

Anton Allahar, President 2007-2008

Conference: 33rd Annual Conference, San Andrés Isla, Colombia, May 26-30, 2008

1) How did you come to specialize in Caribbean Studies?

I was born in Trinidad and lived there for the first 20 years of my life. I immigrated to Canada in 1969 and my Caribbean identity was born there, in exile, so-to-speak. It is difficult to have a Trinidadian identity when one lives in Trinidad and all around you are Trinidadians. The same goes for an Antiguan, a Bajan or a St. Lucian etc. Because social identities are situational, they depend on social context, so when I am with Canadians, I am Caribbean, but if I am with Caribbean people I am from Trinidad, and if I am with Trinidadians I am from Diego Martin and so on. This is why I say my Caribbean identity was born in Canada, for it is there that I really came to meet other Caribbean people and to discover how similar Caribbean peoples are culturally, and how culturally different they can be too. As a young immigrant of colour to North America in the 1960s and 1970s the whole politics of black power was a comforting buffer to the whiteness of the wider society. I found meaning in my Caribbeanness and black power was the avenue to my Caribbean identity. Along with my friends, Caribbean and other, especially the Chilean refugees fleeing Pinochet, we began reading and discussing political ideas, attending political rallies, and challenging the United States' interventions in our region. For that was the climate of the times: the Cuban Revolution, Black Power, anti-Vietnam War, the Women's Movement, the Student Movement etc. We were all becoming heavily politicized and I found intellectual comfort in those politics, for after all, that was where my friends were. So Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Frantz Fanon, Mao Tse Tung, Stokely Carmichael, C.L.R. James and others were linked with the de-colonization movements in the Caribbean and informed my daily realities. We held meetings, formed an Afro-Caribbean association, a Caribbean studies group, and following the murders of people like Walter Rodney and Maurice Bishop, began to speak out on campus. We used to read about such African independence leaders as Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Senghor, Milton Obote, Kenneth Kaunda, Julius Nyerere, Jomo Kenyatta, and Patrice Lumumba part of reaching out to others in the struggle against colonial domination and in the process embraced Africa.

2) How did your interest in and commitment to Caribbean Studies evolve?

Following from the above I developed a keen interest in the politics of the Cuban Revolution. It was not unusual. I had come from a naïve Catholic educational experience in Trinidad and during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 was told that the communists in Cuba were going to invade Trinidad and take away our homes. I was young and impressionable and was scared, for I 'knew' the priests never lied. But 7 years later (1969) after moving to Canada and falling in with the critical, black power groups, I came to see matters in a different light and to question all that I had been taught, even by my parents. I came to understand racism, exploitation and oppression and studying sociology and Marxism and Leninism enabled me to grasp these social processes not in individualistic terms, but as structurally conditioned class phenomena. Those theorists were given concrete expression in Fidel and Che and other Cuban heroes and inspired my desire to learn more about Caribbean history and politics. It

was exciting and novel to have one's world turned upside down. I began to read novels by Caribbean writers and came to admire Samuel Selvon, Harold Ladoo and even V.S. Naipaul, all of whom, perhaps without knowing it, were quite sociological in their literary thrusts. So through my interest in the Cuban Revolution I came to appreciate the histories of slavery, agricultural monoculture (especially sugar), imperialism and economic dependency and political disenfranchisement. In all of this the politics of race that came out of the Caribbean rubbed up against the politics of class that I was coming to learn from my Cuban friends. The combination leaves me where I am today.

3) When did you first join CSA and what did it mean to you then?

I joined the CSA in 1981 and for me it was almost a natural progression. I completed my PhD on the historical sociology of Cuba that year and by then had come to know a number of other Caribbean people at universities throughout Canada and the United States. Still wanting to give legitimacy to Caribbean studies, I took a gamble and joined the CSA. The gamble was as follows: do I want to ghettoize myself and specialize in Caribbean studies, knowing that in Canada the Caribbean is only valued for its beaches, music, rum and sunshine, but not for its intellectual prowess? Or should I do so with the thought of going back to the Caribbean? The latter never happened, and in my own limited way I have been struggling in Canada ever since to bring a higher profile to Caribbean studies. To me the CSA represented intellectual legitimacy. I met big names, decorated professors, prize-winning authors, cultural and political activists, government diplomats and just ordinary bright and charismatic men and women, who did not feel the need to apologize for our Caribbean, and to me that was empowering.

4) What were your goals for CSA the year of your presidency?

In my presidential year 200-08, my goals were few. Thanks to the Herculean efforts of the two presidents who preceded me, Pedro Noguera (2005-06) and Percy Hintzen (2006-07) I was left with a full plate that involved a major re-thinking of the CSA. Pedro and Percy had secured a major grant of USD\$98,100 from the Ford Foundation in New York, and the mandate was the reorganization of the CSA along lines that would make it more professional and more financial self-sustaining. Those efforts are still developing, but as I said, they are pretty thorough-going and as far as a vision for the Association, they occupied the horizons of my thoughts during my presidential year. Of course there were the nitty-gritty aspects of planning the CSA 2008 annual conference.

5) What did you recognize to be the greatest obstacles facing CSA and Caribbean Studies during your presidency?

The greatest challenges are always going to be financial, but those are taken for granted, and if we play our cards correctly, they ought to be under control. On a personnel side, however, we need to get more members to be prepared to continue the initiatives of Pedro and Percy, to follow up on my efforts and to support the seated president with more than just words. We must get others to run for office (vice president and executive council). The idea of

incorporating the younger scholars is a solid one, but as young professors and graduate students know, getting tenure and finishing their degrees take priority. So how does one balance the two, especially when one adds family and childrearing issues into the fray. On another matter, I want to ensure that the Association continue its multilingual membership. Today, however, since most money lies in the “North” those colleagues from the “North” can bring their students and initiate them far more easily than those from the “South.” This means that owing to financial imbalances the Association could come to be seen as an English-speaking one and that would lead to lower participation rates among our Spanish-speaking and French-speaking colleagues. And the latter in particular need to be more actively encouraged. And although Dutch or Papiamentu are not official CSA languages, I would also like to see some more outreach to our colleagues in the Dutch-speaking countries.

6) What did you consider to be the greatest accomplishment of CSA that year?

The greatest accomplishment of CSA in my presidential year was probably registering the largest number of graduate students ever. Along with this we were able to attract several new members of junior faculty. I also applaud the serious participation by large numbers of students and professors from our host university, la Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Sede Caribe. Under the leadership of Yusmidia Solano Suarez, our local chair, the quality of their participation was superb. I also applaud the supreme efforts of our programme chair, Dwaine Plaza, who was the real guts of CSA San Andres. Of course, there were other stalwarts who worked feverishly behind the scenes: George Priestley, Samuel Fure Davis, Maggie Shrimpton and Carolle Charles.

7) Why did you choose the location you did for the CSA annual conference that year?

I chose the theme of “The Caribbean: embracing the diasporas within and without,” for quite precise reasons. I felt then and continue to feel now, that the greatest challenge we face as a region is that of our continued coherence or unity as a community. To this end I thought of the curious relationship between the Caribbean and its traditional diasporas in places like Toronto, New York, London and Amsterdam; curious because of the inversion of that relationship. For whereas in times past it was the Caribbean that nurtured its far-flung diasporas with migrants and that gave those diasporas their cultural shape and content, today globalization has meant that the diasporic impact and blow-back on the region is huge. Not only in terms of cash remittances, but also in the re-importation of ideas, of people (retirees returning home and wishing to invest their pensions and savings), new values inculcated in the various metropolises where they migrated, new political ideas and economic practices, new takes on family relations and child rearing, second and third generations, and concerns over teen sex, pregnancy, disease, drugs, violence etc.

Then I thought about the Caribbean diaspora within the Caribbean. Places like Baraguá in Cuba, Colón in Panamá, Limón in Costa Rica, Bluefields in Nicaragua, and San Andrés in Colombia, among others. Thinking in terms of the English-speaking Caribbean these are viable diasporic Caribbean communities within the Caribbean, and they have a great deal to tell us about Caribbean unity and integration, if only because we know so little about our neighbours, and they about us. Also, quite apart from the issues surrounding the developing

Guyanese diaspora in Barbados, outside of the English-speaking countries, what about the Cuban diaspora in Puerto Rico, the Haitian diaspora in the Dominican Republic, or the Hindus in Dutch Suriname? The possibilities for research, discovery and further strengthening our Caribbean ties are endless. And when we add to the equation the divisive concerns of 'race,' ethnicity and nationalism, we have the making of a of a major set of intellectual, political, economic and cultural projects.

8) Where do you hope to see CSA in the next ten years?

I want to see the CSA as a financially independent and viable organization sharing organic links with major regional organizations such as CARICOM, the Association of Caribbean States and the Organization of American States.

9) What is one of your fondest CSA memories?

This is very difficult to choose, but perhaps those where the intellectual passions demonstrated in panel discussions are on par with the passions outside those sessions, in the hotel lobbies, at the cultural nights, the field outings and elsewhere. To this end, CSA San Andres was a real stand-out for me.

10) What are you doing now in terms of the Caribbean?

I am writing a new book that showcases the encounter between positivistic history and narrative history, all with a view to bringing to light many Caribbean voices that have been silenced or erased in the presentation of that history. To this end I am working through the early stages of planning a major volume on the history of sugar and all the different types of people it touched and the ways in which they were touched.

11) Where do see the future of Caribbean Studies?

The future is very bright for Caribbean studies for it is in very capable young hands. As globalization becomes more deeply entrenched the Caribbean region will become more of a central player in hemispheric affairs and we must prepare ourselves with for that role by producing capable and critical intellectual leaders. CSA has a huge role to play here.

12) What would you recommend to a young scholar starting in Caribbean Studies?

Decide first where you want to live for that will condition the reception of your ideas. Cultivate a critical sense a stay close to the ears of those who make decisions. This means developing links with like others, sharing ideas, envisaging theoretical alternatives to suit the ever-emerging political and economic realities. Focus on our less fortunate neighbours, seek out post-docs within the region, and do not be afraid to promote Caribbean studies with the same force and pride that others promote their areas. If you inside or outside the region, get your chairs or deans etc., to promote exchange programmes.

