



Book cover for *Cave, City, and Eagle's Nest*.  
 Inside: the results of five years of research  
 on the Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2.

## David Carrasco

### With Robert Wilder

**D**avid Carrasco is Neil L. Rudenstine Professor of the Study of Latin America with a joint appointment in the Department of Anthropology and the Divinity School at Harvard University. He was recently awarded the Mexican Order of the Aztec Eagle, the highest honor the Mexican government gives to a foreign national. He is the author and editor of numerous books including *Cave, City, and Eagle's Nest: An Interpretive Journey through the Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2* (co-edited with Scott Sessions) and *Breaking Through Mexico's Past: Digging the Aztecs with Eduardo Matos Moctezuma* (with Leonardo López Luján and Eduardo Matos Moctezuma). Robert Wilder spoke to him at the Albuquerque office of the UNM Press, which published the two books.

**Wilder:** I've done my research, read articles by and about you, watched videos on the Internet, but I still wonder: when someone sits next to you on a plane and asks what you do, what do you say?

**Carrasco:** I say I'm a historian of religions and I focus my work on sacred places, especially those powerful and sacred places in Mexico and the Southwest. The reason I focus on sacred places is that human beings always gather around centers, whether the center is a Day of the Dead altar or a dinner table or a pyramid, and I think this gives me a chance to approach human communities wherever I find them. It gives me a way in. I'm basically asking a community—whether it's a person or a text or a map—where's your sacred place? That's where I start.

**Wilder:** It doesn't matter if it's sixteenth-century Mesoamerica or twenty-first-century Juarez, those places are all connected for you?

**Carrasco:** As a historian of religions, I was trained at the University of Chicago under the influence of a truly great scholar named

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Mircea Eliade. Eliade was a comparativist; the idea was that the comparison, always having more sacred places, more communities, that would lead you to understand specific communities—each claimed sacred place—would also allow you to constantly enlarge your sense of how human beings orient themselves in a community around a powerful location. To me, although I was pushed in graduate school to work in a particular cultural area—I chose Mexico—I’m interested in Sartre, streetcorner churches, I’m interested in Chama, places like that. It’s really about sacred places in human history.

**Wilder:** I’ve read that you believe that your journey started with your grandmother. Can you talk about that?

**Carrasco:** My grandmother Carlota Carranza Carrasco was born in Batopilas, which is at the bottom of the Copper Canyon, a very productive silver mining town that was run and owned by *norteamericanos* who had come down from Tennessee, places like that. So she grows up there, goes to Chihuahua city as a teenager, becomes associated with the Protestant church and during the Mexican Revolution moves to El Paso, Texas, where she meets my grandfather and where my father and his brothers are born and raised. That’s a powerful journey right there. So as I’ve gotten further away from the Southwest—places like Washington, D.C., Princeton, and Harvard—it’s interesting how much I remember her. She helped raise me when I was an infant.



David Carrasco at a recent lecture, discussing key imagery in the Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2, which has been projected onto a screen. Photograph by Steve Gilbert ©2008 StudioFlex.

I remember the path that led from Batopilas to Harvard through El Paso, “smelter town.” I identify strongly with that background, that history. I see that as a kind of origin place for me. There’s this story I tell about Carlota. When she was an old woman, she had this beautiful skin. The grandchildren were really amazed by how beautiful and rosy her skin was, so we asked her about it. She said, “I have a secret ingredient I use to keep my skin healthy-looking.” We asked her what it was. “It’s four things. It’s prayer, prayer, prayer, and good cosmetics.”

**Wilder:** I like when you talk about the difference between borderlines and borderlands and how you, in a sense, enact that which you study, leading peoples together rather than separating them. Isn’t that what happened with the Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2 (MC2)? They came to you with this amazing artifact, and you brought all these scholars together?

**Carrasco:** It’s a great story. This map is produced in 1542 or 1543 in Mexico and it’s protected by the community and put into a museum

## INTERVIEW

in the twentieth century. Then it disappears from the museum and goes into private hands. Nobody quite knows where it is until the director of the David Rockefeller Center at Harvard comes to me and says, “Have you ever heard of this map, this codex?” And I say, “Yeah, I do know a little about it but it’s disappeared.” He says, “Well, a member of the David Rockefeller Center advisory board says she owns it. She wants to know if you can read it.” I say, “I’ll be glad to look at it.” He tells me that it’s in her house in Mexico City, which is strange since it’s part of the Mexican National Patrimony. To backtrack a bit, we know in the 1740s an Italian count came to Mexico trying to collect documents. So he went to this community and tried to buy the *mapa* from the people, but they wouldn’t sell it to him. Because he wrote about it, we know it was there in the 1740s and was probably being used ritually. We don’t hear anything about it in the non-Indian record until 1891 when a guy in Mexico makes reference to it in a scientific journal that in this town they have this codex. In 1892, Madrid (Spain) was getting ready for the 400th anniversary of Columbus, and they wanted to bring this map to Madrid for this exposition. They sent people to this community but the people said, “No, you can’t have this map, but we’ll let you make a copy.” The copy went to Spain, so people in Europe knew about it, but it was protected in the community until the 1930s when it went in the museum. Then it disappeared in the 1970s.

So I go to Mexico City, go to the owner’s fortified house—she’s got Monets, Manets, Picassos, Renoirs all on her walls. She goes over to this drawer where she keeps her plates. She unfolds the map on the dining room table. It’s almost 500 years old. I could tell right away by the quality, the color, that this was a sensational discovery—rediscovery. I have a center at Harvard called the Mesomaerican Archive, which is really not just an archive of documents; it’s a group of people who’ve worked together for twenty years on different types of documents. I told the owner that I can put together a team that could do a first reading of this map: an archeoastronomer, iconographer, historian, anthropologist, botanist, ethnobotanist, and people who’ve lived and made long journeys with Indians. I wanted to put together people who would look at the map from different lenses, different views. We worked for five years on the *mapa* itself.

**Wilder:** When all the scholars finally met, and the team presented its findings, what was surprising to you?

**Carrasco:** Two of the big problems we faced but didn’t solve—that’s what’s fun about it—the left side of the map is so different from the right side of the map. The left side of the map is a winding road, a

serpentine road, a labyrinth where there’s all this activity; things are compacted. The right side of the map is like a big circle, like they’re circumambulating this huge space. One of the big surprises is that when these people were narrating their epic story, for some reason there’s a real disjunction, a real difference between the way the story is told in the first half to the way it’s told in the second. I’ve often asked audiences for their ideas about this disjunction, and we get the most incredible answers: one part is history, one part is myth; over here they’re confident, over here is unfinished; over here is an opera, over here is a sonnet. All these possibilities.

Another big surprise was how many places appear on the map, how many places over a huge territory of Mexico. The map itself is about three feet high and six and a half feet long, but it actually covers four states of modern Mexico. It shows a huge territory that these people walked, had in their conception, and knew enough about so they could actually paint this territory in a very compact

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space. It’s like their view of the global map. There are hundreds of locations that we’ve been able to identify, from north of Mexico City down to Oaxaca up to the coast of Veracruz; there are huge volcano ranges in here and so many communities. Yet another surprise was how much life and geography they encoded in the map itself. There are probably ten different ethnic groups that we can identify that they were conscious of. Not just tribes, these are different peoples, different colors, they have different gods, they do different types of jobs, and they left on the map itself clues as to what were in the interactions of these communities. These are some of the great surprises that we found, and I’m sure they’ll go on.

**Wilder:** I heard that you were responsible for taking Toni Morrison to Mexico City to have dinner with Gabriel García Márquez at Carlos Fuentes’ house. As a writer, teacher, and lover of literature, I have to ask: what was that evening like?

**Carrasco:** Well, what happens is that I’m at Princeton enjoying my collegial relationship with Toni Morrison, and then we became

friends. She and I eventually taught a course together. I was concerned about the race discourse in her novels, which is so powerful, but it seemed to me that it left out race mixture. I wanted her to go to Mexico, so I'd say to her, "Let's go to Mexico. I can show you the pyramids, the people." She finally said she'd go, and we set up the trip. About six weeks before, her assistant calls and says, "Ms. Morrison wants to go, but she just has one request, and that is to meet Gabriel García Márquez." Of course I say, "Sure. Well, sure," because I wasn't going to let her off the hook. Then I said to myself, "Oh my God, what am I gonna do?" I didn't know García Márquez. I called up Carlos Fuentes whom I'd met through a man named Raymond Williams. I said to Carlos, "She's gonna come but there's this one thing hanging loose." He said, "That's no problem. Gabo is my best friend. We'll have dinner at my house."

Thursday night was the big night. We went to Carlos' house which is in a part of Mexico City called San Geronimo. Lo and behold, García Márquez comes dressed in a beige-looking suit. I could have never imagined him in a suit and tie, but there he is in a suit and tie. He has such great respect for Morrison. There are six or seven people at this dinner, and the evening went along fine but not great. García Márquez was not comfortable in English, and she was not comfortable in Spanish. Even though we were translating, it never clicked. About 11:30—I remember this so well—I'm feeling okay, but *it* didn't really happen. There was respect, there was this and that, but they never danced. They never got to the dance part.

**Wilder:** You'd expect such magic between those two.

**Carrasco:** Yes, you'd expect the magic. I remember I told the chauffeur we'd go in half an hour, and then decided to get my courage up one more time. García Márquez now had his coat off and was sitting on this couch. I went over and said to him in Spanish, "You know, the only request she made when I invited her to Mexico was to meet you. I think she really came to Mexico to meet you."

At that he just relaxed and started to recite for me the title and year of every one of her books. He knew *The Bluest Eye*, when it was published, what it was about. He knew *Sula*, and the year it was published. When he got to *Song of Solomon*, I just said, "Hold on. *Un momentito*."

I went over to Morrison and said, "He wants to talk to you." Then I led her over, and he stood up, and for the next three hours the magic happened between them. As we stood in a circle, García Márquez basically began a tour of her novels. He would say, "*The Bluest Eye* was published in this year, the way to get into this novel is this, here's what I see you were doing in this novel." He'd talk

about it for a while, and she would just be fascinated with him; then he'd go to the next novel.

It ended that the two of them were very indebted in their vision to William Faulkner. García Márquez traveled through Faulkner's hometown, and Morrison had written part of her master's thesis on Faulkner. They talked about the importance of having a good editor. The evening became magical.

Next they talked about the Nobel Prize. García Márquez says one of the best things about winning the Nobel Prize is "*No tengo que hacer cola*" (I don't have to wait in line—ever again). "Every time I go to the movies, everyone says, 'no no, come to the front.'"

But the real story that evening was when he said, "You know, when you go to Stockholm to get the Nobel Prize, the people who win the literary category get the best apartments. I met with the Nobel Prize committee and said 'You are very smart but you don't know anything about literature. Look who you didn't choose: Conrad, Proust. Look who you left out of this group.'" Then he said, "When I got the Nobel Prize and went back to the apartment, I was getting ready for bed and I looked at the bed and started thinking of the people who had slept in that bed. And when I got to Thomas Mann, I could not sleep in the bed, so I went to sleep on the couch."

**Wilder:** Another amazing story. Thanks for telling it. Finally, when you come to New Mexico, are there places you like to visit?

**Carrasco:** One of the reasons I come here is for the New Mexico sky, horizon to horizon. Driving from Santa Fe to Albuquerque, I've pulled over, as I'm sure many people do, to look at the sky—its energy, its shapes, its colors. It takes me back to Chicago studying with Mircea Eliade. He always talked about the sacredness of the sky, the shape of the sky. The sky opens up the imagination to so many things.

Every time I come out I go to more places. We went out to the Zia Pueblo over Christmas, and they just happened to be doing one of their dances. Oh man, I mean the sounds, the sounds that came out of those men singers and the drums! That's been around a long time. My mother was here and my partner, and we happened to pull in this day and we could hear the chanting. We could see them dance, face the directions, stop, start again. It's another rhythm of life. ■

Robert Wilder's essays have appeared in *Newsweek*, *Details*, *Salon*, and *Creative Nonfiction*. His column "Daddy Needs a Drink" appears monthly in the *Santa Fe Reporter*, and he is the author of two books, *Daddy Needs a Drink* and *Tales from the Teachers' Lounge*.