Re-imagining Ollas at 20!

Special Remarks delivered by Dr. Lourdes Gouveia[[1]](#footnote-1) as part of the 20th anniversary of UNO’s Office of Latino/Latin American Studies.

November 3, 2023

It’s wonderful to be here with all of you celebrating 20 years of OLLAS—an accomplishment we must indeed celebrate together ¡en grande!

If I may take the longer view for a moment, today we must also be reminded of the fact that OLLAS was not born in a historical vacuum. Rather, it belongs to a long lineage of hard-won collaborative spaces of learning and cultural belonging that have linked U.S. universities with local Chicanx, Mexican, Mexican-American, newer immigrant and Latinx communities for more than 50 years. That also needs to be celebrated and, especially, never forgotten.

OLLAS was also shaped by scholars hailing from two types of programs—which have not always seen eye to eye: the grassroots-driven Chicano programs, and the grasstops-driven Latin American Studies programs of the 1960s and 70s. The former were a response to a long history of racialization, exclusion, and historical erasure of generations of Mexican-origin populations. The latter were born largely, though not exclusively, out of U.S. government interests in re-securing Latin America as a sphere of influence amidst a raging cold war and a vibrant communist Cuba. The fact that some of us were coming directly from Latin America provided us with a critical third lens to imagine OLLAS.

But OLLAS’s most immediate predecessor was the academic space secured by colleagues and community members who founded UNO’s first Chicano/Latino studies program in the late 90s. By that time, many of us had begun to observe that a seismic socio-demographic shift was afoot, much of it triggered by a profound restructuring of the U.S meatpacking industry. This restructuring was premised, in large part, on locating new pockets of low-wage, non-unionized, non-citizen labor pools that could be deployed across a new generation of meat-packing plants in rural communities losing jobs and population.

These transnational and internal population movements, as well as the perennial Janus-faced responses to new immigrant waves from the global south—at times hostile, at times welcoming—led us to imagine an innovative center like OLLAS which would meet our communities’ challenges and aspirations now. We believed that such a center could simultaneously breach artificially manufactured borders—disciplinary and otherwise, preserve our historical and collective memory, and expand opportunities for multi-generational learning and community-building.

OLLAS became a nationally respected program—the Latinx flagship of the NU system so to speak. We have produced hundreds of reports, policy and data briefs, academic papers, international conferences such as *Cumbres of the Great Plains*, public testimonies and community-led presentations and workshops. Together, these constitute an important historical record about the lived experiences and aspirations of our communities, which could have otherwise been lost without OLLAS. We have documented the socio-economic characteristics, the contributions, migration experiences and struggles of those communities.

We have marched and testified alongside them, and they alongside us—lest we forget the famous graduation march our students staged when we were facing the possible disappearance of our interdisciplinary programs during serious budget cuts—not only OLLAS, but Native American and Women Studies as well.

Most importantly, we should be proud of the two generations of OLLAS graduates, most of whom were from Spanish-speaking households and first in their family to go to college. Today, many of these students are our colleagues as well as impassioned community leaders and partners.

I cannot tell you how much of what I learned as a founding director of OLLAS, and while working closing with our local communities in Nebraska and across borders, has informed the work I am doing at of “Somos Lawrence”— a volunteer-based, grassroots organization formed two years ago in Lawrence, Kansas.

We forget this history and take our accomplishments for granted at our own peril. Powerful forces pushing toward the erasure of these spaces are forever lurking in the background. Today, opportunities for a deeper and much needed understanding of our communities and the rapid changes happening around us are shrinking and being deliberately shrunk on a daily basis.

A failed neoliberal order, which values individualism and wealth above all else has left us, first, with the corporatization of universities increasingly deprived of public funding. Second, we are left with large pockets of U.S. and world populations left behind—and many others simply afraid of being left behind. And third, we are left with a new breed of cultural warriors, *disfrazados de expertos* in health and education, ready to stoke fear and weaponize a politics of grievances aimed at those others who do not fit their fictional national narrative.

However, rather than viewing these disturbing trends with pessimism or a misguided sense of personal victimhood, I believe this constitutes an excellent opportunity for collective innovation without capitulation. Spaces like OLLAS are best suited for imagining ways out of these divisive dynamics, re-building a sense of community across racial and ethnic groups, and constructing more equal, just, and democratic universities and societies.

Postscript

OLLAS is in great hands today, and I can’t wait to celebrate our half a century of imagining and re-imagining OLLAS. A big thanks to Yuriko Doku and Cristián Doña-Reveco, for their passionate leadership and unwavering support for our students, colleagues, and communities. You made this anniversary very special.

Kudos to UNO’s [Archives and Special Collections](https://www.unomaha.edu/criss-library/archives-and-special-collections/index.php) colleagues, particularly to the *infatigable* Amy C. Schindler, for your forethought in helping us conserve, and continuously update, the history of OLLAS and all its products so students, researchers and community members can access them with ease.

1. OLLAS founding director and Professor Emerita, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Nebraska at Omaha. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)