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## EDITOR'S FOREWORD

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### BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS — PLAYING CATCH-UP

More than twenty-five years ago *LARR* inaugurated a new section called "Books in Review," whose purpose was "to commission review essays of several works on the same subject" (10, no. 1 [Spring 1975]: 4–5). Over the years the review section has, by most accounts, become a very popular feature within the *LARR* readership, and many find the expert overview of emerging books in print extremely useful, especially for teaching purposes in those subject areas that are tangential to one's specific research interests. Faced with rising levels of intellectual production and ever-busy schedules, for many of us, review essays perform an important function in allowing us to keep up with research activity and publications.

But that is not the primary reason for this brief foreword. Notwithstanding the important role played by review essays, most readers continue to regard the research articles and research notes as the lifeblood of *LARR*. That is why, when LASA awarded the journal to a new editorial team at the University of Texas at Austin, we resolved to increase the number of mainstream articles in any one issue, principally by reducing the normal limit to a 10,000 word maximum. Indeed, in the five issues since UT-Austin took over the *LARR* masthead in 2003, we have averaged just over five full articles per issue (up from three in the previous biennium). We also decided to maintain the tradition of allocating approximately 40 percent of any one issue to review essays with the lion's share going to articles and research notes both of which undergo a thorough "double-blind" peer review from outside evaluators. Readers may note however, that we will breach this guideline in vol. 39, no. 2, and will do so again in vol. 39, no. 3, where roughly 50 percent of each issue will be dedicated to review essays, and the purpose of this foreword is to provide an explanation.

A reader once expressed the not-so-tongue-in-cheek comment that by the time a review is actually published, most of the books were already out-of-date and in some cases were no longer in print. We propose to address this problem in a number of ways. First, we are seeking to shorten the length of time it takes to broker books into a cluster, get them out to reviewers and receive their finished reviews. Given that these essays are reviewed and edited internally, there is little lag-time in scheduling them for production once we have the review essay in hand (provided, of course, that it is of an appropriate length and passes muster in terms of quality). Secondly, we have decided to apply a “guillotine” principle that entails no book be more than three years from its publication date *by the time the review appears* in *LARR*. This means, of course, that we have had to cull many of the books that were carried over from the University of New Mexico on the one hand, as well as develop a strategy to ensure that books received in the past twelve months are clustered expeditiously and sent out for review. As before, this does not mean that we can always ensure that every book actually goes out for review, or if it does, that it will be included in the final essay. From 2004 onwards, readers can only exceptionally expect to see books that were published more than three years earlier included, and wherever possible, we hope that they will be within one to two years of their publication date.

The second strategy we have adopted in order to reduce the backlog of review essays in hand, and allow us to “catch up” and review more recently published books, is to temporarily increase the number of book reviews and/or the space allocated for this section in *LARR*. We propose to do this over the next two issues. At the same time, however, we will increase the overall size by some thirty published pages, thereby ensuring that the peer-reviewed research articles and research notes are not reduced in absolute terms. By 2005 we anticipate being caught-up, at which time we will revert to our 40 percent allocation for review essays and the regular-sized issue of around 280 pages.

#### FOR THE POTENTIAL ESSAYIST

As before, the book review essays are intended to offer the reader a chance to see how a selected cluster of books speaks to, and about, any given topic. As Associate Editor responsible for these review essays, I ask reviewers to spend about three-quarters of their paper summarizing and discussing the contents of the cluster, but I also ask that they place the books in the somewhat larger context of current research efforts, theoretical approaches, empirical data-gathering, and the like. I also ask that the books be compared with one another in terms of subjects emphasized, debates entered into, and strengths and weaknesses

contrasted. This allows the essayist to add her or his own "voice" to the analysis and discussion.

*LARR* receives well in excess of three hundred books for review each year, and I am aware that many titles published in the United States, and especially in Latin America, never come our way. I am also acutely aware that many scholars of Latin America have expertise in areas, but that I do not know these individuals personally or by reputation. Therefore I ask *LASA* members and *LARR* readers to let me know if they would like to be available for review essays, and what areas they are especially interested in covering, both topically (e.g., urban affairs, post-World War II poetry, late colonial history, the environment), as well as country. The more explicit the better, since this allows us to match clusters with particular areas of expertise and interest. Similarly, if a reader knows of a few titles that have appeared recently that would form an intriguing cluster, she or he should let me know; *LARR* will do what it can to obtain copies from publishers. But please do bear in mind our three-year "guillotine," and keep suggestions to books published within the last fifteen months or thereabouts.

Please note that *LARR* does not encourage or seek review essays from graduate students since a critical review might rebound adversely on their early career development. Nor does *LARR* elicit a review from someone who is an author or chapter contributor of any of the books in a cluster. Also, a couple of caveats: first, if a reader agrees to review a selection of books, please follow through on that agreement in a reasonable period of time (generally two to four months). A would-be reviewer who accepts a cluster of books and then disappears does no one any favors and deprives someone else of the opportunity to write an essay. Second, please do not add titles to a cluster of books without first consulting with the editorial office, since another reviewer may already have the volume under review; and, it is *LARR*'s policy not to offer multiple reviews of the same book.

It is a great personal pleasure for me to serve as the Associate Editor in charge of the Book Review section of the journal, but its value and timeliness depends exclusively on you—the journal's readers. With your assistance we can continue to make this long-standing tradition in *LARR* useful to everyone concerned.

Henry Dietz  
Associate Editor