

## Angels Dancing on the Head of a Pin?

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We would like to begin by stating that the vitality of professional organizations—such as LASA—grow out of the significance of their contributions to the betterment of people's lives. Being relevant implies building the capacity to discuss important issues openly and frankly. And, as we all well know, discussion of these issues is the lifeblood of democratic societies. Lately, some disagreements have flared up in LASA around management and procedures that, while important, may not, over the long haul, increase the organization's status as a socially relevant academic association.

Dancing around the issue of how many anthropologists or how many literary critics should sit in LASA's leadership not only may displace the real debate we should be having, but may render this organization socially irrelevant. The multinational, multilingual, and interdisciplinary composition of LASA situates this association in a privileged position to promote debates on more substantial issues afflicting our transnational communities.

We feel that the phenomenal growth of the Latino(a) population in the United States is an issue worth examining. The demographic changes taking place in this country over the last three and a half decades are well known and concerns related to Latinos/as in the United States have taken center stage in public debates. We are aware of the ambiguity of terms like Latino(a) and risking oversimplification we will use here Latino/a to mean people who identify themselves as sharing a Latin American origin. Since the Johnson administration's open door policy in the 1960s, the ravaging wars in Central America in the early 1980s and the deleterious effects of globalization on the local economies of most of Latin America but particularly México and Central America, the northward migration from

these areas has become massive and unmitigated. It signals a profound turn-of-the-century demographic shift in the United States, expressed most significantly in states like California and Texas, which no longer contain a specific racial majority. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of persons that claimed Latin American origin in the year 2000 was 35 million, making Latinos the largest minority in the country. Conservative estimates project Latinos as 25 percent of the population by 2050. At present, there are more Latino/as in the United States than Canadians in Canada!

An important consequence of these dramatic population changes is that Latino/children constitute a numerical majority in several of the urban public school districts in the country. Another consequence of this demographic shift is the tremendous increase of Spanish speakers not only in the southwest but also in metropolitan areas like Miami, Chicago, New York and a host of smaller cities which previously did not have a large Latino(a) population.

Official discourses praise Bostonians who cherished the Martínez surname, who along with a powerful team made the Red Sox unbeatable in 2004, putting an end to the Bambino curse that kept the Red Sox dry since 1918. The defenders of the status quo point out that Latinos are a staple not only among the Red Sox but of every single professional baseball team. These apologists also point out that Latino/a politicians head major cities, have been elected to state and federal offices, and that Latinos(as) are part of a multibillion consumer market. While this is true, the fact remains that, generally, Latinos(as) in the United States are, according to most socioeconomic indicators, at the bottom of the socioeconomic strata. In spite of their

precarious situation, Latinos(as) have contributed disproportionately to the economic well being of U.S. society and have invigorated the culture of this nation. To the dismay of the proponents of an Anglo European nativist ideology, the "browning" of the United States is occurring at an accelerated pace.

A nativist inspired backlash against the increasing presence of Latinos didn't take long to surface. Anti-bilingual education, anti-affirmative action, and anti-immigration legal initiatives swept through many states during the 1990s. Recently, a case involving housing discrimination made it onto the front pages. The mayor of Hazleton, Pennsylvania, (himself Italian-American) issued a city ordinance forbidding renting to and employing undocumented Latino(a) immigrants. Fortunately, a federal judge considered the initiative unconstitutional and voided it. Anti-immigrant hysteria aimed at Latinos(as) has arguably been worse than the hatred against Irish and Italian immigrants at the turn of the 19th century.

This pernicious nativist ideology either masks or justifies a wide range of grave problems affecting Latinos/as. Health, employment, housing, institutional discrimination, and education are but a few of the areas that are of critical concern to the Latino community in the United States. For instance, among those between 25 and 34 years of age in the state of California, only eight percent of males and ten percent of females attain a college degree. This fact sadly places this community below all other ethnic and racial groups in that State.

The point is that as the United States becomes more "hispanized," its Latino population remains mired in poverty and despair. We think that given LASA's multidisciplinary orientation, the

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Association can make useful connections with progressive North American colleagues who are involved in Latino and Afro Latino studies associations. We think that such an exchange would benefit both organizations since the situation of U.S. Latinos(as) is intimately tied to the situation of poor people in Latin America. An ongoing conversation of this kind could help us make the linkage across fields such as research, policy and advocacy. This conversation could include the following issues: a) How do we explain the high incidence of HIV among Latinos/as in the United States and its spread, for instance, among heterosexual women in rural Mexico? b) Why is it that, in spite of all efforts, Latino/a youth drop out at a relentless pace—one out of every two—from U.S. schools? c) Why is it that political and civil rights haven't been granted to immigrant workers by their home Central American governments, given how indispensable these workers' remittances are to those countries/economies?

Again, let's emphasize the pivotal role that issue-oriented professional communities can play by concentrating on the issues they have in common, so that we can, together, seek answers to these grave problems. It is inevitable that such exchanges between academic organizations create tensions and disagreements. However, these tensions, when well directed, forge creativity. Professional communities engender cultural capital through dynamic, issue-focused debate and networking.

As we indicated above, LASA's invaluable multi-dimensional composition adds to the organization's uniqueness. It brings together one of the most multinational memberships, one that embodies a diversity of languages, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, cultural makeup, and

disciplines rarely seen in other professional associations. Let us use these invaluable assets to do our academic work in the hope that our efforts can translate into innovative, socially relevant practices that do not hark back to the past.

It is within these broader issues that debating LASA's overall goals, composition, and multi-pronged approach to scholarship and leadership makes sense. Yet, as central as this point may be, it is crucially important to remember that the bottom line of LASA's vitality resides in the issues the organization embraces. As we pointed out above, the huge demographic changes due to globalization is an event of historical proportions.

Nonetheless, Latino representation at LASA is fairly new; its Section only took off at the 2001 Congress, and debates about the feasibility of merging Latin American and Latino studies continued in the ensuing years. As we have seen in recent issues of the *LASA Forum*, some academics still see this turn, and many other analogous ones, as problematic. Yet, it has been proven time after time that focusing on urgent social issues may well be the surest road to positioning LASA as what it is: a professional academic association that is also, like many Latin American institutions, a socially relevant organization. This inevitable recognition would be one way of avoiding unnecessary debates, such as the baseless accusation that LASA is drifting from its founding principles and historical roots as a professional association (suffice to read the papers presented by past presidents of the association at the Puerto Rico Congress to verify this); the only thing that has changed is what is considered *political* by Latin Americans—that will keep us, like disoriented angels, dancing on the head of a pin. ■