

Report from the Program Chairs: The Challenge of Greater Diversity in LASA

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We would like to welcome all of you to the Thirty-Third International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, which will take place in San Juan, Puerto Rico, May 27–30, 2015. After a year of intense collaborative, cross-disciplinary work, we finally get to meet and share our scholarly endeavors, reflections, and engagements. In the process of giving shape to the LASA2015 program, we had the extraordinary participation of 61 track chairs from Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, the Netherlands, Puerto Rico, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. By the time we were drafting this note, we had 5,560 presenters in 1,306 sessions, a record number in the history of LASA.

San Juan, Puerto Rico, is certainly an appealing city to travel to for the hundreds of LASA members across the globe. At the same time, the thematic focus on the concepts *precariedades*, *exclusiones*, *emergencias* has intellectually stimulated the submission of papers and panel and workshop proposals aimed at developing dialogues across fields and addressing pressing cultural, political, social, and economic issues in the region. Since we began our programming work in Chicago in May 2014, our goal has been to help, in modest ways, in the process of making LASA a more diverse setting. Therefore we decided to engage ethnic, racial, gender, geographical, institutional, and cultural diversity as a guiding factor in the process of appointing the program track chairs. Among our academically stellar group of track chairs, we have several colleagues who identify and situate themselves as scholars of Afro-descendant, indigenous (Maya, Chatino, Kichwa, Chickasaw), Asian-American, or Latino backgrounds; men, women, and LGTBQ individuals; and all of them from diverse geographical locations. Furthermore, in the organization

of this collective body, we ensured that we had a fair representation of the diverse disciplines and fields that form part of the intellectual map of LASA. In this regard, we also paid attention to thematic areas that sought our support for better positioning in this international forum; for example, religion, health, linguistics and languages, art and architecture, and the study of agrarian life, to name a few. All these efforts were carried out with due attention to academic excellence, which was reflected in the rigorous and meticulous review process performed by all the track chairs.

This year, another dimension of the pre-Congress LASA work was an unexpected but tremendously enriching task for us as program co-chairs: to help the presidency and the Secretariat in the reestablishment of the Otros Saberes Initiative. Following the decision of President Debra Castillo, with the support of the Executive Committee of LASA, we volunteered to collect materials from the Otros Saberes projects that have been supported by LASA in recent years, more specifically during the second phase of Otros Saberes. We carried out this task between June and December 2014, in order to provide enough content to build an Otros Saberes website and thus give a public and global face to this important initiative. It is pertinent to recall here that Otros Saberes was founded around 2005 with the distinct goal of promoting collaboration between intellectuals situated within and outside the academy as well as engaging in the generation of knowledge and exchange of experiences useful to both sides. Scholars such as Charles Hale, Sonia Álvarez, Lynn Stephen, Joanne Rappaport, and George Yúdice played important roles in establishing the foundations of the initiative and implementing its first and second phases.

In the case of Otros Saberes II: Justice Reform and Citizenship Rights, its goals were drafted in 2008, and in 2010, with four projects approved, it took a concrete shape. When we started the task of collecting materials, we found significant collaboration among LASA colleagues and activists who had been involved at this stage. First, Rachel Sieder from CIESAS, Mexico, who was the coordinator of the Steering Committee for this second phase, enabled us to access valuable information about it. Likewise, we received prompt responses from those who had played leading roles in three of the projects funded by Otros Saberes II: from Alejandra Navarro, who worked for the project “Liderazgo femenino, derechos indígenas y medio ambiente: La lucha jurídica por la pesca cucapá en el Golfo de California”; from María Socorro Grande, who coordinated the project “La experiencia de formación en derecho propio de los pueblos indígenas del Cauca: Impacto en el ejercicio de la justicia tradicional y en el relacionamiento con el sistema judicial nacional”; and from Jo-Marie Burt (George Mason University), who led the “Human Rights Trials and Access to Justice in Peru” project.

Another important step was the relaunching of the LASA track Otros Saberes: Collective Methods and the Politics of Research. We appointed colleagues Shannon Speed (Chickasaw, from the University of Texas at Austin), and Maylei Blackwell (Cherokee/Thai, from the University of California at Los Angeles). After reviewing a significant number of submissions, they approved 12 panel proposals and have organized an invited session entitled “Collaborative Indigenous and Afro-descendant Knowledge Production.” In this session, as well as in the welcome event of this

LASA2015 Congress, we will also present the Otros Saberes website.

Our modest efforts to foster diversity at LASA have, as a distinct corollary, the participation in this Congress of a significant number of special guests who were proposed to us by the track chairs; most of them are activist researchers anchored in social movements; human rights advocacy; Afro-Latino, indigenous, and women's organizations; and LGBTQ communities. In order to make possible the participation of these researchers, who mostly work outside the traditional circuits of the academy in Latin America, we had the invaluable support of the LASA Secretariat, especially from Milagros Pereyra-Rojas, LASA Executive Director. Since LASA does not have the budget to fund this type of extra effort—inviting special guests to the Congress—the Secretariat had to spend an immense amount of time and energy to obtain external funds and thus support at least some of the special guest proposals.

Another characteristic of this Congress will be a greater presence of Asia, which will contribute to diversify the voices of LASA. In order to foster intercontinental bridges, we supported the organization of the Invited Panel “Asia and Latin America: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Approaches, Methodologies, and Challenges.” For the general program, our track chairs have also selected various panels that include the dialogue between Asia and Latin America:

- New Approaches to Asian–Latin American Studies
- Afro-Asia in Latin America: Religion, Literature, and Film
- Comparative Raciality of Afro and Asian Latin Americans

- Transpacific Cultures I: Imaginaries and Identities of Asia in the Americas
- Transpacific Cultures II: Comparative and Transnational Approaches to the Cultures of Asia and the Americas
- Converging and Diverging Development Paths, and Can Latin America Learn from East Asia? Cases of Cuba and Colombia
- Alternative Models for Latin American and Caribbean Engagement with Asia
- Another Side of Mestizaje: Mexicans of African and Asian Descent

The intercultural dialogues that characterize our Congress will also be present through literature, performance, and music. The LASA2015 Welcome Ceremony, which will take place on Wednesday, May 27, will feature two distinguished guests: the Afro–Puerto Rican writer Mayra Santos-Febres, and Mare Advertencia Lirika, a Zapotec feminist poet and hip-hop artist. Both artists link their aesthetics to social, ethical, and political concerns in contemporary life, using their art to denounce the exclusions of marginalized communities and address issues of representation and agency in the public realm. Indeed, Santos-Febres—one of the most prominent Caribbean writers today—has written poetry, short stories, novels, and essays that pose critical questions about a wide range of topics: the body, sexual and gender politics, women's (self-)representation, transvestite identities, Afro–Puerto Rican subjects, Caribbean diasporas, and urban popular culture in San Juan. Through playful and poetic literary language, she engages the aforementioned issues in novels such as *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (2000) or *Nuestra Señora de la Noche* (2006), and collections of poems such as *Tercer Mundo* (2010) or *Boat People* (2005), among her

numerous works. Likewise, Oaxaca-born Zapotec artist Mare Advertencia Lirika is a unique figure in the performance of poetry and music through hip-hop aesthetics. Since 2003, Mare has been involved with hip-hop, becoming a distinctive female rapper committed to working in collective projects and promoting the agency of women in music. Furthermore, her music and performances address critical issues in contemporary Mexico: sexism and patriarchy, gender violence, women's representation and empowerment, social injustice, and the experiences and struggles of indigenous communities in her native region. In 2010, Mare released her first EP as a soloist, “¡Qué mujer!,” a collection of seven songs that engage many of the aforementioned concerns. In 2010, Mare participated in a compilation entitled “Salir a las calles” with the aim of denouncing the current situation of political prisoners in Mexico. Our Welcome Ceremony, with the presence of Mayra Santos-Febres and Mare Advertencia Lirika, will foster a ludic and critical dialogue, setting the tone for the next four days.

Again this year, the LASA Film Festival, curated by colleague Claudia Ferman (University of Richmond), will be an important complement to the panels and workshops. The participating films and their directors are from all over the world, but what they have in common is a focus on Latin America. This year, the festival will screen 31 films, which range from documentaries and fiction movies to experimental short films, including productions from 13 Latin American and Caribbean countries, 7 European countries, and the United States. This year the film series at LASA will have a section on community cinema, with several screenings thematically focused on indigenous peoples and social movements. In this regard, there will be a special panel featuring four

prominent Latin American filmmakers who are engaged in socially conscious cinema and media production: Vincent Carelli (Brazil, Video nas Aldeias), Marta Rodríguez and Fernando Restrepo (Colombia, Fundación Cine Documental), and Iván Sanjinés (Bolivia, Centro de Formación y Realización Cinematográfica–Coordinadora Audiovisual Indígena Originaria de Bolivia, CEFREC-CAIB).

Besides all these exciting intellectual dialogues and cross-cultural engagements, another good reason to come to LASA2015 in San Juan, Puerto Rico, is the Gran Baile, which will have onstage the salsa orchestra El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico, considered “the best salsa orchestra” in the world. On Friday, May 29, El Gran Combo once again will share their talents with the members of LASA, as in the 2006 Congress, when more than four thousand members attended the Gran Baile.

Los esperamos en San Juan para compartir ideas y construir puentes de colaboración y, junto con ello, aprender de la historia y las luchas de Puerto Rico y de su gente y, de paso, disfrutar de sus artes, su cultura y su entorno. ■

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