

Jury Report NALACS Thesis Award 2008-2009

The Netherlands Association for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (NALACS) aims to promote the study of and attention for this region, within and beyond academic circles. To contribute to this objective the NALACS has instituted a prize for MA theses on the region in order to encourage study of the region and the publication of research outcomes.

Important criteria in evaluating the theses are:

- Scientific quality and originality in terms of the contribution to theory development and methodological approach;
- The societal relevance of the topic or, in other words, the actuality of the research theme and its importance for debates beyond academic circles;
- The originality of the choice of subject and the research design;
- The style of writing and the structure of the thesis.

This year the jury, conformed by Hebe Verrest (Utrecht University), Edwin Rap (Wageningen University) and myself (Wageningen University) received 14 theses, equal to the number received last year.

We would like to highlight the diversity of the theses we received, not only in thematic terms but also in terms of geographical spread. Apart from some inter-country comparative studies that focus on political analysis we received a number of theses on Brazil, some of them focusing on violence in Rio de Janeiro and one on ecotourism in the Amazon region. The latter thesis was written in Portuguese but we accepted it since, after all, with a population of some 180 million Brazil constitutes an important country in the region. We also are happy to note that, in contrast to last year, Brazil is not absent this time. Other countries covered are Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Peru, Surinam and Venezuela. The issues addressed in the theses are quite diverse, ranging from resource and energy politics, through forms of collective action to dance and identity in Peru or yoga in Cuba. In very broad terms they can be classified as pertaining to the disciplines of anthropology, development studies and political sciences, but we should underline that various thesis transcend such a classification and that we welcome such multidisciplinary endeavors.

Ten out of the 14 theses we received were written in English, three in Dutch and one in Portuguese. Five theses were developed at the University of Amsterdam, four at Leiden University, three at Utrecht University, one at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam and one at the University of Groningen. Remarkably, thirteen out of the fourteen theses we received were written by women. We wondered if this reflects a feminization of Latin American and Caribbean studies and how this might be explained. Is the region especially attractive to women, despite or precisely because its putative macho culture –one of the themes of this year's NALACS congress– or is this because as the late Robert Palmer put it because “the women are smarter”? And to stick with Palmer, we are “looking for clues.”

All of the theses we received are of excellent quality, which saddled us with the difficult task of decision-making. After intense consultations we selected a shortlist of four theses that particularly drew our attention for their original contribution to Latin American and Caribbean studies. These were:

- *'Haantjes en Hooligans' Sport, identiteit en nationalisme in Suriname: Kwalitatief onderzoek naar voetbal en zangvogelsport* by Sabine van der Gref (Utrecht University);
- *Rescuing lo nuestro?: motivations to dance and notions of authenticity and identity in Cusco, Peru* by Lotte Haase (Leiden University);
- *Between trust and fear: Mothers creating spaces of security amid violence in Vila Cruzeiro, Rio de Janeiro* by Sara Koenders (Utrecht University);
- *The politics of trade and intellectual property rights in developing countries: A critical case study of Peru and Ecuador in negotiation with the European Union* by Barbara Jantien van Paassen (University of Amsterdam).

We considered that these four theses came closest to the criteria for awarding the NALACS Thesis Prize.

We then faced the task of selecting the final winner of the Thesis Award 2008-2009 and agreed that this would be Lotte Haase with her thesis on dance performances, authenticity and identity in Cusco, Peru, which combines an excellent, original and well-written thesis with a visual ethnographic documentary.

Below is the speech presenting the thesis award as read out by Edwin Rap on November 25, 2009.

“Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to Lotte Haase. Lotte has written a beautiful Masters thesis called:

Rescuing lo nuestro?: Motivations to dance and notions of authenticity, identity and meaning in Cuzco, Peru

This is a thesis in the field of Visual Ethnography for a degree in Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden. In the year 2008 Lotte did field work in the city of Cuzco to study one of the most important artistic expressions of Cuzqueños, which is ‘la danza’. These are different sorts of regional dances, both folkloric and religious dances. On the basis of this field work she produced both a film and a written thesis.

Her interest for studying these dances started when she visited Cusco in 2007 and by chance witnessed a celebration of Corpus Christi. Later she got into contact with a dance group that consisted of urban mestizo adolescents and students which were rehearsing in regular ‘Western style’ clothes a dance choreography. The next day, during a dance competition, they performed these regional dances on stage in the regional dresses and with the particular hairdo, the long black braids, of indigenous people that incorporate obvious rural movements such as sowing the land.

Lotte turned her confusion about the contrasting meanings of these events into a research topic. She studies these dances as expressions of a collective memory of a regional past. However, she does not focus only on the more abstract and historical meanings of these dances, but specifically on the meanings that this has for the people of these dance groups. She follows these dancers and the musicians, who she interviews and observes with her camera. She is interested to know how the motives of these people to participate in such dances are related to ideas and practical use of the concepts of identity, authenticity and meaning. On the basis of her findings, Lotte warns against essentializing identity

characterizations and shows that within certain contexts people can adjust their position and connect with different sources of identity.

What I find remarkable about this thesis is its humane and intellectual creativity. Lotte describes her personal research journey and positions herself as an actor in the research, reflects on this and makes this thematically and theoretically relevant for the topic that she studies. This personal touch, joining the personal and the theoretical, works very well as you become just as intrigued to know about these young people and why they want to dance. The final results are both a documentary which is not yet finished but already very interesting from this point of view and a thesis which is a joy to read and theoretically well versed in the literature on this topic. I have to point out that Lotte succeeded in acquiring these two completely different skills and media, writing an original thesis and making a film, which are extremely hard to combine in practice. This deserves an applause.”