

President's Report

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Although the Montréal Congress came to a close ten days ago, I still feel the afterglow. Anyone's experience of these massive events is inevitably partial, of course; and there are areas in need of improvement, a point to which I will return. But rising above these details, my thoughts keep returning to moments when LASA's mission as a scholarly association met its heart and soul as a space for the inception, growth and affirmation of community. Although we are all members of one association, this is adamantly *not* community in the singular, but rather *communities*: some strictly academic, others of more heterogeneous membership, some focused solely on scholarly endeavors, others who link knowledge production to aspirations for social change; nearly all transnational, making face-to-face connections that, despite the rich possibilities for "going virtual," are still essential.

I think, for example, of the outpouring of warmth and gratitude for Helen Safa, our Kalman Silvert awardee: successive generations of scholars who benefitted from her generosity as a mentor, joined with her in collaborative scholarly endeavors, and worked alongside her to transform Latin American studies, achieving hard-fought changes—such as the principle of gender equity and the vibrant presence of feminist scholarship—that today seem so integral to LASA they run the risk of being taken for granted. I think also of Maestro Orlando Fals Borda, who delivered the 2007 LASA-Oxfam America Martin Diskin Lecture, and whose humility, humanism and fervent lifelong commitment to *investigación-acción* inspired and energized so many. And I think of the scholars working on Afro-descendant issues, who have taken steps to constitute themselves as a community within LASA. Two factors appear to have motivated this initiative: the significantly increased presence of Afro-descendant

intellectuals at the Montréal Congress; and the general sense that issues of race, anti-Black racism, and Afro-descendant cultural politics historically have occupied a marginal space within LASA and Latin American studies more generally. Prime movers of this emergent community are now engaged in discussions on how best to constitute themselves—one possibility is under the aegis of the Ethnicity, Race and Indigenous Peoples (ERIP) Section, and another is to establish a separate, closely linked Section. In any case, this is an exciting development, precisely the kind of community-building that the LASA Congress is meant to engender.

Before this issue of the *Forum* reaches your mailboxes, you will have received, via email, a request for critical feedback on the Montréal Congress. I urge you to take a moment to respond, since this will be vital to our ongoing efforts to improve on this periodic signature event of our Association. Here are a few thoughts of my own. Three innovations seemed successful enough to merit continuation with refinement. The first is the inaugural plenary, preceding the Welcoming Reception. Success in Montréal, of course, was due largely to the acuity and charisma of Governor General Michèle Jean, who drew a large and appreciative crowd. But such events also give LASA officers an opportunity to address the membership, both to communicate key points about the Association, and to open the Congress with ceremonial *ánimo*. Another successful innovation was the *Diálogos Políticos* series. It seemed to strike a chord of interest and excitement that the Congress would offer the possibility for close-up interaction with prominent political actors who are, quite literally, making the history that academics seek to interpret and narrate. Questions linger for me about how best to achieve the intended *diálogo*



with their academic counterparts; with some refinement along these lines, continuity would be well-justified. Third, and most important in my mind, was the strong presence of civil society-based intellectuals. This has long been a distinctive feature of our Congresses, and it received special emphasis in Montréal; my sense is that their presence added a critical edge to many sessions, giving rise to cross-talk that is a crucial and perhaps growing source of LASA's vibrancy.

There also is room for improvement. We need to rethink the Business Meeting, traditionally held at 8:00 p.m. on Friday evening, concurrent with a half-dozen sumptuous receptions, not to mention city night life, which lure all of our 6,000 Congress participants except the forlorn few who for one reason or another are required to be there. This is especially unfortunate for the winners of three important LASA Awards—Bryce Wood, Iberoamericano, and Media—and our hardworking committees who honor the awardees inside a virtually empty ballroom; it also has a negative impact on Association governance, undermining the accountability of the elected officers to the membership. There must be a better way! I also believe LASA Congresses, given the presence of especially high-profile participants and sessions, have great untapped potential appeal to the news media. Since media coverage contributes directly to the stature, visibility and impact of our Association, I think we need to develop more effective strategies for realizing this potential. Third, and most important, we may be reaching a point where our own success is creating

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predicaments stemming from the limits of growth. Since I have been associated with LASA, and especially in the past three years, growth in membership, Congress participation, and any other measure of organizational heft, have been presented as victories for the Association. I have explicitly endorsed this logic, using a discursive formula that is ubiquitous in my adopted state of Texas: the biggest Congress ever, the most session proposals, the most Cuban intellectuals ever to attend a Congress, etc., etc. There is much to recommend this line of reasoning, beginning with the fact that Congress attendance and membership growth contribute directly to LASA's financial health. Yet there are limits: four days of packed Congress proceedings is probably too much; relatively low rejection rates, which draw more people to the Congress, cannot be sustained; skyrocketing demand for travel fellowships cannot be met, which raises the prospect that Association growth would bring a decline in the relative presence of Latin America-based participants—to name just a few concerns. These issues pose difficult choices that require sustained collective discussion in the years to come.

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I would also like to take a moment to reflect more generally on LASA, apart from the specific experience of the Montréal Congress. My "campaign statement," written some four years ago, enunciated two goals: "to make at least one durable contribution to organizational strengthening of our Association;" and "to strengthen our central mission of trans-regional research collaboration and scholarly exchange." Two important organizational changes have taken place during my "watch," both the products not of my own initiative, but rather, of much

collective effort on the part of the Secretariat and the LASA Executive Council (EC). The first is an innovation in how the production of the *Latin American Research Review* (LARR) is organized. Control over intellectual content remains firmly in the hands of the Editor, who is selected by the EC on a competitive basis every five years. However, all production, distribution and financial matters are now handled by the LASA Secretariat. This new arrangement should make the production of LARR more cost-effective and efficient, at the same time making it much easier for potential Editors, from Montréal to Montevideo, to take on the job, without need for major support from their home universities. Simultaneously, we have implemented a system of periodic membership evaluation of LARR, to provide constructive feedback to the Editor, and to help us all monitor the scope and quality of our flagship journal. You can look forward to receiving the first issue of LARR published through this new system, under the able Editorship of Philip Oxhorn, at the beginning of 2008.

Another organizational innovation was consummated in the Montréal EC meeting, with the approval of the Academic Freedom Commission. Chaired by the Vice President, this Commission will be responsible for receiving and acting upon the range of complaints, petitions, calls for urgent actions and the like related to the physical and intellectual integrity of our members, and of potential members, across the hemisphere. We are both extremely gratified that the Commission is now in place, and apprehensive that the volume and complexity of the cases that come under its purview could be overwhelming. In anticipation of this problem, we have devised procedures that will keep the Commission's workload manageable while preserving its mandate. We need to advise our members from the outset that these

procedures will require the Commission to be selective and judicious in its responses to the cases brought forward. Nonetheless, the achievement is crucial: it places LASA on record with a strong commitment to protect the conditions that make it possible for us—all of us—to do our work free from coercion or harm. Details on the Commission are available on the LASA website.

The other component of my stated objectives three years ago, involving trans-regional collaborative research, has been realized mainly in the form of the *Otros Saberes* Initiative. Much already has been written about *Otros Saberes* in previous *Forum* issues; suffice it to say here that the Initiative brought 18 intellectuals from six research teams to the Montréal Congress, and for a two-day workshop afterward, to report on the results and the process of their collaborative research projects. We concluded the workshop Monday evening in high spirits. The group made a commitment to draw together these results in an academically-oriented edited volume, in addition to locally circulating products (e.g. videos, educational materials, strategy documents) to be used by the civil society organizations that conceived the research. We have high hopes that the *Otros Saberes* Initiative will continue, funding a new group of research teams who will present their findings in Rio in 2009.

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With full confidence, great relief and genuine excitement for LASA's future, I will be passing presidential responsibilities to Eric Herschberg at the end of October. One of the enduring strengths of our organization is the rhythm of this transition, which allows for fresh energy, new leadership styles, and a healthy mix of continuity and innovation every 18 months.

In my understanding of customary practice, the role of past president is to provide support and advice as a member of the current president's team, and to take on limited responsibilities for ongoing initiatives and special projects. There are four such commitments that I see on the horizon:

1. Phase II of the *Otros Saberes* Initiative
2. Working to bring to fruition an exciting new component of the Diskin Lectureship: a dissertation award for an activist scholar at the beginning stages of her or his career
3. Finding the right way to gather basic information about the ethnic and racial composition of our membership (four essays in the summer issue of the *Forum* on this topic provide excellent analysis and proposals to spur us ahead)
4. Continued efforts at fund-raising for LASA through agreements with socially responsible corporations that might view our Congresses as advertising venues.

I have learned an enormous amount over the preceding 18 months, and I thank the LASA membership for the confidence they placed in me. I have been especially gratified by the opportunity to work with such able and committed colleagues, grappling with so many substantive challenges facing our Association: the Congress relocation in relation to the freedom of scholarly exchange and movement; LASA's role in academic freedom issues in the Americas; the place of alternative forms of knowledge and intellectual work within the Association; how to respond to the alleged "politicization" of LASA; our commitment to continued "Latin Americanization" of the Association, to name just a few. None

of these issues has been laid to rest, by any means; I trust that ongoing vibrant debate on these and many other matters—debates much less present in other scholarly associations—will continue to be a major factor that draws members to LASA year after year. I would like to conclude with a note of heartfelt thanks to the Secretariat, and especially to Milagros Pereyra, for the pleasure of working with such a wonderful and talented team, and for the privilege of having learned so much from them about what it takes to make complex organizations work well. I also want to thank Arturo Arias (my new colleague at Texas!) for his outstanding, professional, and diligent work as Associate editor of the *Forum*, and to Milagros Pereyra, once again, whose firm and efficient hand as *Forum* Managing Editor has kept us all on task.

Por ultimo, quero unir-me aos meus colegas da Secretaria para convidá-lo a visitar a nova página web de LASA, que em breve apresentará seu conteúdo nas três línguas principais da região. O pluralismo lingüístico tem sido desde sempre um princípio de LASA, e inspirados por o extraordinário discurso multilíngüe do Governador General durante a inauguração da plenária, decidimos dar um passo em direção a sua implementação.

Finalmente, junto con mis colegas en el Secretariado de la Asociación, los invito a que visiten el "website" de LASA, el cual, en el futuro cercano, será en los tres principales idiomas de la región. El pluralismo lingüístico ha sido siempre un principio de LASA e inspirados por el increíble discurso en varios idiomas de la Gobernadora General en la sesión inaugural, hemos adelantado las gestiones necesarias para lograr su implementación.

Finally, I join with my colleagues in the Secretariat to invite you to visit the new LASA website, which will soon feature complete presentation in the three principal languages of the region. Linguistic pluralism has long been a principle of LASA, and drawing special inspiration from the incredible multilingual speech of the Governor General at the inaugural plenary, we have now taken another step toward its implementation. ■