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Beyond Las Vegas and Why Che Matters, 50 years After His Death

By Susan Babbitt
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I listened with interest to CBC call-in shows about the mass killing in Las Vegas. Caller after caller, some who'd been there months before, or never, described confusion, guilt about surviving, helplessness. A commentator spoke of one person shielding another with his body: "Therein lies the hope for our species", she said. One person sacrificing for another.

The radio commentator said people come together under existential threat. Maybe. But the threat is exceptional, or so we should believe. That's why it was the call-in topic on two successive days.

Cuban independence leader and philosopher, José Martí, distinguished north and south Americas by the fact that the US was born behind a plough and the south was born out of panic and trauma. It was born out of terror. He said that for this reason there are two, and only two, Americas. [i]

He drew heavily upon Náhuatl imagery, inspired by his time in Guatemala. [ii] Martí's poetry is replete with images of volcanic eruptions, lava and swords. The eruptions symbolize "la energía original" or humanness. Lava is disruptive. It seems to come from nowhere.

It burns. Náhuatl culture, dominated by the myth of Quetzalcátl, relies on images of fire and sun to portray freedom. Martí's image of the "warrior whose path leads to the heavens" is nonetheless still "fiery and devastating". In the Náhuatl dialectic of lava, fire and glittering swords lies, Cuban philosopher Cintio Vitier argues, the "key" to Martí's poetry: its *americanness*.

The *other* America. When we hear about solidarity after disasters like Las Vegas, we are supposed to be comforted. Hope for the species. In Martí's poetry, the "lengua de lava" does not get a chance to cool. It emerges into human consciousness as a sword that becomes sheathed in the sun. Nature's chaos is real, and acts upon us according to the laws of nature. But we can respond with sacrifice.

The sacrifice noted on CBC is what Martí, following the Náhuatl, calls "love". It is how to escape what Marx called "alienation": separation from humanness. [iii] Martí's *americanness* is realistic. "Hope" for humanity is not something soft and fuzzy for extraordinary moments of trouble. Humanness must be discovered. It takes work, and can be as disruptive as nature's unpredictable and devastating events.

Che Guevara also referred to love as sacrifice. He was murdered 50 years ago this week by US agents. Che Guevara is criticized for what he said about sacrifice, just as he is criticized for much else. His vision is little understood. It is deeply philosophical. It matters today.

Che wrote that solidarity "has something of the bitter irony of the plebeians cheering on the gladiators in the Roman circus". It is not enough "to wish the victim success", he wrote. Instead, "one must share his or her fate.... in victory or death". [iv]

We don't like reference to death. We prefer "pathological upbeatness", [v] believing in (our own) survival no matter what. Antonio Gramsci called such an attitude lazy.

It's easy. It means we don't have to think about solidarity as we might when survival is threatened.

It always is. The truth is that we are all in the path of an oncoming train, just as in Alex Colville's famous painting. Che Guevara said, "at the risk of seeming ridiculous" that revolutionaries have to be guided by "great feelings of love". He meant the sacrifice sort.

But he wasn't referring to dramatic events.

Speaking to medical workers in 1960, Che told them: "If we all use the new weapon of solidarity ... then the only thing left for us is to know the daily stretch of the road and to take it. Nobody can point out that stretch ... in the personal road of each individual; it is what he will do every day, what he will gain from his individual experience".

"What he will do every day". The sacrifice part of Guevara's message about solidarity, about love, is a day by day affair. This is what you find in the Náuatl cosmology. Images of fire and volcanoes are coupled with images of liberation. It is realistic, like Martí's poetry, like Che's "new person". It must be.

Che compared the "self-made man" to an invisible cage: we are enslaved by socially produced beliefs and values and we call that "freedom". Like Martí, he took the question of freedom to be about how to get out of the cage without creating another one. Put differently, how do you respond to slavery without reasons and acts drawn from the same enslavement?

Critics say Che Guevara is naïve, expecting a new type of being. Instead, he is practical, as the other America has always had to be. He knows an ancient dialectic, in which we have to lose – or sacrifice – in order to gain – truth. The "new person" recognizes the dialectic of sacrifice, called "love". Such practical (not moral) insight is lost in the only "America" most now recognize.

Drawing upon *his* America, Martí wrote: "Despídete de ti mismo, y vivirás".[vi] It needn't be so remarkable an inclination that only a horror like that of Las Vegas brings it to attention.

Ana Belén Montes is an example, urgently relevant.[vii] She's in jail in the US. Please sign petition here.

Notes.

[i] Cited in Juan Marinello, "Discurso en la clausura del 11 semanario juvenil nacional de estudios martianos" *ACEM* 1974

[ii] Cintio Vitier, "Lava, espada, alas (en torno a los *versos libres*)" in *José Martí: Edición al cuidado de Ana Cairo Ballestar* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 2007) 211-225

[iii] Vitier, op. cit. 216

[iv] Che Guevara, "Create two, three, many Vietnams", *The Che Guevara Reader* (Ocean Press, 1997) 316

[v] Terry Eagleton, *Reason, faith and revolution* (Yale University Press, 2009) 138

[vi] ‘Say good-bye to yourself, and you will live’

[vii] <http://www.prolibertad.org/ana-belen-montes>. For more information, write to the cnc@canadiannetworkoncuba.ca or cincoheroes@listas.cujae.edu.cu