

President's Report

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Though LASA2006 is now behind us, the “Spirit of San Juan,” I like to think, will help inspire, enliven, and further transform our Association for some time to come. The extraordinary *hospitalidad* and *calor humano* with which our Puerto Rican and Caribbean colleagues received us and *la gente* de San Juan welcomed us made LASA’s 40th anniversary celebration an especially memorable one. *Entre* the unparalleled tropical extravaganza that was the opening reception, the pulsating rhythms of the *gran baile*’s Gran Combo, and the exceptional media coverage and public outreach that was arranged before and during the Congress, the local organizing committee, headed by Margarita Ostolaza, and our local sponsors—who included el Gobierno del Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico y su Compañía de Turismo, la Universidad de Puerto Rico y la Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico—truly outdid themselves. We thank them again for their support.

Part of the “Spirit of San Juan” that we hope lives on is the spirit of teamwork and collaboration between the U.S.-based Secretariat and local LASA Congress supporters, and the spirit of university-community outreach and inter-institutional collaboration—between LASA and Puerto Rico- and Caribbean-based universities or universities and community organizations and research institutions wherever our Congresses are held. Seldom has a LASA Congress been so extensively *divulgado* locally or so thoroughly enmeshed in the fabric of local university and community life. The over 130 students from Puerto Rican universities who served as Congress volunteers—recruited largely thanks to the efforts of longtime LASA member Professor Alice Colón—were the most vivid testament to the spirit of transformation and renovation that was LASA2006.

Transformation and renovation, or the changes necessary for what Arturo Escobar in his essay for this issue refers to as the “re-visioning” of Latin American Studies, call for the further decentering of our field—another aspect of the Spirit of San Juan that I hope will have enduring effects on our Association. Given its unique place in the post/colonial history of the Américas and its *lugar de puente* between the North and South, Puerto Rico proved to be an ideal site for a Congress on the theme of decentering our field of study to unfold. For those who’d never visited the island, or who’d never experienced Puerto Ricans’ particular and profoundly Caribbean/Latin/o-americano hybrid/code-switching/re-mix of languages, peoples and *culturas*, San Juan itself was perhaps an intensive lesson in why rethinking conventional approaches to LAS/area studies is an ever more urgent task.

As I emphasized in my remarks at the Congress’ opening session, San Juan also was an ideal site for LASA2006 because, with its *guagua aérea* and its 3 million plus-strong diaspora in the United States, Puerto Rico, like the Caribbean more generally, calls attention to the critical importance of Latina/o Studies/Caribbean/Diaspora Studies to the enterprise of decentering Latin American Studies. Indeed, one of the *miradas/epistemologías* which is *imprescindible* to a genuinely revitalized LASA mission is a recognition that Latin America and the Caribbean stretch well into the North of the Américas, that there is no inside/outside, that borders within and without countries in our hemispheres are increasingly fluid, like the waters of the Caribbean itself.

Against the inexorable tides of cultures, histories, and humanity, the Bush administration remains ever more intent on enforcing and policing (b)orders in ways



that increasingly violate fundamental human rights and, crucially for our Association, encroach upon our academic freedom. LASA’s ability to fulfill our core mission of promoting scholarly exchange and debate among scholars in the Américas is seriously compromised by the systematic denial of visas to our Cuban colleagues and the increasing difficulties encountered by many others from across Latin American and the Caribbean in securing visas to the United States in recent years.

In response to this situation, the Spirit of San Juan also turned out to be a renewed spirit of engaged scholarship, of taking principled professional action in the name of human rights and academic freedom, of honoring LASA’s long-standing tradition of solidarity/identity with our Latin/o American colleagues, on whichever side of the (b)orders they/we may reside—a tradition eloquently recounted in the essays collected in this issue’s *Debates* section, which presents *testimonios* by several of the women and men involved in LASA’s founding decades who came together in a special 40th anniversary session in San Juan. All of them, along with scholars who write in this issue about LASA’s relationship to Cuban scholars and our decades-old struggle for academic freedom, remind us that this last aspect of the Spirit of San Juan—embodied in the Declaration issued by the Executive Council on March 14, 2006 (reprinted below, as amended) by the EC on May 9 to reflect changes suggested by members of the Cuban Studies Section—is the very spirit of LASA. As part of a broader strategy to address the problem of growing impediments and denials in the granting of visas to Latin

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American scholars wishing to participate in our Congresses and in other forms of scholarly exchange in the United States, the EC also voted to create a special Task Force on Academic Freedom and Human Rights, to file an amicus brief in an ACLU case against the U.S. government for unlawful visa denials of scholars, and to collaborate with other professional associations in advocating changes in current visa policy and travel restrictions.

As this issue goes to press, the EC has just received the results of the membership poll on whether to move LASA2007 from Boston to Montreal. The extremely complex process of investigating and debating the possible relocation of the 2007 Congress was a commendable team effort, ably commandeered by Executive Director, Milagros Pereyra, and incoming President, Charles Hale. I thank them both for their exceptional hard work, tireless good humor, and generous friendship, not just during what is proving to be an unusually complicated "transition period," but over the course of my term as president.

Before passing *la palabra y la batuta* to Charlie to provide details about where we stand on the LASA2007 relocation process, I want to close by thanking the many others who helped make my time as LASA president as painless as possible: María Cecilia Dancisin, Sandy Klinzing, Sandra Wiegand, Kate Foster and everyone at the LASA Secretariat for running a flawless operation in Pittsburgh; members of the EC for their wise advice and insight; my Congress "cocheras," Frances Aparicio and Amalia Pallares, a first-rate Program Committee, and all those who organized Plenaries and Featured Sessions for helping put together what I (objectively. . .) think was one of the best LASA programs ever; Arturo Arias and colleagues who authored essays or guest edited special sections of

this journal, for helping me refashion the *LASA Forum*; the many colleagues who generously gave of their time to serve on LASA's core committees, especially Rita Schmidt, Alberto Olvera, James Green, and Guillermo Delgado, who capably chaired important, if onerous, prize committees; my former (and much missed) colleagues at UCSC and my new colleagues at UMass-Amherst for supporting me even during my most frazzled LASA crisis moments; and my friends and family, especially Sonia Alvarez (Sr.) and Claudia de Lima Costa, for putting up with me during the past 18 months. The Spirit of San Juan was, ultimately, a team spirit. Finally, I thank the members of LASA for granting me the honor of serving this Association. ■