

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS



Raphi Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. An actor, director, playwright, musician and theatre educator, he has worked in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

**Institute of Current
World Affairs**

The Crane-Rogers Foundation
4545 42nd St. NW, Ste 311
Washington, D.C. 20016

Tel: 202-364-4068
Fax: 202-364-0498
E-mail: icwa@icwa.org
Web: www.icwa.org

The Information contained in this publication may not be reprinted or republished without the express written consent of the Institute of Current World Affairs.

Kneeling on Asphalt and Other Reflections on Democracy

By Raphael Soifer

BELÉM –“We’re not civilized,” Lucileine branted. She had just asked me what I thought of Pará, her home state, but she seemed more interested in shouting through her own list of concerns than in listening to my answer. “We’re rude. We’re violent. We’re dirty. We’re right on the edge of the Amazon, but we throw all our trash on the ground,” she complained. I started to respond that I’d found *paraenses* to be incredibly welcoming, and that everywhere I’d been in Brazil, I’d watched people toss their soda cans and food wrappings onto sidewalks or out of bus windows. Lucileine wasn’t having any of it, though. “We’re worse,” she said. “Stay a little longer and you’ll see what I mean.” Then she dropped the plastic baggie and straw from which she’d been drinking into a puddle on the downtown Praça da Bandeira in Belém, Pará’s capital. She turned

and strutted back toward our rehearsal, bellowing at anyone who made the mistake of looking in her general direction.

Most of the *paraenses* I’ve met have been a lot more balanced than Lucileine. Many have welcomed me far more warmly. But they’ve also been consistent in warning me that their home state is pretty far behind the times. While Lucileine was the most blunt, her assessment of Pará as “uncivilized” is a common theme. Other folks I’ve met here called the state “lawless,” or warned me that the only rule that applies is the “law of the bullet.” When Pará makes national or international news, it’s usually for brutal, heartbreaking violence. The 2005 murder of Sister Dorothy Stang, a 73-year-old American-Brazilian nun who advocated for land rights in the state’s northeastern tip was one



A devotee undertakes the 5-kilometer Cirio de Nazaré on his knees.

such story. In 2007, an incident in which a 15-year-old girl was locked for almost a month in a state prison cell with 20 adult men became the most recent headline grabber out of a state that's among Brazil's leaders in slave labor, illegal wood harvesting, and brutal local wars over land rights.

I knew about Pará's reputation for lawlessness when I moved here in early August 2008. It was one of the things that attracted me to the state in the first place. Many Brazilians automatically associate bad news out of the Amazon—everything from uncontrolled deforestation and grim statistics of political assassinations to horror stories about kidnapped tourists and organ trafficking—with Pará. I arrived wary of getting too close to local politics, though not overly concerned with losing my kidneys. But I was resolved to experience daily life in a place seemingly at the center of so many conflicts, a state so complicated and yet—outside of sensational media cycles—relatively ignored. I wanted to see how this supposedly “uncivilized” place was moving into the 21st century and toward the Lula-era ideals of a more egalitarian and democratic Brazilian society.

Pará has long had a tenuous connection to the rest of Brazil. Many of the *belemenses* I met told me that their state was bound to exist forever on the periphery of a country focused on the relatively prosperous southeast. Arriving after a month of travel through the country's northeast, I was prepared for complaints that Belém was just a satellite of Rio and São Paulo. I'd heard the same thing about towns in the interior *sertão*, small state capitals like João Pessoa in Paraíba, and even regional powerhouses like Recife.

I was struck, though, by a sense of independence that I'd rarely encountered in the northeast. Pará, along with the rest of the Amazon, may traditionally be a “forgotten Brazil,” but at least in the capital, it often seems that *belemenses* are the ones who have forgotten about the rest of the country. Frequently, they don't seem to miss it. Pará prides

itself on a local culture with strong indigenous influences, and on distinct traditions that—if not quite unknown—generally haven't attracted the same kind of national attention and commercialization as other local folk cultures. Though locals grumble about the lack of government funds for music and dance forms like *carimbó*—a fast-paced *mestiço* rhythm marrying indigenous flutes and reeds to African drums and European guitars and banjos—the separateness of local culture seems to suit them perfectly well. “Sure, I'm Brazilian,” Chico, a local filmmaker, told me. “But I'm a northerner first.”

But even Chico's sense of separateness underscores Pará's connection to the rest of Brazil. By calling himself a “northerner” rather than an “Amazonian,” Chico put his regionalism in a purely national context. Pará has been at odds with the rest of the country since at least the 1835 “Cabangem” uprising, when black and indigenous revolutionaries in the state attempted to secede from a newly independent Brazil. Chico complained that the revolt—which ended with federal troops massacring an estimated 30 percent of Belém's population—is a crucial but forgotten chapter of Brazil's past. Northern history, he told me, is usually absent from Brazilian textbooks. In recent decades, though, interest in and concern about the Amazon have started to draw national and global scrutiny to the region. Chico and other *paraenses*, long accustomed to seeing themselves as residents of a “forgotten” Brazil, are now faced with the challenge of defining themselves in relation to a country that suddenly seems to have remembered them.

Belém's most celebrated display of northern identity is also the city's most classically Brazilian celebration. The *Círio de Nazaré* is an annual procession in honor of the Virgin of Nazareth—known locally as the “Queen of the Amazon”—that takes place every second Sunday in October. The procession began in 1700, when, according to local legend, a recently converted *caboclo* (a person of mixed in-





A promise-payer in the Círio de Nazaré.

digenous and African descent) found an image of the Virgin in an *igarapé* (a stream diverging from a larger river). The Church hurried to build a major cathedral on the spot, and locals soon began attributing miracles to the Queen of the Amazon and promising tributes in exchange for cures or material successes. The Church had been a major presence in the Amazon for more than a century before, but it was through the Círio—named for the long candles that devotees carry—that Catholicism began to move from outside imposition to local tradition. These days, the Círio marries Catholic devotion to local party foods like *pato no tucupi* (duck cooked in manioc broth) and *maniçoba* (a stew made of smoky pork and manioc leaves) in a uniquely Brazilian *mestiçagem*, a mixture of cultures.

The Círio is a testament to faith *en masse*. At least two million people take to the streets for the procession between the Sé and Nazaré cathedrals, including hundreds of thousands of promise payers. Many devotees carry concrete reminders of answered prayers—a wooden replica of a house, or wax body parts representing miraculous cures—while at least a hundred thousand others pull the coarse, heavy ropes propelling the ornate carriage that carries an image of the Virgin. A determined few make the five kilometer pilgrimage on their knees, accompanied by groups of young volunteer paramedics who fan them with large cardboard sheets.

The lead-up to the Círio includes open-air masses and a “vine radio” network of loudspeakers blaring hymns and sermons from lampposts throughout the

city center. It would be positively un-Brazilian, though, to miss the opportunity for a secular street party. In the weeks leading up to the procession, concerts and bar crawls take over the city center, and local entrepreneurs mount a small amusement park next to the Nazaré Cathedral. On the eve of the Círio, the Festa da Xiquita—an all-night party organized by the city’s best-known drag queens—packs the downtown Praça da Republica with dancers, musicians, food vendors and small-time coke dealers, in addition to a couple hundred thousand partiers. The next morning, hungover teenagers and freshly scrubbed promise keepers share crowded streets as the sun rises, but there are barely any conflicts between the sacred and the profane. The Círio, like Belém, is a constant work in progress, capable of integrating a wealth of different celebrations into itself.

In 2008, the lead-up to the Círio de Nazaré was also the lead-up to municipal elections, which took place a week before. Elections are firmly entrenched in *belemense* tradition, but voting has never held same the cachet as honoring the Virgin. Weeks before the Círio, Belém was decked out in yellow and white to honor the Church. People hung posters, streamers, and blinking lights from their windows and balconies, and all of my friends began planning outfits and activities for a good party, a dose of religious catharsis, or both. The elections were heating up, too, but mostly for the politicians and their armies of paid campaigners. Flag wavers stood at the corners of busy intersections, while sound trucks circled the city endlessly, blaring tinny tunes advertising their candidates’ electoral serial numbers. For most *belemenses*, though, the election



Legs, feet, heads, babies: Wax replicas given in thanks to the Queen of the Amazon.



A paid flag-waver for Dulciomar Costa, Belém's incumbent mayor and eventual election winner.

seemed to be more hassle than civic duty.

Brazil's political system is standardized nationally, so that each of the country's 5,564 municipalities held elections on October 5. At least this year, the apathy seemed nationalized as well. By July, when I made my way across the northeast to Belém, most of the voters I talked to already seemed exhausted. On occasion, I met someone who expressed a strong preference for a specific candidate and who wasn't on any party's payroll. A couple of times, I even talked to voters who could actually sum up a major policy difference between candidates, but they were extreme exceptions. Across Pernambuco, Bahia, Piauí, Maranhão, and finally Pará, I mostly heard the same things from voters: that this election didn't mean anything, that the candidates were all crooks, and that people in power really couldn't care less about the lives of the "povão" (common folks; literally, the "big people," RS-8).

The campaigns certainly all looked pretty much the same. In spite of widespread disappointment in the pace of the federal government's reforms, Lula—the "people's president"—still has an approval rating of around 80 percent. As a result, the political class considers him a sure vote getter. The president is especially popular in the north and northeast, so nearly everybody here—from candidates with his own PT to the opposition PSDB—campaigns as an ally. They showed off photographs of handshakes with the former metalworker, or just cut and pasted him into their banners if no good pictures were available. My friends in Belém were disillusioned to see Lula playing politics as usual with his videotaped endorsement of José Priante, the mayoral candidate for the centrist PMDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement Party). While Priante's ad aired several times a day, Mario Cardoso—the candidate from Lula's

PT—had to rely on photo-shopping the president into his posters. An embarrassing rumor circulating the city said that the PT's national commission had made Cardoso pay to use the president's image.

Across the northeast and into Belém, the candidates' talking points were virtually identical, too. They promised to clean up politics and act as agents of change; to finally address failing public hospitals, schools, and roadways; and to solve the crime wave in which nearly every Brazilian municipality thinks it's stuck. Even the candidates' campaign songs sounded the same. Not surprisingly, many were take-offs on First World imports. Each town I crossed through had at least one variation on "Reason" by James Blunt and usually a couple based on "Don't Matter," the hit tune by the Senegalese-American singer Akon that I've heard almost every

day since I arrived in Brazil in May 2007.

By mid-September, I was desperate for a break from this standardized, one-size-fits-all aesthetic. I also wanted more of an insider's perspective into the Círio de Nazaré, so I signed up to take part in the Auto do Círio. The Auto is a



Showing off a homemade costume for the Auto do Círio.



Cast members bust out during the final rehearsal for the *Auto do Círio*.

carnavalesque *cortejo* (a street procession or “cortège”) that serves as one of many profane counterpoints to the Círio. The performance, sponsored by the Arts department of the Universidade Federal do Pará (UFPA), attracts an audience of about 10,000 to the streets of Belém’s old city on the Friday night before the Círio.

I met Lucileine, an administrative assistant by day who was so concerned with her “uncivilized” home state, during our first rehearsal. She and I were in the same scene, part of a cycle of cheesy “mystery play” conflicts between God and the Devil that formed one of the centerpieces of the *Auto do Círio*. We were both assigned to play demons, but Lucileine spent most of her rehearsal time either chain-smoking on the sidelines or running amok in the playing space, upstaging the speaking actors and humping our “rivals” in the chorus of angels.

I’d realized from the beginning that putting up with a few people like Lucileine would be part of deal for the *Auto do Círio*. The *cortejo* opened itself to the public by advertising rehearsals in the local *Diário do Pará* newspaper. I was interested in this inherently democratic approach, and curious to see what happened when a diverse cast of *belemenses*—including physical education teachers, seamstresses, high school students, and a smattering of professional artists—got together to create a spectacle for their city. I’d seen different *cortejos* all over Brazil, and loved the way the

processions seemed to open up the streets, creating a more vibrant, welcoming public space.

Our first rehearsals for the *Auto do Círio* were exuberant. They were admittedly a bit unfocused, but they had me hooked. We spent most of our time doing circle dances on the Praça da Bandeira, skipping and twirling around each other as Miguel Santa Brígida—a theatre professor at UFPA, and founder of the *Auto*—coached us along through a wireless microphone. Through it all, samba music pounded from portable speakers and echoed through the streets of the downtown Campina neighborhood. It was a rush to spiral my way around an image of the Virgin with dozens of other sweaty revelers (we never made it to the promised 150 cast members, topping out at about 80), and I felt that I might be beginning to tap into some essentially local spirit at the heart of the *Auto*.

As rehearsals wore on, though, I began to wonder how far the *Auto do Círio* went in displaying or affirming local culture. By the end of the first week, we had spent all of our rehearsal time learning the lyrics and choreography for two songs from Rio de Janeiro’s prestigious samba schools. Admittedly, one of them—“No Mês de Outubro” (“In the Month of October”)—is a homage to the Círio de Nazaré, but in style and execution it’s purely *carioca*. Rio’s Estácio de Sá samba school premiered the song as the theme for their Carnival parade in 1975, and *paraenses* quickly fell in love

with it. In Pará and throughout Brazil, there's often an automatic affirmation of any aspect of local culture recognized by a wealthier, supposedly more sophisticated society, such as Europe, the United States, or in this case, Rio de Janeiro (see RS-11). The Unidos do Viradouro school revived the song for their Carnival procession in 2004, and the national broadcast ensured it another wave of enthusiasm in Belém.

I recognized quickly, too, that the Auto's democratic experiment wouldn't be an especially transcendent experience. The free-form nature of our rehearsals meant that, after about 5 minutes of circle dancing, we always wound up adhering to mob logic. Regardless of our individual training, gracefulness, or sense of direction, whoever tugged the most adamantly wound up determining our course. If the dancer on my left pulled me hard enough, for example, I usually had no choice but to pull the dancer on my right along with me, even if Miguel was calling for us to double back.

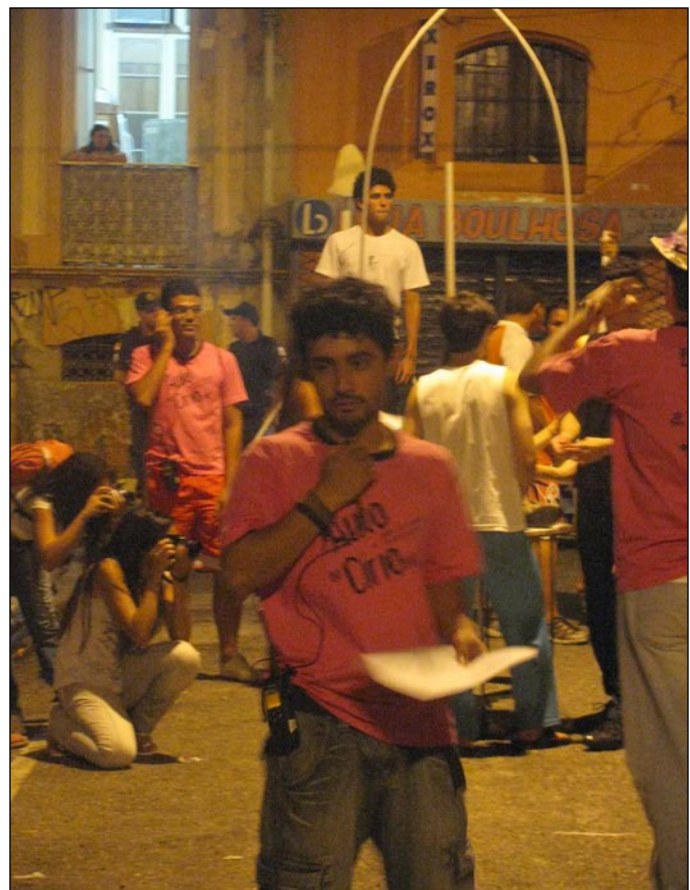
Local elections wore on throughout our rehearsal process, and Belém's mayoral candidates were full of talk about fighting the kind of chaos and disorder that reigned in the news and in the Auto's early rehearsals. Most were eager to present themselves as strongmen (or women), reassuring voters that, after the election, they'd clamp down on the city's problems. Their commercials focused on a paternalistic government that would "take care of Belém" and fight the bad guys responsible for the city's ever-accelerating crime wave. (Depending on whom I asked, I learned that the rise in urban violence was the fault of migrants from Pará's interior and Brazil's northeast; Venezuelan and Colombian drug runners; or current city council employees). José Priante, the PMDB candidate who drew Lula's videotaped support, ran a commercial featuring a percussion-heavy "funk" tune—a style associated with raunchy, violent lyrics and with Rio de Janeiro's drug gangs—that showed cops in action, frisking and handcuffing suspected criminals or just beating the crap out of them.

I'd watch election commercials over lunch every afternoon, but the macho know-it-all seemed most pervasive during nightly rehearsals for the Auto do Círio. After our first sloppy but free-spirited sessions, the director's assistants descended on our circle-dancing, unsmilingly barking out orders and occasionally shoving us into position when our choreography went out of step. Things got worse when we began rehearsing our "mystery play" scenes during the second week. My group's director was somehow able to micromanage without ever making a concrete decision, interrupting the scene with shouting every couple of seconds to correct the speaking actors' lines, or to tell the rest of us exactly how we ought to writhe. I resisted the urge to talk back, but I started showing up at rehearsals late, or leaving after our warm-ups. I had to be careful with my attendance, though, since in the true spirit of Brazilian bureaucracy, one of the assistants took a roll call every night. I began to suspect, in spite of what my dictionary told me, that "director" and "dictator" probably shared the same Latin root.

As our performance neared after three weeks of disorder-

ganized rehearsals, the Auto do Círio's production team got especially uptight, though no more competent. At the beginning of our final run-through, Miguel ordered all of us to kneel on the ground to begin the Auto. It was 8 pm, but the pavement was still hot from a sunny *belemense* afternoon. Since many of us were bare-kneed, the asphalt was punishing. We waited for our sound cue for about five minutes, but there was apparently a problem with the speakers. Still, whenever any of us began to fidget, the omnipresent director's assistants moved in, more than ready to make us suffer for their art. I held my position in the silence, but as soon as I pulled my camera out of my waist pack to document the action, there were two assistants on top of me. "Let's take this seriously, please," one of them growled.

I fell in love with *cortejo* processions during my first visit to Brazil in 2002. The street spectacles I watched then suggested a jubilant, democratic creativity, a spontaneous popular presence in the streets. I was much less starry-eyed when I joined the Auto do Círio six years later. I understood that a mass of revelers from divergent backgrounds would need some pretty exact direction in order to come up with anything worth watching. Still, I'd expected the process to be a lot more enjoyable. Even if participants weren't collaborating on the choreography or decision-making, I'd assumed that we'd have some degree of creative freedom. At the very least, I'd imagined that the production team would have a sense of humor. I have a reasonably high pain threshold, so our extended period of kneeling on the old



Self-importance and bright pink shirts: assistant directing the Auto do Círio.



My hastily assembled outfit—as a doll made of local miriti wood, complete with miriti toy snake—in the Auto do Círio.

city's asphalt wasn't too much of a physical strain. If Miguel had explained why we were doing it, or if his assistants had shown a little bit of patience, it probably wouldn't have been more than a minor annoyance. Instead, it came as the final absolute order in a series of senseless demands.

My first exposure to Brazilian politics mirrored my early *cortejo* experiences. 2002 marked Lula's fourth presidential campaign, when after 13 years of tough defeats, he finally prevailed. The outpouring of support for the former union organizer left a strong impression on me, and was one reason I kept coming back to the Brazil. Lula captured the public imagination that year. Brazilians' frustrations with crime, inequality, and unresponsive government seemed to peak in 2002, but their hopes for the change that Lula represented overwhelmed their disappointment. In official rallies, like the one I attended at Rio de Janeiro's downtown Cinelândia square, tens of thousands of Brazilians from different backgrounds turned out to greet Lula with an enthusiasm usually reserved for sports or entertainment icons. I wandered into more than a few spontaneous street processions that year. At least they looked spontaneous as far as I could tell. It seemed to me that anyone carrying a PT flag on a crowded street could start off an impassioned, informal *cortejo* of her own without too much effort. This year in Belém, friends pointed to the 2002 elections as the only time they'd been excited to go to the polls. Even the ones who had been too young to vote at the time had gotten into the act, volunteering to hand out campaign literature

or wave flags on the downtown Praça da República. (Since these tasks are almost always paid, volunteering is an especially strong show of support).

This year, I didn't see any political rallies that captured the same spirit of Lula's 2002 campaign. In the Círio de Nazaré's Sunday procession, though, I saw a public manifestation that highlighted the same sort of enthusiasm, albeit with different ends. It would be easy to critique the two million pilgrims who take to the streets in homage to the Virgin as falling under the influence of the "opiate of the masses." That plays a part in the Círio, but it doesn't fully explain the procession. The promise payers honoring the Queen of the Amazon are also showing reverence for Belém, celebrating the city's heritage and showing their faith in its future. Even the small number of pilgrims who follow the Círio's course on their knees, taking on tremendous physical suffering to show their thanks, are part of what the early French anthropologist Emile Durkheim called a "collective effervescence," a public euphoria that sets a mass ritual apart from everyday concerns. Participation in the Círio's celebration is also by no means limited to religious Catholics. My friend Arthur Leonardo, a professor at UFPA and *pai-de-santo* (Candomblé priest), unleashed a visual intervention during the procession with a pyrotechnic display of plumes of violet smoke to contrast with the devotee's white clothes.

I was surprised to find that a 308-year-old procession reflected the ideals of a newly open and democratic Brazil



Sacred and profane mingle in Arthur Leonardo's Círio intervention.

much more powerfully than either municipal elections or a popular street *cortejo*. The Belém's sense of tradition and independence seems to adapt easily to include all interested participants. What I'd imagined as a potentially staid or touristy mass spectacle was the most potent example of the "country of all" that Lula's government constantly invokes ("Brasil: A Country of All" is the federal government's slogan). During the Círio, Belém's streets felt not only more vibrant, but also more open—and safer—than I've seen them at any other time.

Yet the Círio remains an exception, a sharp contrast to the quotidian violence of life in Belém. In the week leading up to the procession, I got a much more alarming picture of the possibilities of the kind of mob rule that the city's candidates were trying to prevent. I was walking to a favorite lunch spot on Avenida Presidente Vargas, the main street in Belém's downtown (named after the Brazilian dictator-turned-president known as "the Father of the Poor"). At the street's intersection with Rua Ó de Almeida, a short man in a ponytail and yellow t-shirt dodged two stocky men and raced past me. As he sprinted into the street, someone yelled, "Catch the thief!" It was early afternoon and the sidewalk was crowded, but virtually everyone seemed to react automatically, pouring into the street to grab the suspected criminal. Someone threw him to the pavement and dozens of people descended on him, punching, kicking, and shouting obscenities. From the sidewalk, onlookers watched approvingly. "You have to

kill 'em," I heard a fat balding guy say.

A police car was waiting at the next intersection, and it turned onto Presidente Vargas, lights flashing, to disperse the mob.

"You have to kill 'em," agreed a woman standing in the shade of a newspaper kiosk. "He's lucky the police showed up."

"If you don't kill him, he'll just get released and go back to robbing as soon as he's out," said the fat guy. "The only good thief is a dead thief."

The cops didn't seem to be in any hurry as they calmly pulled the mob apart. By the time they'd cleared the vigilantes away, the street was too crowded for me to see whether the limp body they finally loaded into the back of their car had already become a "good thief."

Faced with the frightening prospect of mob justice, I understood more clearly the desire—in the Auto do Círio or in the ballot box—for paternalistic, all-controlling governance. On the other hand, no one else on the street seemed to be especially concerned by the near lynching. It's hard for me to distinguish between the uncontrolled fury of the crowd on Presidente Vargas, and snapshots of the cops' supposedly controlled and rational violence in José Priante's funk commercial. Mulling over the two forms of violence, I get stuck in a "chicken or egg?" scenario, wondering if the strongmen's uniformed mobs created the seething masses, or vice versa. □

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young women and men to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4303) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4545 42nd Street NW, Suite 311, Washington, D.C. 20016. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers on our web site.

CONTACT:

Phone: (202) 364-4068
Fax: (202) 364-0498
E-mail: icwa@icwa.org
Website: www.icwa.org

STAFF:

Executive Director:
Steven Butler

Program Assistant/
Publications Manager:
Ellen Kozak

Administrative Assistant/
Bookkeeper: Meera Shah

©2009 Institute of Current World Affairs, The Crane-Rogers Foundation