Nostalgia.
Evoking Christopher Schmidt-Nowara

Luis Miguel Garcia Mora

“Viernes 26/06/2015 9:35

Queridos, mala noticia: he tenido que cancelar el viaje a Madrid. Estoy con un virus con temperaturas rozando los 40 grados. Estoy hecho polvo. ¡Lo siento mucho!

Abrazos, Chris.

- 26/06/2015 9:38

Vaya, lo siento mucho. Quizás más adelante te tengamos por aquí.

Un abrazo,

Luis Miguel”

Sadly there was never a chance.

When Dale Tomich asked me to write a few words in memory of Chris, obviously, I could not refuse. He is one of my dearest and most beloved friends. And I say this, in the present tense, because he still is. It has been almost a year since he has not been with us, but I remember him constantly. I still believe he is here. It is hard to

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“Friday 06/26/2015 9:35 am

Dear all, bad news: I have had to cancel my trip to Madrid. I have a virus and have a temperature bordering 40 degrees. I am shattered. I’m very sorry!

Hugs, Chris.

-06/26/2015 9:38 am

Wow, I’m really sorry. Perhaps we’ll have you here further on.

Hugs,

Luis Miguel."
accept that I am not going to meet with Chris at conferences, that I won’t receive an urgent email from him after a sporting event, which we used to share at a distance. It is in these moments when I become conscious that he is no longer here and his absence stirs a sense of vertigo within me. Rare is the day that, by one circumstance or another, someone or something does not bring back his memory. In this way I have the consolation of feeling that Chris is still with us, because he was someone very important in our lives.

This book honors the historian, whose intellectual career is well known. My words are aimed at remembering everyone’s friend, my friend. This will be a short story that in some way ended when I wrote that last email on June 26, 2015, but in some way the memory of Chris makes it ongoing; a short story that began in the winter of 1993 at the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid.

When re-reading the last email exchanged with Chris, I tried to do so wearing my historian’s glasses, in order to properly contextualize the event. When we rescue a document from the past we do so knowing, if not all, at least much of what relates to it before it existed and also how it connects with the future. This is the advantage of the historian. But when one is part of the story, everything is more complex. No one could imagine what would happen a few hours after receiving that email, and still today, even though I know, I am still unable to assume it. But this, although short, is a story and we must try to tell it according to a method.

It was Ada Ferrer who introduced me to Chris. I had met Ada a few days earlier, also at the Biblioteca Nacional. No one introduced us, well, in fact, yes. We were introduced by the narrow desks where fate sat us next to one another. I remember I was surrounded by books on Puerto Rico with which I was trying to synthesize its history in
the nineteenth century for a piece I was writing with Loles González-Ripoll. Ada saw *Conflictos de clase política en Puerto Rico*, by Quintero Rivera, and could not avoid saying: “That book is very good.” When she asked me if I was interested in the history of Puerto Rico, I said yes, but I was more interested in that of Cuba. Ada told me: “I am Cuban and I work on Cuban history.” I think we hadn’t spoken for five minutes when she said: “You have to meet my colleague from the University of Michigan, Chris Schmidt-Nowara, you have a lot in common.” I have always laughed about those historians who write: “And at that moment Napoleon thought…” How the hell are they going to know what Napoleon was thinking? Well, at that moment Luis Miguel thought that he had only met Ada five minutes ago and it was a bit rash on her part to think that I was going to have a lot in common with Chris, who until that moment had been completely alien to me. Ada was right. Two days later, during that winter of 1993, sadly I do not know the exact date, I met Chris.

The first time that I saw him, at the cantina of the Biblioteca Nacional, he was the center of a rowdy group of North Americans. I later found out that they were all recipients of Fulbright scholarships. Chris was very thin and had very long and wavy hair. He wore denim pants and jacket and a long sleeve cotton shirt. By the way he was dressed I would have said that I was in the presence of someone from a grunge band from Seattle. Ada formally introduced us and in a moment we were already entangled in a long conversation, the first of many, in which I realized that indeed we had a lot in common, and not only our interest in history. From that moment we spoke daily. I don’t know, some people you know your entire life, you see them often, but still remain complete strangers. However, with others one immediately generates a bond that seems to have always been there. Not as if they were a recent friend, but a lifelong friend, the
kind you rapidly feel the need to introduce to your other friends because there is no doubt that you are before someone that you will soon consider “one of ours.”

Sharing our lives, I began to learn a few things. Chris was born in Ohio, but when he was a child moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico. His family was from Boston, but he was at home in the south. He would always tell me that he would go back to New Mexico someday. He would buy a house and spend more time there with his family. It was in Albuquerque that he came into contact with Hispanic culture. It was easy, he found it right out on the street. It was also helpful that his family, white and Bostonian, would not think twice about getting to know and relating with other cultures. Sometimes proximity is not a matter of the physical distance that separates us from things, but of the desire and interest that we have in approaching them. Chris would tell me that as a child he would often go to summer school in Spanish. That is where it all began.

He studied in Albuquerque and then moved to Madrid where he spent a year, 1986-1987, at New York University. He returned to his hometown to study at the prestigious Kenyon College where he obtained his undergraduate degree in History in 1988. That year he enrolled at the University of Michigan. Thanks to a Fulbright scholarship he returned to Spain to research for his Doctoral thesis, which he wrote on the abolitionist movement between 1833 and 1874.

What struck me the most about Chris when I first met him was how perfectly integrated he was in Spanish historiography and how well he knew all the historians. Evidently he was very proud of working with Rebecca Scott, but also of working with Miguel Artola and his disciples from the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, José Álvarez Junco and Elena Hernández Sandoica from the Universidad Complutense, and
Josep Fradera, Jordi Maluquer and Astrid Cubano in Barcelona. Without a doubt it was his relationship with all of them that confirmed that his work, aside from the Caribbean implications, was a piece on the history of Spain in the nineteenth century. In fact his book was entitled *Empire and Antislavery*: one had to understand the imperial dynamics in order to properly evaluate what Spanish abolitionism was and who made it possible. He built on a seminal study that Alberto Gil Novales published during the sixties in the *Revista de Occidente*. He understood and incorporated the contributions of Spanish historiography, without forgetting the vast tradition of studies written about slavery in the United States, Puerto Rico and Cuba. Christopher Schmidt-Nowara knew, as well as anyone, how to reconcile different traditions to create his own recognizable voice.

The one writing these lines, was born in Madrid, like his parents, his grandparents and seven of his eight great grandparents. I am what is known as a true *Madrileño*. Chris also is, and now that he lives in our memory, he will never cease to be. He showed me many new things about my city. It was a joy to walk with him, he would suddenly stop and say: “Labra lived here,” only to continue and ask himself where Labra would have gone to have a drink before heading to the courts in order to present a memorandum against slavery for the Abolitionist Society. I loved his ability to evoke history with humor, incorporate it into our day to day narrative.

Chris loved Madrid and with no credentials became an ambassador for many North American students and professors who would come and go, who he accompanied in administrative tasks at the libraries and archives, and to whom he also revealed the secrets of the city in order to figure out where to sleep, eat, and have fun. Chris’s Madrid began in Lavapiés, without a doubt his favorite neighborhood. He lived at the

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2 A native of Madrid.
border between the Lavapiés and Huertas neighborhoods, on Santa Isabel street, close to
the Doré film archive, where he was a regular. In the morning, he would go north, to the
Archivo Histórico Nacional and after lunch he would head back south to the Biblioteca
Nacional and to the Academia de la Historia. From there he would walk to Lavapiés, to
Huertas, in search of the best croquetas, which he would find at the Aloque, the best
paella at El Ventorrillo Murciano or La Barraca, or he would go into a bar to savor some
good patatas bravas, something, as his good friend James Amelang reminded me, were
a true obsession of his. He loved to eat well, but more than food he liked the fact of
sharing, discussing with his friends about the divine and the human while having a beer
and a bite to eat. Far from the center, his Madrid was also in the periphery, in the
Moratalaz sports center, in the neighborhood in which I was born, grew up, and I lived
at the time. Chris would go to play basketball every Monday night, with James and
other Americans.

When meeting up with him a few days later, he would tell me how the game
went, but also about what was talked about at the traditional Leonese bar that they
would go to afterwards to comment on the current events of a city and country they felt
as their own.

This is how Chris was and this is how I like to remember him: a person who was
involved, who empathized; your problems and worries were his problems and worries.
A perfect mix of intelligence, empathy, and generosity. Perhaps generosity is not the
most adequate word (someone who is generous gives or shares what he or she has).
More than generosity it was solidarity. That sum of intelligence, empathy and solidarity
is what I understand as bonhomie, which the dictionary defines correctly as “affability,
simplicity, kindness, honesty in character and behavior.” In short, aside from
intellectual genius, he was the professor all the students wanted; the director that all the
doctoral students wanted; one whose suggestions enriched their work without making them lose their own voice.

When the last semester of his Fulbright scholarship ended, he began to worry about having to go back to the United States. At that moment another scholarship appeared from the Mellon Foundation, which granted him one more year to complete his thesis. He would have loved to have been able to do it in Madrid. At that time he had a girlfriend who he loved very much. I remember his joy when he told me that the scholarship would allow him to extend his stay; I remember his sadness when a few weeks later his thesis director requested his presence in Ann Arbor. Perhaps he was aware that a very happy stage of his life was ending, but that it was a sacrifice he had to make so that we could all enjoy his contributions today.

He defended his thesis in 1995, which was later his first book. When all the American universities had important Latin American Studies programs, that he could easily fit into, Chris always presented himself as a specialist in nineteenth century Spanish history, which reduced his possibilities with evaluators. He worked for three years, 1996-1998, at Stanford University. It was then that he met his first wife, Joy. Stanford is without a doubt a great university, but Chris did not like California very much. That is why he was happy when he took a position at Fordham in 1998, first as assistant professor, then as associate and from 2008 as professor.

Chris loved New York. I remember how stricken he was after 9/11. He had planned a trip to Spain but cancelled it. Chris’s favorite area of New York was north of Manhattan, in Washington Heights, towards the south, near Tribecca, and above all, in Brooklyn, between Fort Greene, where he lived, and DUMBO. Aside from these spaces we should add Fifth Avenue where the New York Public Library is; Columbus Circle,
where the Fordham Campus and Lincoln Center are, and more specifically the Dizzy club, where Chris liked to go and listen to music while enjoying the City’s 1930s skyline. Further north, Chris’s New York included the recreations of medieval cloisters at the Metropolitan and the Columbia University Campus, where he met Miranda, his second wife.

In New York, Chris consolidated his intellectual prestige and became, thanks to his acute analysis, a reference in everything relating to Latin American history and nineteenth century Spain. Between 2006 and 2008 he was a visiting professor at the University of Arizona and Princeton. 2011 was his biggest year: in April, his daughter Althea was born, in the fall he transferred to Tufts to take possession of the Prince of Asturias Chair in Spanish Culture and Civilization. He was returning to his roots, to the Boston where his grandfather had been an important doctor, professor, and philanthropist; to a chair in Spanish History and to the home of the baseball team of which he was a fanatic, the Red Sox. Chris loved sports, basketball and baseball, and in Spain he learned to love Soccer. Sadly, no one is perfect and having lived in Madrid and being as he was, I cannot understand how he could prefer Real Madrid over Atlético. Perhaps our friend’s only flaw. But as an intelligent person, removed from fanaticism for a set of colors, he knew how to admire a good play. I remember when in 2010 Spain won the World Cup, which he celebrated like any other Spaniard, the shirt that he insisted that I get for him with insistence was that of Andrés Iniesta, an idol for Barcelona, the historic rival of his team. And as a good friend, which he was, he would be the first to be happy and congratulate me when Atlético, my team and the other historic rival of his, won.

With his daughter in Paris from 2013, he would be on this side of the Atlantic at every chance he had. And it was in old Europe where the most madrileño of Americans
that I have ever met left us. Something that is real and painful, but also apparent. There is a saying in Spanish that states: *Hay personas que pasan por la vida, y otras a las que la vida pasa por ellas*, roughly translated this expression argues that there are some people who simply go through life and others who transform and enhance it. Without a doubt Chris is of the latter. The other day I read in a paper that if during our lives we manage to transmit an idea to someone we love, we will produce a physical change in that person, a real change, that will persist after we are gone. In some ways, we will remain alive while there is someone who remembers us. It is clear that for being the way he was and for all that he has given to us, Chris continues and will always continue to be amongst us.

Binghamton, April 2016.