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Fighting Invisibility, the Fifth Conference on the Americas

24

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In October 1994, the newly-established Latin American Studies Program at Grand Valley began a conference series that has grown to become a regular part of west Michigan life. With the theme "Democracy, Capitalism, Activism," the program hosted an event which contained many of distinctive features that would come to characterize all Conferences on the Americas. Dedicated to commemorating the anniversary of key historical events in Guatemala's history, the conference featured a keynote speaker (Professor Susanne Jonas of the University of California at Santa Cruz), numerous panels put together by scholars from many institutions of higher learning in the midwest (from MSU to Calvin to Western), a balanced focus on things Latin American both inside and outside the borders of the United States, and the close involvement of community activists (instrumental in organizing the 1994 conference was Jeff Smith of the Institute for Global Education).

The successful combination of these features—a thematic focus, a nationally recognized keynote speaker, hemispheric analysis, and regional town and gown participation—gradually came to shape the LAS Program itself. Not satisfied to keep knowledge within the confines of the classroom or outside the walls of the institution, the LAS Program built on the conference to strengthen university and community relations. Time and again, the program brought its scholarly speakers and performers into the community or the community onto campus. Most recently, Union High School in Grand Rapids brought a class of students to Cook-DeWitt Auditorium to hear Professor Cecilia Zarate speak about the U.S.

drug war in Colombia. On the occasion of the last Conference on the Americas, keynote speaker Martín Espada—a poet and English professor at the University of Massachusetts—visited schools in Holland and Grand Rapids where he addressed hundreds of students. He also gave a reading to nearly one hundred community members at the El Matador Tortilla Factory. The mix of town and gown, of academic-knowledge and street-knowledge in the pursuit of understanding and explaining the Latin American experience, has proved to be one of the conference's most unique and enduring qualities. Recognizing this, former LAS coordinator Walter Foote dubbed the series "a conference for the whole community." As the years went by, community participation grew and diversified, adding dynamic force to the university's academic endeavors. The ties developed with the community stimulated increased academic focus on the Latin American population of the United States, on Latinos. This feature of Latin American studies was always a part of the LAS Program, but the conference encouraged a bigger intellectual investment in the issue. Out of this has grown an on-going community research project called "Latinos in West Michigan," in which students typically interview local Latino residents about their experiences. Several "life stories" produced by students have been published on a student-designed website (www4.gvsu.edu/latinos). I am pleased to report that next fall Martha Gonzalez-Cortes, executive director of the Hispanic Center of West Michigan and ABD in Anthropology at Stanford University, will teach the course associated with this project, LAS 475, Latinos in West Michigan. This outgrowth of the conference has also led to increased pressure to diversify the GVSU faculty, a slow but positive process, recently addressed in part by hiring Dr. David Stark, a puertorriqueño, in the history department.

Most people imagine the conference series to be an annual event but the Conference on the Americas is actually hosted every third semester. Thus, the sixth conference is scheduled for

Saturday, February 9, 2002, midway into the Winter 2002 semester. Like the first conference, each event is organized around a theme. Selecting a theme that is transnational and user-friendly for community and academic participants can be challenging. Last October's conference theme—"Fighting Invisibility"—came to coordinator Dr. Gabriela Pozzi after some other ideas failed to excite community support. With the support of conference co-chairs Dr. Jeff Lamb and Dr. David Alvarez, the theme became a vehicle for approaching the ways scholars and activists confront the stereotypes used to obscure Latino and Latin American reality. While many portrayals of Latinos and Latin America emphasize gangs, drugs, war, and folklore, conferees used the theme to show how gangs build community, how the drug trade would disappear without consumers in the U.S., how war-victims in Central America have built rich participatory democracies, and how folkways contribute to an em-

powering sense of common identity among Latinos. By its very existence, the conference fought the invisibility of Latinos and Latin America. The articles published here were selected from the "Fighting Invisibility" conference to make concrete some of the enduring qualities of the Conference on the Americas series. Among them are works written by scholars from throughout the region, such as MSU's Bill Van Lopik and Northeastern Illinois State's David Leaman; studies by community activists Jeff Smith and Robert Dodde; and contributions from the arts and literature by Bob Mayberry and Walter Foote. The issue also features a poem by keynote speaker Espada. Each work approaches the theme differently—from Mayberry's play to Smith's media analysis—demonstrating the rich intellectual variety the conference always engenders. I am grateful to each of them for preparing their conference presentations for publication so quickly. I am also grateful to editor Dan Royer for urging us to help him put together a special Latin American Studies issue of the *Grand Valley Review*, and to Alvarez for pulling together a number of loose ends.

The issue provides an unexpected occasion to showcase the considerable achievements of the Latin American Studies Program and its Conference on the Americas series. I hope you enjoy reading these pieces and that we can count on seeing you at the Eberhard Center in February 2002 for our sixth conference!