

## NALACS THESIS AWARD 2008

### Jury Report

The Netherlands Association for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (NALACS) seeks to promote the study of this region and to draw attention to it, both inside and outside the academic world. One of the means to achieve this goal is the yearly award of the NALACS prize for an MA thesis that meritoriously contributes to research on and knowledge of the region. With this award NALACS seeks to encourage emerging talents and to promote the study of the region and the publication of research outcomes.

Important criteria in the evaluation of the theses submitted are:

- The scientific value in terms of its contribution to theory building and methodological approach;
- The social relevance in terms of the actuality of the subject and the contribution of the analysis to ongoing debate inside and outside academia;
- The originality in the choice of subject and in the research approach;
- The structure, style and language usage.

This year the jury, consisting of myself, Gery Nijenhuis (Utrecht University) and Tine Davids (Radboud University Nijmegen), received and evaluated fourteen theses. The authors of these theses come from very varied disciplinary backgrounds and probably we should say that the usual classification according to disciplines increasing loses relevance as cross disciplinary research becomes more important. This is also reflected in methodological approaches where we often witness a creative combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches.

In contrast to last year, when armed conflict and related subjects took pride of place. This time the theses submitted for the contest cover a broad spectrum of subjects, ranging from the choice of marital partners in indigenous communities in Surinam or the position of Colombian refugees in Costa Rica to studies of democratization process in Nicaragua and Ecuador. Where the theme of this years' NALACS Congress "Conflict, Fragmentation and Hope in the Neoliberal City: Urban Space in Latin America" is concerned a thesis on the life of the inhabitants of a Guatemalan condominium caught our attention. This thesis discusses how walls are constructed to keep undesired outsiders out but at the same time allow the entry of more or less desired outsiders. It also draws attention to the virtual absence of "community" among the inhabitants of the compound, which sharply contrasts to what publicity about the advantages of living in a condominium often suggests. We also should mention an interesting analysis of the discourses about juvenile crime, citizen security and criminalization in Chile.

Besides the diversity in thematic focus the submitted thesis displayed diversity in geographic coverage. As such, that is a good thing but we note that in contrast to last year Brazil is absent. We think that this country merits more attention and hope that next year more work on it will compete for the NALACS Thesis Award. We also note that the theses we received mostly focus on the local and national level and no attention is given to the processes of regional integration and the formation of regional pacts. Only one thesis we received addresses the theme of transnationalism in treating the question of the social perception of remittances among Surinamese in the Netherlands and in Suriname.

Of the fourteen theses we received ten were written in English, three in Dutch and one in Spanish. Although the quality of language usage generally is acceptable we note that in some cases it still seems to be difficult for students to write up their ideas in good English. This is a reason for concern as English has become a *lingua franca* that is needed to make research outcomes accessible to a wider academic and non-academic public.

Evaluating the theses submitted once again proved to be a difficult task. They are not easily comparable because the subjects chosen and the approaches used are very different while the length of the theses varied between about 50 pages to about 160 pages. Nonetheless, after a first reading the members of the jury came up with rather similar shortlists of potential candidates for the NALACS Thesis Award 2008. To be sure, such convergence was a reason for discussion: were we not biased by our own disciplinary backgrounds and methodological preferences? We discussed the cases of doubt and finally agreed on a shortlist of four nominees. Among these nominees only one could be the winner but we think that by presenting our final shortlist we can draw attention to other potential candidates and award their work with an honorable mention.

The shortlist, in arbitrary order, was as follows:

\* “Brandnetels en boete: rechtspluralisme en interlegaliteit in Ecuador” by Marc Simon Thomas. This thesis was written for the MA Latin American Studies at the Center for the Study and Documentation of Latin America (CEDLA) under the supervision of Arij Ouweneel and Willem Assies. The thesis attractively draws attention to the world of legal pluralism: the coexistence of various legal systems, in this case formal state law and indigenous customary justice. In this very readable analysis a very interesting case study provides insight in the workings and dynamics of legal pluralism which is also accessible to others than legal scholars.

\* Another thesis on our shortlist was “Seguridad ciudadana, delincuencia juvenil y discursos de control en Chile” by Pablo A. Isla Mosalve who wrote this thesis for the MA Latin American Studies at Leiden University under the supervision of Patricio Silva. Juvenile criminality, citizen security and the construction of a discourse regarding how to deal with such issues and to exercise control are at the heart of this substantial essay. Most attractive aspects are the development of a theoretical framework through a discussion of various theoretical approaches and the way research outcomes are presented in the empirical chapters.

\* “Che Guervara: A Martyr’s Death: Messianism & the Cuban Political Religion” by Pedro Santos Silva also drew our attention. This thesis was written for the MA Political Culture and National Identities at Leiden University under the supervision of Henk te Velde and Henk Kern. The thesis analyses the Messianic ethos and the religion-like aspects of the Cuban revolution by concentrating on the symbolic role of Che Guevara in Cuban political religion. In contrast to the other theses this one is not based on ethnographic fieldwork but on a discourse analysis of written sources, complemented with interviews.

\* Finally, we would like to mention “Partnerships for conservation in indigenous territories: discourses, negotiations and indigenous political organization in Selva de Matavén, Colombia” by Eloisa Berman Arévalo who wrote this thesis for the Research Master Human Geography Planning and Development at the University of Amsterdam under the supervision of Mirjam Ros-Tonen. Her thesis provides fascinating insights into the formation and dynamics of partnerships for rainforest protection and conservation, in particular in

indigenous territories. Based on thorough research the thesis reveals the role of different stakeholders, analyses their discourses and the dynamics of their interaction.

Among these four nominees we finally selected a winner. The 2008 NALACS Thesis Award goes to Pedro Santos Silva and his thesis “Che Guevara: A Martyr’s Death: Messianism & the Cuban Political Religion.”

The jury unanimously agreed that this is a very well-written and timely essay on an original subject at the intersection of political culture and religion. The author takes the reader to revolutionary Cuba, the 1970s and 1980s and the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1998. He presents an insightful and fascinating analysis of how the Castro regime drew on the life and death of Che Guevara to develop a political and modern discourse to legitimate and support its revolutionary project, while at the same time having recourse to a religious rhetoric and imagery. A quote from the thesis eloquently illustrates the argument: “What Jesus is to John Paul II, Che is to Fidel Castro” (p. iii). With this thesis Pedro Santos Silva shows his capacities as a thorough and critical researcher who also disposes of excellent literary qualities.

Dr. Willem Assies

(Chairperson of the 2008 NALACS Thesis Award jury)