

President's Report

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These are exciting, tumultuous times for LASA, defined partly by conditions thrust upon us, and partly by our own initiatives. The day I assumed the LASA presidency, 1 May 2006, marked the culmination of a historic wave of mobilizations to demand rights for Latin American immigrants. Given the burgeoning presence of these immigrants in the United States, the increasingly repressive atmosphere for those defined as “illegal,” and the polarized nature of public debate, Latin American immigrant issues are sure to gain importance in LASA’s scholarly agenda—and in LASA’s commitment to give our scholarship a public voice.

Serious issues of academic freedom also are in the mix. Visa difficulties and denials for Latin American scholars are on the rise; U.S. government policy to monitor “anti-American” ideology in Area Studies programs, eerily reminiscent of the McCarthy era, demands our continued vigilance and opposition. The Florida Legislature’s passage of SB 2434 (also known as the Rivera Bill), which bans research travel to “terrorist countries” including Cuba, is further cause for concern and action. Steps already have been taken by former LASA president Carmen Diana Deere (Florida), and LASA Member Lisandro Perez (FIU), who along with six others, are plaintiffs in an ACLU-led court challenge of this bill.

The most important action that LASA has taken in response to these conditions is to relocate the 2007 Congress from Boston to Montreal. This was a momentous decision, reached through painstaking deliberation, which began at the Puerto Rico Congress in mid-March and consumed much collective energy since then. This process culminated with a referendum put to the LASA membership, in which 80 percent voted for relocation. Although we cannot know how

this decision will be judged in hindsight, one key factor in that judgment will be the extent to which we are able to capture the energy and resolve behind the near-unanimous repudiation of Bush administration visa policies, and redirect them toward the goal of making LASA2007 a vibrant, innovative, broadly inclusive and intellectually expansive experience for all.

A crucial first step toward this end is to address, in a careful and systematic manner, the questions and concerns that motivated the 20 percent of “no” votes on relocation. My purpose in doing this is neither to convince dissenters to change their minds, nor to reopen a debate that thankfully has concluded, but rather to reiterate two simple points: first, your voices have been heard; second, despite, indeed because of your dissent, LASA wants and needs you to be present in Montreal all the more. Many who voted “no” generously offered comments to explain and elaborate on their positions; these comments comprise some 25 pages of text, which I have read in its entirety. They are respectful, well-reasoned and clearly have the best interests of the Association in mind. Let me summarize them briefly, and then provide a few reflections in response.

- **Costs.** There are two variants here: the worst-case estimate of \$80,000 is too much for LASA to bear, and could be better used for other purposes; Montreal is a costly city as a destination (especially from Latin America) and as a Congress site.
- **Faulty planning.** We have known about this problem for a long time. Why the last minute scramble? Why not make a policy that starts with 2009, thus avoiding the need for cancellation of an existing contract?



- **Efficacy.** The move will have no impact on Bush Administration visa policy; it is an empty gesture, which simply punishes Boston, a LASA-friendly city; money saved by staying in Boston could have been put to more efficacious ends.
- **Quebec/Canada as dubious alternative site.** There are three variants: Canadian visa policies are also restrictive, and subject to U.S. government influence; Canada is North, the move should have been to Latin America; Montreal is francophone and French is not a language that the vast majority of LASA Members speak.
- **Politicization.** To quote one Member who raised this objection: “LASA urgently needs to stop its increasing politicization. We are a scholarly organization!”

The question of efficacy is fundamental. The primary rationale for the relocation, repeatedly emphasized by the LASA Executive Council (EC), is the protection of scholarly freedom. We have no illusions that this relocation will have any effect on Bush administration policies; our objective is to hold a Congress in which the U.S. government will not be able to interfere, by deciding, on arbitrary or ideological grounds, who can attend and who cannot. True, we have been forewarned on the problem with visas for Cuban scholars at least since 2004. However, the Boston hotel contract was negotiated in 2001, before the current U.S. political landscape could have been predicted. In each of three Congresses since Dallas (2003), LASA has

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proceeded on the assumption that legal channels, political pressure, and sheer persistence would yield positive results; cumulative evidence proved this assumption to be simply wrong. The "crisis" to which the EC statement refers, to be precise, is a crisis in our own *modus operandi*, in response to Bush administration policies. The relocation is a minimal action taken to safeguard LASA's core mission and values; we are taking other measures, after a careful consideration of efficacy for time/energy spent, in an attempt to move the U.S. government toward a more open, less politically tinged visa policy. These include: future Congress planning (LASA2009 will be in Brazil, and LASA2010, whose site is yet to be determined, could be outside the United States as well); presenting Amicus briefs in lawsuits involving scholarly freedom; letter writing campaigns to influential politicians; coordinated actions with other professional associations; a paid ad in a major U.S. publication.

Costs and viability of Montreal were major considerations in our decision. Although the final cost to LASA of the move is not yet known, we are optimistic that the overall "hit" will be substantially less than our worst case estimate. As stated in our explanation of the referendum, while a modest increase in registration fees cannot be ruled out, these costs will be covered largely by reserves that have been set aside to deal with emergencies. With the referendum vote, the membership in effect supported the position that visa denials constituted an emergency. Because these are reserves, to use them does not divert one penny from outlays for LASA programs (e.g., for travel grants); similarly, staying in Boston would not have freed these funds for any alternative use. A rough estimate of differences in travel costs between Montreal and Boston comes to just over

\$100; we hope the considerably lower hotel costs (Boston: US\$200; Montreal: \$195-209 CDN) will offset this difference, and we are exploring other measures to reduce costs.

Montreal is a vibrant and fascinating city, whose hotels were able to offer much better conditions for a Congress than the long list of alternatives considered, including Mexico City and Guadalajara. Canada is very much part of hemispheric inter-American affairs, as its prominence both in NAFTA and anti-free trade agreement protests attests. There are some 170 Canadian LASA members, a number that we expect to increase considerably with this Congress, which will be carried out in cooperation with CALACS, our sister Association. (Many thanks to Steven Palmer, CALACS President, for his energy and enthusiasm in taking on this task.) Preliminary inquiries gave us considerable confidence that visas will not be a problem for Latin American scholars; to help ensure this, a high-level delegation will be assembled to meet with Canadian government officials in Ottawa. Especially given my own scholarly interests, I am very keen that LASA2007 be organized in a manner fully attuned to the cultural and political distinctiveness of Quebec. We already are hard at work to address this concern in the Congress program: soliciting active participation of Quebecois scholars, and organizing special activities that highlight comparative and global analysis of key issues of concern both to the Quebecois and to their Latin American counterparts. Specific ideas that Members might contribute toward these ends are especially welcome.

Finally, I agree that what one Member calls the "politicization" of LASA merits further discussion. Both as President, and more generally, I favor scrupulous pluralism on

the question of the relationship between scholarship and politics. There must be room in our Association both for those who seek spaces of activist and public scholarship, and for those who defend more conventional notions of scholarship as objective, value-free, and strictly disengaged from the political conditions that surround us. Ideally, LASA would also provide a space where the many positions along this continuum might meet and productively engage. Minimally, LASA must prevent any one of these positions from suppressing or delegitimizing any other. It is hard for me to imagine how the relocation to Montreal could possibly have the latter effect, but if concerns along these lines do arise, I very much want to hear them—and promise prompt responses.

We look forward to seeing you in Montreal in September 2007!

In planning for my 18 months as LASA President, I established two goals beyond standard responsibilities that any President must assume. The first was to make one incremental improvement in LASA's already excellent structure and functioning as an organization; the second was to take one new initiative, to expand LASA's scope and impact in the field of Latin American Studies. While relocation deliberations have robbed me of the time to deliver fully on the first goal, they have at least helped the topic to congeal: communication between the LASA leadership (Secretariat and elected officers) and the Members. In response to my query about how LASA could be better, a Dutch colleague recently made a telling comment: "LASA has no public face." I am concerned that Members know too little about how LASA functions; what elected officers think; what we do and why. Established channels of communication—the *Forum*, Congress sessions, and various working groups—are

not enough. Percentages of LASA Members who vote are too low. As the recent referendum proved, the Internet offers possibilities that have not yet been fully explored. You will hear more from me on this topic in the coming months.

With regard to the second goal, I have very good news to report. As you already know via email notification, the “*Otros Saberes/Other Américas*” Initiative has been funded and launched, and will introduce a modest transformation in the Montreal Congress—and hopefully in future years. [To find out more about *Otros Saberes*, please visit

<<http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/news.html>>].

This first phase of the Initiative has two defining features: innovative research methods, based on collaboration between academic- and civil society-based intellectuals; and substantive research on issues of direct concern to indigenous and afro-descendant peoples. The funds raised will make it possible to cover basic expenses of five collaborative research teams, and to bring some members of each team to the Montreal Congress, as well as to a pre-Congress workshop. Although the deadline for proposals has not yet passed, judging from the letters of inquiry the response has been remarkably successful: some 175 letters from 22 different countries, about one-third with an afro-descendant focus, and two-thirds indigenous. It appears that the Call has tapped into an abundant underground stream of already-existing collaborative research relations; we feel enormously gratified that LASA will be able to benefit from, while helping to strengthen, these activities. *Otros Saberes* was conceived and achieved through the collective effort of many, including Sonia Alvarez, Lynn Stephen, Milagros Pereyra, Kimberly Theidon, Joanne Rappaport, and the following donors: Ford Foundation, Open

Society Institute, Inter-American Foundation, Harvard University, and LASA. Our deepest thanks to all!

The theme for the upcoming Congress—“*After the Washington Consensus: Collaborative Scholarship for a New América*”—is turning out to have meaning that could not have been imagined when it was conceived. The phrase “After the Washington Consensus” now also references the Bush administration’s clinging to policies toward scholarly freedom that (like Washington consensus economic policies) increasing numbers view as dangerously out of keeping with basic principles of global well-being. The phrase “Collaborative Scholarship for a new América” will be on display as *Otros Saberes* intellectuals, and other Congress attendees, accept the challenge to explore the methodological implications of horizontal research collaboration across one or more of the many boundaries and hierarchies that divide us. José Martí’s famous essay “Nuestra América,” which inspired this phrase in the Congress theme, culminates with a moving, if slightly enigmatic image: an emergent continent-wide political sensibility, “*del Bravo a Magallanes*,” which carries “...*la semilla de la América nueva!*” LASA has a small but important part to play in forging this *América nueva*, by rising to the challenge of the Congress relocation, by strengthening relations of hemispheric scholarly collaboration, and by making Montreal2007 a glowing and unforgettable success. ■