my job as editor of *El País* English language in Cali. So, that's how it all started.

ML: And *National Catholic Reporter* had a presence in Colombia?

JE: Well, actually, yes. They had had, or they had at the time Penny Lernoux who was a really great reporter and she, however, was pregnant with her first child, Angela, and she did not want to continue to travel and to report. So, she recommended me for the position and she became Latin American affairs writer, which is kind of a columnist, and I became the correspondent based in Bogotá.

ML: That's fascinating. And can you tell us, or tell me, rather, a little bit about the socio-economic—the socio-political climate in Bogotá at the time you were there? Because it seems that you were kind of a pioneer in terms of being in Bogotá at a time when there were relatively few Americans who weren't involved in the embassy or in the oil industry or something.

JE: Yes. I mean, there was, first of all, the guerilla war as we know it today where the FARC people talk about the fifty-year long war, but the war felt far removed in the countryside. What really came to the front spotlight very early on was M-19 and guerilla warfare and the drug trade was marijuana. The drug traffickers were gringos. And so this all began to sort of develop. There was a very thick sense of the old Bogotá. It was a lot greyer. Even the weather was greyer. People dressed more in, you know, black and greys. Yet a wonderful cultural scene was emerging, particularly with theatre arts and folk music and, somewhat, plastic arts. It was fairly underground. You had to look for it, but if you just scratched the surface, it was really there. It was really vibrant. I feel like the newspapers were far more vibrant than they are now. There was *Alternativa*, which was a magazine run by García Márquez, which I occasionally wrote for. But it certainly was not the big, sprawling city that it is now and not nearly as cosmopolitan. There, you know, in terms, just thinking about restaurants, you had Ramses, which was on the Séptima, which was Lebanese. And then you had a couple of Chinese places, but you know, it was very, it was insular, it was an insular city. There were two neighborhoods which were bad barrios, but in the process of gentrification. One, the neighborhood where I lived, was Santa Fe,—now a red light district—and the other was the Candelaria which was filled with single-room-occupancy residences. And people were kind of betting on one neighborhood or the other. A lot of people from the Nacional University bought into my neighborhood or rented apartments there, but of course it was the Candelaria that won out.

ML: Okay. Now is it safe to say that we're talking about the late 70s, early 80s, more or less?

JE: Mid 70s, early 80s.

ML: So that gives us some historic context. Well, that's great. And you, as you mentioned a few minutes ago, published a book of interrelated stories about living in Bogotá. It came out in English with the University of Texas Press, and in Bogotá as well.

JE: It came out first in Spanish...

ML: First in Spanish, right, and then with UT, exactly. Can you tell me how did that project emerge, where did you come up with the idea to do that book, and can you tell us a little bit about the genesis of that project? It would be great to hear the story.

JE: Well, my trip to Bogotá wasn't planned and I had no intention of writing a book, at least this book, about Bogotá. What happened is that I got a Fulbright fellowship to Colombia to work on some journalism projects and because of a change in leadership there was no longer so much political will for a masters in journalism program at the Universidad Nacional. And so I was doing workshops, but, you know, I also felt like this was a moment that was going to escape me if I didn't keep a journal. So when I got there in August, I started keeping a journal of what I had done everyday. And in December, when I looked at it, I thought, this is not going to remind me of anything. It was kind of like, "Oh, met with Mike LaRosa, in a patio and we had coffee and we ran into such-and-such a person and I had *ajiacó* for lunch." And I looked at this, and I just, this is not worth anything! And, so, I set myself a project that once a week, I would pick out, sort of a theme, and it could be any theme, and I would spend a day, at least a day, writing it, and at least a day researching it. And I really started to get into it. It made me see things very differently because I would be walking around and I would see a museum exhibition and/or I would eat a certain type of food or I would notice the stray dogs in the street were gone. And I would say, "Oh! Okay, that's a subject I could write about." And then I would start talking to people about it, or researching, or both, and I would come up with my theme.

Well, I had a first book that was called *Disappeared: A Journalist Silenced*, which recently appeared in Spanish. And, at that time, I wanted very much to get it into Spanish. So, Juanita León, who's the director of *La Silla Vacía* and who's a good friend said, "Why don't you talk to my editor?" So I went to Juanita's editor with *Disappeared*. Because it was a book that wasn't about Colombia, she—the editor, Pilar Reyes—had to present it to three branches of Santillana. So she chose Miami, Guatemala, and Colombia. She voted yes. Guatemala voted no because they felt the people were tired of hearing about the war. And Santillana-Miami voted

no because they felt Guatemala, the Central American presence in the United States, wasn't really the market. So, Pilar said to me, "I like the way you write. If you ever write anything about Colombia, I'd be interested." So, a couple of months went by and I was ready to leave Bogotá. And I had lunch with Pilar, and right before, you know, a few days before I thought, "You know, I'm going to print out what I have from my journal and see if she sees any themes in there that she might see as possibly expanding into a book. So, I printed the journal out and near the street where I lived, there are a whole bunch of places that kind of bind theses. So, I said, "Oh, I'll just give it to her bound!" So, I gave her the thing bound. My idea was that she would read it and say, "Oh, nobody's ever really written a book on animals in Bogotá. Why don't you do a book on the animals?" So, I gave it to her. Sort of forgot about it.

In February of the following year, I was going back to Colombia for the Inter-American Press Association meeting in Cartagena, and I was going to spend a few days in Bogotá. So, I said, "Okay, I'll get in touch with Pilar and see if she has time for lunch." And she wrote me back right away, and she said, "Oh! You're on my to-do list! I wanted to tell you we're interested in your book." And my first thought was, "Oh! They changed their mind about *Disappeared*. And then I thought, "Oh, my God! It's not that! It's that she perceives this thing I gave her as book." And this thing that I gave her was in Spanglish because as those of you who are bilingual know when you're keeping a journal and you've been using Spanish all day, you often write in Spanish or Spanglish in your journal, and this thing is half in English, half in Spanish, half in Spanglish. And, I had lunch with her and she said, "You know, these are vignettes. This is really interesting. It is a book, and I want you to work with someone to get it all into, you know, Spanish, and so I worked with a woman named Patricia Torres who helped me work through my Spanish and my English and my Spanglish. And it came out first in Spanish. And, Aguilar, even though the book is basically out of print, did really right with me with publicity and I was at a LASA conference in someplace—California, maybe—and we have a stand because the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies also publishes books, and Aguilar made me up these beautiful postcards. So, I was going around and showing people that I knew and the woman at the University of Texas Press said, "Is this book in English?" And I said, "No." And she said, "Well, is there a manuscript in English?" And I said, "Well, no, but it could be put into English really easily because it's my native language, believe it or not." And so she said, "I'd be really interested. It'd have to be peer reviewed." So, I did it in English really quickly and she had it peer reviewed quickly and it came out and it still has an interesting audience because a lot of people who are young Colombians, brought up in the United States

and who are going back, and also the parents of adopted Colombian children have been a very unexpected audience for my book. And even though it's set in a very particular period of time, which is 2005, 2006, it still captures two very distinct periods of Colombia.

ML: Yes, and I think that's a nice lead in to the next follow-up question. I was trying to think of other books like yours that exist, regarding Colombia, and I couldn't come up with one. Why is it, in your opinion, that there aren't more books like this, that there aren't more published studies like yours out there? Obviously I think of Alma Guillermoprieto, [*The Heart That Bleeds; Looking for History*]*—*she writes some really good essays about Colombia in books about Latin America. There is not a book like yours out there. Why is that do you think?

JE: I think, for one thing, there exists the cult of negativity about Colombia, and I think that those people who do write in the style closest to mine would probably be travelogues, but they don't have the depth of experience and, actually, my book, even though I think it's an easy read, the basic question is a serious one which is, "where is the war?", and how does the war creep into the daily lives of people?" But it's told from the point of view of somebody who first came to Colombia in 1975. And there aren't many people you know, Juanita said to me, "You know, I've, you know, gone past those stray dogs, and I've seen the absence of those stray dogs, and the fact that the stray dogs are in other neighborhoods, but it never occurred to me to write to it." I think it would be a hard book for a Colombian to write, perhaps a Colombian who had gone off to college someplace and come back, but I think it's a book that has to be written by an insider-outsider and that's why I think Tico Braun is probably about the best writer on Colombia that there is because he has that very insider, very outsider perspective.

ML: And that's another lead in. And I was going to ask that very question. Can you tell, or would you be willing to tell, who your intellectual mentors were, or journalistic mentors, or people from whom you sought advice? I mean, you've already mentioned some people. Were there some books or some authors or some people who were influential to you as you were going about preparing your manuscript and going about this process?

JE: Well, as I said, I wasn't preparing a manuscript. That changes the ballgame. It's kind of funny that you say mentor because the relationship is a very...I mean, I was Juanita's mentor when she was at Columbia Journalism School. And also, Margarita Martínez, who's the wonderful producer and filmmaker of *La Sierra*. So, that, in a sense, it's not a mentor-mentee relationship. It's a dialogue. In terms of people that I think have helped me understand a lot about Colombia, obviously Penny

Lernoux was very influential not only in my career path, but just thinking about Latin America. Daniel Samper who is a, was a wonderful, active journalist when I first came to Bogotá. And Enrique Santos Calderón. I think that very often these relationships, perhaps with the exception of Penny, were, you know, very much of a dialogue. I think Penny really was a mentor-mentee relationship. And I think that because I'm a journalist, I don't prepare in the way that an academic does. I experience.

ML: Okay. A few more questions here. Kind of switching gears a little bit. You teach journalism here at Harvard to students. Do you talk a lot about Colombia? If so, how? If not, why not?

JE: I don't talk a lot about Colombia because the audience is basically people who are not necessarily interested in Latin America. I'm teaching them how to write. Occasionally, Colombia will come up in the context of a story I've done. However, this fall [2014] I'm teaching for the first time a feature writing course which has its focus on foreign correspondence. So, I imagine that Colombia will come up a lot more often.

ML: And everybody is talking, you know, lamenting the field of journalism these days saying, "It's gone. Newspapers are going out of business." All of that talk out there. How do you perceive the field, in general, of journalism right now? How are we doing? Is it as bad as everybody says or are those claims overblown in your estimation?

JE: Well, neither! Both! What you have is not a problem with journalism. We need information. We need information that's filtered by people we trust. We need to know what we're getting. We need brands. But the question is how do we deliver that journalism? How do we make sure that it's good? And how do we pay for it? So, you're actually seeing, I think you're seeing, a period like where television came in and people are going, "Radio! It's dead! It's dead! It's gone!" And since then, you have your NPR type stations, your education type stations. You have all news all the time, which didn't exist. And you have crappy, you know, hate talk shows. So, what you learn as a consumer is, "I'm going to listen to NPR, or I'm going to listen to the hate shows." And, unfortunately, there are people who are going to listen to the hate shows. My students found, in the class I'm teaching right now, actually found a very interesting development. There's this thing called BuzzFeed. BuzzFeed is an aggregator of news and basically takes from here, it takes from there. It's all short. It's all crap, and it's not filtered. Well, BuzzFeed just decided to hire a lot of people and they're doing long-form journalism. And there was this beautiful article on Detroit—it needed some editing—but there was this beautiful article on Detroit which was written by a twenty-three-year-old white guy who bought a

house for five hundred bucks in Detroit, and it was about his experience living in this black neighborhood and about the resurgence of Detroit. It was a story that, with some editing, you could find in the *New York Times* magazine section. This kid wouldn't have access to the *New York Times* magazine section! So, I think there are interesting things going on in journalism.

ML: Right, that's good to know. One more question that I have... What do you think, and obviously you know the answer to this question because you work at this on a day-to-day basis, how can journalists in the United States help journalists in other places, specifically in Colombia since that's sort of the nature of this interview? And we know that journalists in Colombia have had some problems. I mean, there have been some real troubles there and real violence and human rights abuses against them. Is there something that we can do, or that we're doing, that you're doing to support them? And kind of vice versa, how can they support us as well?

JE: Well, I think that there are a lot of organizations like the Committee to Protect Journalists, for training, the Neiman Foundation, and I think that it's very important right now, and this has not always been the case in Colombia, but I think right now, the principal challenge or the principal difficulty for journalists are those journalists that work out in the provinces. One of the problems with journalists who work out in the provinces is that they aren't trained. And sometimes they are making people mad unnecessarily. So, I think you have to train people. It doesn't have to be a U.S. organization. There's the FNPI [Fundación Gabriel García Márquez para el Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano] in Cartagena. There's the International Center for Journalism, which sends people down to train journalists. Then, there's Fulbright. I think that there needs to be, not only a watchdog function, but a training function. This is not just true for Colombia. It's true for Mexico. It's true for Central America. I think that there needs to be more circulation of articles and information that Colombian journalists do. I find that I check *La Silla Vacía*, *Kienke*, *El Espectador*, *El Tiempo* and *Semana* fairly frequently, but I really wish that Colombians could help us by doing kind of a digest. One of the problems has been that so many foreign bureaus have left Colombia. Colombia's very lucky because a couple of very excellent journalists like Juan Forero and Chris Kraul instead of being moved out of Colombia as staff reporters have decided, "Hey! I'm staying! I'll stay as a, you know, kind of freelance..." but it's not really freelance. It's quasi-freelance. And they are excellent reporters and they do an excellent job and I think the symbiosis between foreign correspondents and local reporters is very important because they're the people that get those local stories out into the world.

ML: One more question. When are you going back to Colombia? When's your next trip there?

JE: Generally, I go back at Christmas time.

ML: Well, thank you very much, June. It's been a pleasure. I appreciate your sharing your story with the readers of *REC*.