

CHARLES H. LONG

405 Wesley Drive
Chapel Hill, NC 27516
(919) ~~967-4615~~ 933-8019

MEMORANDUM

25 August 1998

To: Chair, Michigan Humanities Council
119 Pere Marquette
Lansing, Michigan 48912-1270

From: Charles H. Long Ph.D.

Re: Dr. Irene Vasquez [Proposal from Magical Rain
Theaterworks with Dan Runyan]

I write to recommend Dr. Irene Vasquez and her proposal for Academia de Espanol. I have known Irene Vasquez since her graduate student days at the University of Chicago in the early 1970's. I was advisor for her M.A. degree in the History of Religions. When I accepted a joint professorship at the University of North Carolina and Duke universities in 1974, she followed me to complete her doctoral dissertation in the History of Religions from Duke University in 1982. The title of her dissertation was, "Images of the Unspoken Maya: Silence and Discourse Concerning the New World Classic Maya Culture."

During her graduate student days Irene Vasquez served as my research and teaching assistant. I would rank Vasquez among the top five per cent of graduate students I have taught at the University of Chicago over for two decades and at Duke University for fourteen years. Not only does she bring exceptional intellectual skills to her work, she is able to critically think through, with imagination and insight, dimensions of meaning that fall outside the order of normal academic disciplines.

These insights emerge from a sophisticated innocence--the ability to ask in a profound way why certain questions were asked and answered in a particular style. This ability to know and feel the "first naivete," to use Ricoeur's apt phrase, is what makes her a superb teacher.

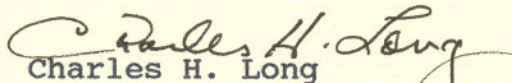
Dr. Vasquez's was trained as a Historian of Religions. Within this discipline her specialty was ancient Meso-American religions, the Aztecs and the Mayas. Her dissertation on the Maya consisted in part of a critical review of the major theoretical positions taken by Western scholarship regarding these cultures. She was

able to show that these theoretical positions always operated from a Western normative standard of the nature of the humanity. For example, the Mayas were brilliant because of their precise calendrical calculations, or, the Mayas were stupid because they did not employ the wheel in their agricultural and architectural labor.

Instead of employing this kind of a norm she undertook a careful decipherment of their expressions that enabled one to make sense of the Mayan culture in terms of its internal orientation and consistency. At another level she was concerned with an emerging meaning and interpretation of these ancient American cultures as backdrops to popular well as scholarly assessments of the nature of the human in the Americas.

I note that her proposal dealing with the Aztecs follows this trend of her thought. Given the nature of education in the United States, most students are not confronted with the existence of Meso-American cultures until they reach college. By this time in very unconscious ways they have already imbibed notions of "the primitive," "historical cultural progress," and ideas that imply that the only monumental architectural cultures were in Egypt and Mesopotamia. It is almost too late at this juncture to bring about a different point view. Her intellectual preparation along with teaching techniques which are interactive and performative, is a novel model for redressing one of the structural ills of K-12 education in our country.

Dr. Vasquez has my highest recommendation. It is my sincere hope that the Council will concur in this judgment.



Charles H. Long

Former Professor History of Religions
University of Chicago and Duke University
and The William Rand Kenan, Jr. Professor
of History of Religions, UNC-CH and
Jeannette K. Watson Professor of History
of Religions, Syracuse University