

President's Report

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These are exciting times for LASA. At midnight on September 8, we were able to put the last of the major concerns associated with the Congress relocation definitively behind us. The Secretariat has negotiated very favorable contracts with three Montréal hotels that together will serve as the Congress site; we have forged an agreement with the Canadian Association of Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CALACS), which lays the groundwork for collaboration that will be of considerable mutual benefit; and the Membership has responded with great enthusiasm to the LASA2007 Call, dispelling fears that confusion or dissent would affect Congress attendance. At last count the Secretariat registered over 3000 proposal submissions—nearly 1000 more than the record numbers that we received for LASA2006 in Puerto Rico!

Having recently returned from a productive three days in Montréal and Ottawa, I can report with confidence that LASA2007 will have a distinctly “Canadian accent.” We convened a thoughtful, diverse, and energetic Local Arrangements Committee, which in turn selected a five-member core group representing each of the four Montréal Universities (McGill University, Université du Québec à Montréal, Université de Montréal, and Concordia), and Rights & Democracy, a Québec-based policy and activist organization with projects throughout Latin America. This group, in conjunction with CALACS, already has taken an active role in planning special programs for the Congress that will connect Canada (and Québec) to Latin America, in fundraising, and in activities to make sure LASA Congress participants will have ample opportunity to engage with the fascinating city of Montréal in substantive and enjoyable ways.

Here are three examples of special program plans underway: Pierre Beaucage, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology from the Université de Montréal, will organize an invited plenary on Autonomy, viewing Québec comparatively with Latin American indigenous experiences; Philip Oxhorn, of McGill University, has conceived a session featuring The Right Honorable Joe Clark, to examine Canada’s political and economic role in the hemisphere; LASA and CALACS have issued an invitation to the Governor General of Canada, the Honorable Michaëlle Jean J, a prominent political figure with deep roots in and great concern for the Caribbean and Latin America, in hopes that she will be our inaugural speaker. In keeping with this Canadian accent, and citing LASA’s policy of linguistic pluralism, the Local Arrangements Committee requested that French be the fourth “official language” of the Congress; this request was immediately granted. On a more practical note, a meeting with the Foreign Affairs Ministry in Ottawa generated further confidence that our basic rationale for relocation to Canada remains sound: a generally open and encouraging response to the Congress; an especially welcoming stance toward our Cuban colleagues; and a commitment to set up mechanisms for rapid response to visa problems for all Congress participants should they arise.

As a matter of scholarly (and human) ethics, I cannot imagine a more forceful confirmation of our relocation decision than the “*palabras prohibidas*” published in this issue of the *Forum*. Milagros Martínez outlines the long and fruitful pattern of Cuban participation in Americas-wide scholarly exchange that LASA has facilitated, ruptured since LASA2003 and now to be restored; Dora María Téllez, with understated eloquence, sums up the outrageous and absurd U.S. government action prohibiting her from accepting a



visiting professorship at Harvard: “...*la denegatoria de visa alegando terrorismo, está basada en mi participación activa en la lucha contra la dictadura somocista en la década del setenta. Estos son hechos públicos y conocidos de los que me siento profundamente orgullosa.... En mi país, estos son actos respetados, pues contribuyeron a hacer posible la condición actual de democracia de Nicaragua.*”

Robert M. O’Neil, law professor at U. Virginia and chair of the AAUP Committee on Academic Freedom and National Security in Time of Crisis, recently wrote a blistering assessment of the broader problem, highlighting the Téllez case, as one example among many of such exclusions, which he notes have reached “almost epidemic proportions.”¹ Like many other Bush Administration policies, these exclusions ironically produce precisely the opposite of their stated intent, increasing hostility toward the United States and suppressing the dialogue and exchange that fosters mutual understanding. I am proud that LASA has acted decisively to counter this trend, and to defend the principles on which our Association rests.

Now that the building blocks for the Congress are in place, we can turn our energies to the tasks that will assure the event’s success. Primary among these are raising funds to provide travel support for a maximum number of participants who otherwise would be unable to attend, and making efforts to refine and confirm the special events that will help give LASA2007 its unique character. In conceiving these events we have followed the lead of past president Sonia Alvarez, drawing a

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distinction between “featured sessions,” which speak directly to some facet of the Congress theme, and “invited sessions,” on general topics of vital interest to LASA. In so doing, I also hope to advance an ongoing discussion on the role of the theme in the organization of a given Congress. Specifically, how should our chosen theme, “*After the Washington Consensus: Collaborative Research for a New América*,” imprint LASA2007?

In my view, the Congress theme should generate interest among the membership, focusing attention on problems, debates, analytical questions that are of central concern in Latin American Studies. No one who attends the Congress should leave unaware of and unprovoked by discussion around some facet of the theme. At the same time, the theme is inevitably partial, ideally of broad interest, but indicates the priorities and passions of a relatively small group of Congress organizers. To balance theme-centered featured events, therefore, we must have ample and equitable space for all topics and perspectives. Given that the LASA2007 theme has acquired special prominence, due mainly to conditions thrust upon us, we will be especially attentive to this complementary “big tent” principle as we refine the details of the Congress program.

Three interconnected topics, each of which I hope will generate interest and debate in Montréal, are embedded in the theme. The first has to do with the “Washington Consensus” itself. To what extent has its substance evolved in the 15 years since John Williamson coined the phrase, and outlined its ten constituent elements?² Is it analytically accurate and clarifying to associate this evolving substance of the Washington Consensus with “neoliberalism,” as we do in the text of the Call? (Williamson himself answers this question with an indignant “no,” calling

such association an “objectionable perversion” of his originally coined phrase.³) Can we interpret the powerful recent shift to the Left throughout the region, expressed in both electoral and social movement arenas, as explicit dissent from either the Washington Consensus, or key constituent elements of neoliberal governance, or both? And in the wake of this dissent, what prospects do the emergent alternatives have? A series of featured sessions will address these and related questions, bringing politically engaged intellectuals and academics into dialogue. Judging from some of the responses to our Call, I suspect these discussions will resonate widely among Congress participants; but I also am sure that their utility will depend on careful efforts to clarify what we take these key phrases to mean, how their use as political epithets informs but is distinct from their use as analytical tools.

The second key phrase in the Congress theme is “collaborative research.” This refers to a broad array of innovative methodological steps that scholars take to cross the boundaries of conventional disciplinary training and carry out research through horizontal relations with intellectuals who work outside of academia proper. One expression of collaborative research has been conceived and put into practice through the *Otros Saberes* Initiative, which receives attention in a separate report in this issue. Further examples are highlighted in the pages that follow, in a series of cogent and illuminating essays by scholars from four disciplines other than Anthropology where traditions of collaborative research are perhaps most well developed.⁴ I am especially hopeful that the Congress will contribute to this methodological debate, subjecting two key underlying assertions to critical scrutiny: first, a wide array of Latin Americanist research agendas can be greatly enriched by

sustained, horizontal relations with nonacademic knowledge producers who bring their own distinctive expertise to the topic; second, the older, hierarchical “us studying them” academic paradigms, quite apart from ethical considerations, are often analytically impoverished, in ways that collaborative research relations can help to remedy. When we pause in an attempt to account for the excitement, vibrancy and remarkable growth of LASA over the years, we often emphasize “interdisciplinarity” and “deep, context-specific engagement with the region”—and with good reason. I suspect there is a third, less commonly noted explanation, however: collaborative relations of knowledge production about the region, and the research findings that result from them, give LASA a depth and richness that disciplinary gatherings often lack.

The third and final element in the Conference theme is an allusion to José Martí’s notion of “*Nuestra América*,” which remains profoundly influential to this day, especially among scholars of cultural studies, literary theory, and ethnic studies. The particular condition of LASA2007—from the welcome participation of Cuban scholars, to the thematic focus on critique of Empire and alternatives to the Washington Consensus, to the emphasis on dialogue with politically engaged intellectuals—seems to be at first glance a thinly veiled attempt to set the stage for the triumphant vindication of Martí’s ideas as blueprint for inter-American relations in the 21st century. But it would be a disservice to rest with this rather simplistic message, especially given the immense flow of recent scholarship on Martí since the centenary of his death in 1895. LASA2007 will feature at least one prominent session on Martí’s legacy, which presents state-of-the-art historical and literary scholarship and reflects on how this properly contextualized and historicized Martí might help us rethink the urgent

problems of Latin America and U.S.-Latin American relations today.

The fundamental reason these are exciting times for LASA is that the *coyuntura* in Latin America today is so critical (even if the U.S. media have largely abandoned the region). From Cuba and Mexico to the southern cone processes are underway that the world will be watching closely, and that LASA Members will report on and analyze with great authority at the Montréal Congress next September. Two are especially prominent in my own mind: the ongoing Oaxaca “uprising,” as some observers have called it; and the intense nationwide consultation process in Bolivia, which will culminate in the August 2007 Constitutional Assembly. Dozens of other crucial, dramatic contemporary problems could be mentioned, and are sure to receive ample coverage as well.

Thanks to all for your energetic response to the Call, which I would like to interpret as a resounding endorsement of the basic principle of inclusive and wide-ranging scholarly discussion and political debate, which has been the cornerstone of LASA’s success since its inception nearly 50 years ago.

Endnotes

¹ See O’Neil, Robert M., “Unnecessary Barriers. The exclusion of foreign scholars has assumed almost epidemic proportions,” *National Cross Talk* (Summer 2006).

² See Williamson, John, “What Washington Means by Policy Reform,” in *Latin American Adjustment: How Much has Happened*, ed. John Williamson (Washington D.C., 1990).

³ See Williamson, “The Strange History of the Washington Consensus,” *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics* 27 (2004-5).

⁴ For one example of an anthropologist who uses this precise phrase, see Luke Eric Lassiter, “Collaborative Ethnography and Public Anthropology,” *Current Anthropology* 46 (2005). Other phrases include activist scholarship, action research, engaged anthropology and participatory action research. Each has associated, overlapping bibliographies. ■