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“One Foot in the Americas and One Foot Somewhere

Crossroads in the Study of the Americas (CISA) in Transition

Luis Marentes is one of the original group of faculty members who were there at CISA's inception in the mid-'90s as a Five College program. Marentes teaches 20th-century Mexican literature and Chicano literature at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. “There’s a phrase we often use in talking about CISA,” he says: “one foot in the Americas and one foot somewhere else.” It’s a program focused on the Americas in a broader context, he explains: “the flow of ideas, peoples, products. It’s not that geography is not a consideration; it’s that America in this kind of study is not limited

to one space but is looked at relationally through the flow of ideas and cultural idiosyncrasies.”

Marentes talks about the importance of the seminars that CISA has sponsored over the years and its emphasis on team teaching in recasting his thinking about so much of what he teaches and writes. “Early on,” he says, “I team-taught a course with two University colleagues, Robbie Schwartzwald, a scholar of Francophone literature and Canadian studies, and Marta Calas, who teaches in the School of Management. I learned so much



JOSEPH KUSHICK

CISA colleagues (left to right): Lisa Henderson, Luis Marentes, and Guillermo Irizarry.

Else”

through that experience,” he says. “Robbie was talking about the Jesuits in Quebec and so much of it resonated for me with the role of the clergy in Mexico.” For the students, it was equally important, Marentes believes, “because it enabled them to see scholars coming from different disciplines talking about some of the same issues.”

While some of the courses he’s currently teaching have the same titles and even the same numbers they once did, because of his experience in CISA Marentes says, “I bring a deeper understanding and awareness of the interrelations of the world into my teaching and I insist on that for my students, too.” The readings he assigns have also been influenced by CISA: “In one class I’m teaching now, my students are reading some of the classical Latin American figures like Simón Bolívar and

Fray-Servando. It would be simple,” he says, “to see them as people who have been influenced by the European enlightenment and trying to adapt those ideas to the Americas. Instead, we’re asking to what degree the idea of America has affected European thought, too. The myth of America, after all, has shaped European thought, so we’re also reading what Voltaire and Rousseau have to say about America: It’s a two-way street, this process of transculturation.”

When he and other scholars like Schwartzwald were just beginning to carve out the idea for such a Five College program, Marentes says, they brought in speakers from places like Stanford, where people were already thinking in new ways about the Americas. “But things have changed since the end of the Cold War,” he says. “The end of that era has sparked a rethinking of area studies on an unprecedented level.” To illustrate his point, he mentions that the Germanic Languages and Literatures Program recently hosted a conference entitled “Rethinking Area Studies.”

When Lisa Henderson joined the University’s Department of Communications in 1994, she says she was told over and over by friends and colleagues: “You have to look up Robbie Schwartzwald.” Schwartzwald had taught for many years in the University’s Department of French and Italian when Henderson arrived on campus. Henderson succeeded him as the director of CISA in 2005, shortly after Schwartzwald left UMass Amherst to accept a position at the University of Montreal.

Although the two had never met until Henderson came to UMass Amherst, they shared, she says, a 15-year history of Montreal politics. “Quebec politics,” Henderson says, “is characterized by a sensitivity to colonization and a long history of understandable anxiety about cultural loss.” Henderson says she had come of age intellectually at Penn State, where as a faculty member interested in Queer studies she had become accustomed to grappling with issues of enfranchisement. Once at UMass, she was unsure about where, outside her department, to take these ideas.

“CISA, you might say, rescued me from the sense of stagnation I felt around the official discourses

of multiculturalism,” Henderson says, conceding that when she first arrived on campus she was feeling “a little burned out by the limits of those conversations.” But she looked up Schwartzwald and through him discovered something called Crossroads in the Study of the Americas—CISA, as it has come to be known for short. “I welcomed its emphasis on questions of enfranchisement and social differences. CISA shook up these questions in an interdisciplinary way. It brought together scholars with a social consciousness,” she recalls, “but also a very broad political sensibility about where identity comes from.”

It also gave her and others what she describes as “a protected corner in which to think differently about the issues that were on our minds.” Rather than imagining area studies as “pushing people apart,” CISA, she says, “provided an opportunity for all of us coming from different areas of study to step into a wider intellectual space.” What they shared, Henderson says, was “a desire to recognize ways in which social constructs are modeled relationally.” Once together in the lively yet protected space that CISA provided, those already connected to “layered domains” like African American studies, Asian American studies, and Latino studies “realized that we needed each other in order to understand our own ideas. We came to CISA to tackle multivocal questions about the formation of the Americas.”

CISA was supported in its fledgling years by a grant from The Teagle Foundation. Subsequently, it received funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities to support the development of courses and course components that reflected CISA’s new vision of area studies. Henderson recalls the important role a retreat played in shaping that vision. “About twenty of us went to Grafton, Vermont, where we spent two intensive days mulling over all the questions. As someone interested in Queer studies, I wanted to be in conversation with others. None of us had any desire to switch fields but we did want a deep conversation where we could be, alternately, an interested guest and a local expert.” Balancing those two postures, she says, requires both “good faith and modesty. CISA has always encouraged that.”

Henderson and Schwartzwald shared a final transition year in 2004–2005, as he prepared to pass the baton to her as the incoming director.



FREDERICK LEBLAC

Michelle Stephens

Under Schwartzwald’s leadership, CISA, Henderson says, had already accomplished a good deal in a relatively few years. It had supported the development of a new foundations course, “Rethinking the Americas,” to introduce students to a new way of thinking about American studies, along with two other courses: “Global Markets, Global Cultures” and “Media, Culture, and Global Citizenship,” which Henderson has now taught several times with her Amherst College colleague Barry O’Connell. CISA’s Fellows program had contributed substantially to the creation of the Five College Program in Asian/Pacific/American Studies. Its annual undergraduate research symposium brings together students from all five campuses, and its seminar series has established the framework of sustained interchange among scholars coming from different disciplines and different fields and points of view.

Now that the grants have expired, Henderson says, CISA has to grapple with the question of how to sustain itself on a relatively modest amount of money that covers the cost of public programming and furnishes a stipend of \$250 to faculty members who serve as a CISA Fellow for a year. In spite of that, she says, “CISA feels very vibrant to me right now,” something she credits to the new direction on which CISA embarked during that critical transition year in 2004–2005. “The program has now shifted from a strictly curricular focus to a topical one: The Black Diaspora in the Americas,” she says. Henderson believes it will ultimately link CISA’s public programming with curricular development.

According to her colleague Michelle Stephens, the focus on the Black Diaspora “emerged out of conversations that began informally several years ago and gradually became formalized just last year as our ideas coalesced.” Stephens is an associate professor of English at Mount Holyoke and a scholar of Caribbean and African American studies. She has been at the college for seven years and involved with CISA for most of that time. It was Ernie Allen of the University’s W. E. B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies, she recalls, who had originally suggested this topic as a focus for CISA: “Ernie kept his eye on that piece of the conversation and brought it back into focus for us, when we were casting around for a new direction for the program.”

A number of events sponsored by CISA further refined and sharpened the focus on the Black Diaspora. These included a symposium on Haiti organized by a teaching fellow named Jana Braziel in the fall of 2002 and a talk by Manthia Diawara, a distinguished scholar of cinema and Francophone Africa. Diawara, Stephens says, had been invited to discuss his memoir *We Won’t Budge*, a chronicle of his life in the African diaspora within the United States. The capstone event was a visit in spring 2005 by three scholars from the Twin Cities: Leola Johnson and Michelle Wright from Macalester College and Roderick Ferguson from the University of Minnesota. All are scholars of Black studies, cultural studies, gender studies, and

putting this topic at center stage for CISA. Earlier this year, CISA’s executive committee formally adopted the topic of the Black Diaspora as a long-term focus for its programming, with the expectation that it will result in another Five College course, possibly as soon as 2007.

Leading the way in charting this course, Henderson believes, will be the new members of the faculty at the five campuses. She spends a good deal of her time these days, she says, actively recruiting people who are working on the Black Diaspora. “New faculty, young scholars, have always been crucial for CISA, and it for them,” she says. “These are people for whom retooling is unnecessary because they have been thinking about these questions since graduate school. CISA offers them a place where certain questions are on the table all the time. And they help move more established kinds of thinking to that new edge.”

One of those young faculty members is Guillermo Irizarry. Before coming to the University of Massachusetts Amherst about a year and a half ago, Irizarry says, he had been teaching at Yale, where he was involved with an interdisciplinary and interdepartmental program called Ethnicity, Race, and Migration. Its goal, he says, was “to promote critical reflections on trans-ethnic cultural production, to understand how culture and knowledge are produced in a transnational fashion.” As a theory-informed project, it brought

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social theory and had been “thinking in new ways that led to new themes and crossovers such as putting Queer studies and Black studies into a dialogue,” says Stephens. An unusually large turnout for a pedagogy seminar led by Johnson, Wright, and Ferguson produced what Stephens describes as “a rich conversation that made us keenly aware of all we had to do in the Valley to prepare to teach about the Black Diaspora.” Taken together, Stephens believes, these incidents contributed to

together scholars of Asian American culture, African American, and Latino studies. “So when I came here,” says Irizarry, “I needed to find a place where thinking of this kind was happening.” And CISA, for him, turned out to be that place.

Irizarry teaches Latin American and Latino literature and culture in the University’s Spanish and Portuguese Program. CISA, he says, brings to the table people who are studying Koreans in Hawaii, Chinese

in the Philippines of the 19th century, and people working with Amerindian communities in Guatemala who have community members in Boston. “CISA goes to the margins of history to find new knowledge,” says Irizarry. “Our efforts to understand all these different cultures and how they intersect results in a far-reaching exchange that’s not nation based and requires crossing borders in its inquiries.”

This is Irizarry’s second year as a CISA fellow. Selected in January of each year, the fellows meet

or Africa, and that helps me to understand the larger historical processes that have in the past and continue today to produce diaspora.”

Irizarry’s colleague Luis Marentes agrees. “You know, at an academic conference people fly in, read their papers, and then leave. With CISA you have regular and ongoing contact with the same group of people, so the dialogue is much more fruitful because it makes possible a sustained conversation over a much longer period of time.”

“[Often the discussions are] very intense, sometimes even antagonistic, but this gives an edge to everyone’s intellectual development and productivity.”

—Guillermo Irizarry

about three times a semester to read from their works in progress and talk about current research. These conversations, Irizarry says, have been “immensely enriching” because often the discussions are “very intense, sometimes even antagonistic, but this gives an edge to everyone’s intellectual development and productivity.”

“People like me who are dealing with minority communities in the United States could find ourselves localized and artificially tied to a place, to a border, but a wide-open topic like the Black Diaspora opens up the discussion, allows me to reflect upon other Black people in the Caribbean

“CISA was a real selling point for me in deciding to come to UMass Amherst,” says Irizarry. “I first heard it about it from Luis [Marentes] during my interview.” Initially skeptical, “because sometimes such initiatives invoked as selling points turn out not to be real,” the first time Irizarry attended a CISA meeting, he says, he was convinced: “I found a lot of people who were interesting for me, socially, professionally, and intellectually. It gave me an immediate connection to the area and to a community of interlocutors who have become part of my intellectual family.”

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