

# Duende

Celebrating 40 years of TCLA.  
Reflections and Gratitude.

Buenas Tardes, Boa tarde, and first of all, I want to congratulate this marvelous institute, Latin American Studies, -TCLA-, on its 40 years of existence. Parabéns y felicidades!

Thank you so much for organizing this marvelous celebration and for inviting me to share some of my thoughts with you on this very special day and occasion.

Dear Friends, en frente de ustedes está una verdadera dinosauria, a true dinosaur, because this year marks exactly 50 years after I began my studies at what would later become this institute (although someone, very kindly, just said to me: do not call yourself a dinosaur, you are one of the *originals! Los originales..*) Because this year marks exactly 50 years since I began my studies at what would later become this institute. And I am so happy to see some fellow dinosaurios -or originales- here today.

In 1976, the study was known as "Spaanse Taal en Letterkunde,". The duration was six years if you studied very hard. After three years you could get your "kandidaats" and then after three years of specialization, you could get your "doctoraal". You could choose between Spanish or Latin American literature or linguistics. And there was a "bijvak" Portuguese and that was Brazilian Portuguese. We had no buildings like this Lipsius, and absolutely no classrooms like this one. Our institute was based in a regular family house at Langebrug 75. There was one large classroom on the ground floor, created by removing the wall between the dining and living rooms. This allowed space for our class of 30 students—29 women and one man.

We started with two weeks of Spanish language lab sessions that immersed us in Spanish, followed by classes on the general history of Spain with Professor Jan Lechner, and Spanish literature with Professor Francisco Carrasquer, a Spanish poet who had fled the Guerra Civil Española. Later, we learned from Jorge Labadie, Luis Iñigo Madrigal, Ben Teensma, who taught Portuguese and invited us at his home, and many others. For oral exams, I remember climbing the small stairs to the professors' tiny offices.

That is all gone now.

What has definitely not gone, not even after 50 years, is what this institute has given to me and my fellow students, what it offers to students today, and -what I hope- it will continue to provide for generations to come.

I truly hope this, because throughout my life, there have been countless moments when I felt deeply grateful for the foundation this institute provided me with—the “luggage”, the armature, I gathered here and carried with me ever since.

Professor Lechner taught us that to understand literature written in Spanish, we had to read and reread two books every year: the Quijote and the Bible. He was right, Professor Lechner always was right (it would never occur to us to not agree with him...).

But during my life, I discovered that to truly understand life itself—as I experienced it in many moments, whether working in favelas and poblaciones in Brazil and Chile, serving as a politician in Dutch Parliament, teaching Spanish at universities in Hong Kong and China or Human Rights in Bangladesh, working with female parliamentarians in Myanmar, or now as chair of the Netherlands Commission for UNESCO— I discovered that to understand life itself, the knowledge I gained at this institute was essential. Reading and learning to understand works like "La Celestina," "El Poema de Mio Cid," "El Martín Fierro," Machado, Quevedo, Sor Juana Ines de la

Cruz, Neruda, Garcia Márquez, Nicolás Guillén and Vargas Llosa gave me a framework to understand situations and articulate experiences.

That is, what the study of cultures and literatures provides a person with: a framework to recognize, understand, and interpret situations. It equips you with language—the ability to formulate ideas, visions, and paths forward that would not occur without such a foundation.

Charlemagne was right when he said that every new language learned, gives you a new friend and a new soul. Learning another language opens up new ways of thinking, reasoning, perspectives, and realities. It teaches empathy.

And that, dear guests, is precisely what our world needs so badly today: empathy, the ability to recognize yourself in the other and the capability to make new friends. Therefore I hope that Latin American Studies will exist for at least 40 years more.

This institute teaches not just how to speak another language, but how to understand other cultures, ways of thinking and reasoning, new approaches to finding solutions, and how to articulate situations and challenges.

And talking about new friends: the EU and the Netherlands have always been certain of their alliances.

Historically, people and politicians in Europe are used to look westward to the US as a trusted friend. Today, however, Europeans must realize the need for new friends and allies—true friends we can trust and understand. Europe must look eastward to Asia and, certainly, southward, where the global majority resides. The BRICS countries alone represent almost 50% of the world economy and a quarter of the world trade, it is where the youngest populations live, with an enormous amount of creative energy, something that is often lacking in the northern part of the world.

In this context, the worst decision a government can make is to cut back on studies that foster knowledge of languages and cultures. Whether it is European languages or other languages: we need new allies, and to connect with them, we must know their languages and, even more importantly, be able understand them.

When preparing what to share today, with so much on my mind, I realized that the word that captures it all is "Duende." Though *duende* translates to "dwarf" in Spanish, it is so much more. Chico Buarque's song, "O que será que será", written for the movie "Dona Flor e Seus Dois Maridos", -that has such a strong political meaning-, says: "...o que será que será que andam suspirando pelas alcovas, que andam susurrando em versos e trovas, que andam combinando no breu das tocas..." this song asks what it is, that mysterious force whispering in verses, the spirit that has no shame or judgment and never will. *Duende* cannot be captured—it is the mystery, the soul Charlemagne referred to, the "black sound" as Federico García Lorca described it, the elusive substance of art and, I dare say, the very essence of what makes life worth living.

*Duende* is something I learned to recognize and value at this institute, and I am so grateful for that.

My deepest wish at this moment of celebration, dear colleagues, is that UCLA, Latin American Studies, will continue to pass on the understanding and sensitivity needed to recognize *duende* to many more students and generations to come.

May they learn not just a language, but new ways of thinking and reasoning, and may they move into the world with a framework that enables them to give words to situations—even the most difficult ones—and to articulate visions, visions of a world of justice and peace.

Because it all starts with language and culture.

Obrigada.