

# From the President

by **Lynn Stephen** | University of Oregon | [stephenl@uoregon.edu](mailto:stephenl@uoregon.edu)

In our forthcoming LASA congress in Boston we invoke the message of “Nuestra América” to promote a hemispheric vision of justice and inclusion. As our call states, “we want our 2019 congress to be seen, and function as, a bridge to LASA 2020 in Mexico, thus symbolizing the unity and mutual dependence between the different parts of our America.” We expect up to 6,400 participants to gather together in 1,486 scheduled sessions, 47 meetings, and at least four receptions, not to mention our opening ceremony and Gran Baile. The graph below charts participation from the 15 countries with the highest numbers of attendees, but the most important statistic is that LASA 2019 is the hub for people from 52 different countries. We are building an arc of justice and inclusion in Boston. And it is a critical message at this time.

LASA has recently issued two important statements about academic freedom and human rights that deeply concern our members.

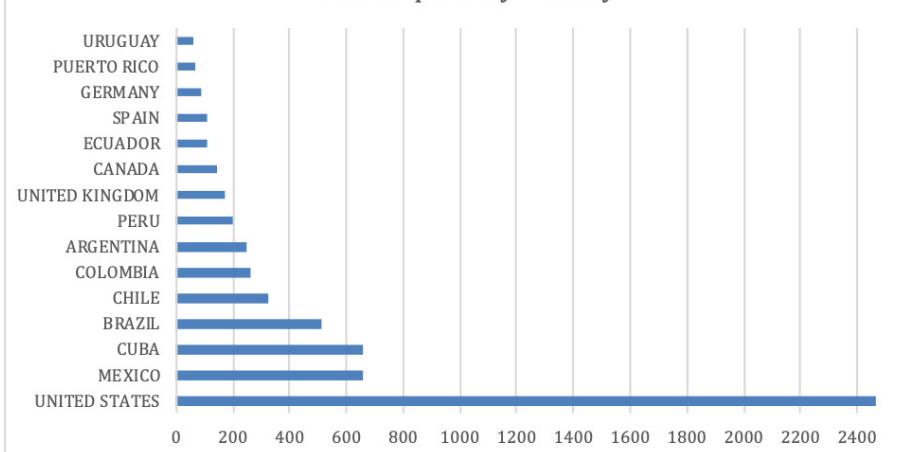
First, since the Brazilian elections, repeated episodes of armed police entering university campuses and threats to professors accused of making political statements in the classroom

violate even the most minimal notion of academic freedom and university autonomy. Since the election there have been signs of increased interference by the so-called Escola sem Partido, a movement that defines appropriate education in a way that both contradicts all scholarly norms and leaves virtually every instructor vulnerable to charges of “indoctrination.” Government officials exhorting students to report on teachers who violate some imagined standard of apolitical instruction threatens to suppress the kinds of groundbreaking research and challenging ideas that have made the Brazilian academy a global site for scholarly innovation. (See “Mounting Threats to Academic Freedom in Brazil,” January 8, 2019; text available in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and French.)

Second, in Colombia, a pacific student movement seeking adequate resources to fund higher education, prevent privatization, and preserve public access to a university education has been met with increasing repression. Students have been injured and continue to be threatened. (See “LASA Expresses Its Concern over State’s Repression of the Colombian Student Movement,” January 8, 2019; text available in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and French.)



# Participants by Country



## A Personal Message: On Borders, Connections, and Caravans

I want to use the rest of this column to reflect on my own experience this fall living in San Diego, very close to the US-Mexico border, while in residence at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies at the University of California, San Diego. During the past months there has been much publicity about the caravan of Central Americans that departed from Honduras in October 2018. I have learned a great many lessons from watching the caravan move through Mexico, settle in the border area, and disperse in different ways through the months of December and January. Many of these lessons have come from the many Mexicans and others who have offered ongoing food, clothing, shelter, medical services, basic necessities, and emotional support and encouragement to those in the caravan. The great diversity of people in the caravan from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, and their reasons for leaving everything behind and risking it all to travel through Mexico to the northern border with the US, also bring important insights.

On November 22 the Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana (COLEF) conducted a survey of 1,037 people housed in the Benito Juárez Sports Arena, a government sports complex in Tijuana. They

found that 76.9 percent of the participants were men and 23.2 percent were women. More than half of those who were surveyed were young men between 18 and 19 years of age; 81.7 percent were from Honduras, 6.8 percent were from El Salvador, and 9.9 percent were from Guatemala; 1.7 percent were from a range of other countries. Not included in the survey, but a part of the caravan included LGBTQI members who arrived at the beginning of November seeking protection and safety (see “La caravana de migrantes centroamericanos en Tijuana 2018: Diagnóstico y propuestas de acción 2018,” El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, December 13, 2018). The numbers of people who initially arrived in Tijuana was likely about 5,500–6,000. Many of these people, including families with children, were crammed into the Benito Juárez Sports Arena for two to three weeks. Because of difficult conditions inside the sports complex after rain and extremely cramped quarters out in the open, officials closed the initial shelter and encouraged people to move to a new site 11 miles away. This new shelter offers some areas with walls and a roof and better conditions. It is known as El Barrital, a former entertainment complex.

As we finish this issue of the LASA Forum, El Barrital is also slated to close down soon. As of January 15, 2019, about 700 people remained in the shelter,



Caravan members line up for afternoon lunch outside of El Barrital shelter in Tijuana, Mexico.



Young Guatemalan caravan participant helping to create a mural.

primarily families with children hoping to seek asylum. Many of these are determined to remain near the border as they wait for their names and number to be called from a list that is controlled by participants from the caravan. Only about 40 to 50 people are called per day, at this time. This process is known as “metering,” whereby only a limited number of people are permitted into the US by U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents who check all crossers’ documents. (For more details, see the report “Asylum Process and Waitlists at the U.S.-Mexico Border,” published by the Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law at University of Texas Austin.)

According to the Mexican government, of the original 6,000 people in the caravan, about 1,300 people have returned to their countries of origin and about 2,900 have received humanitarian visas, which permit them to remain in Mexico and work. Others have left on their own to try their luck at crossing the border elsewhere. (See Maya Averbuch and Patrick McDonnell, “New Caravan Heading to U.S.,” *San Diego Union Tribune*, January 16, 2019.)

I had a chance to spend part of an afternoon in El Barrital in early December. Access is wide open, and when we arrived there was a lot of activity. About 20 young men and women were creating a large mural with flowers, trees, animals, and messages from them to the world. Another group was gathered to sing karaoke. Several impromptu

soccer games were taking place, and there was a line for an open-air barber who was giving haircuts. There were tents everywhere, and in different areas toward the back showers were being built. Two long rows of porta-potties, one for men and one for women, lined a back wall. Farther back, a large indoor space housed families with children. Tents were pitched inside, mattresses laid out on the floor, strollers were scattered, and some children were playing in infant swings, with dolls, and racing around the large space. A long, closed hall was full of single young men who had arranged their sleeping mats, bedding, and shoes on the concrete floor one next to the other.

Meals were being served to people on paper plates. The plates had rice and noodles on them; some people had soup. I chatted with a Honduran family consisting of two sisters and their children sitting on stumps and low rocks just outside the entrance of the shelter. They told me that conditions have improved for them since leaving the other shelter and they were happy to be dry and fed. They had put their names on a list to be called to the San Ysidro port of entry to receive a credible fear interview with an asylum officer in the hopes of being let into the US. They hinted at neighborhood violence, sexual violence, and very difficult conditions behind their decision to flee and bring their small children in the caravan.



Honduran family eating lunch together inside the shelter.



Mother and daughter outside their tent watching a nearby soccer game.



I spoke with José Luis (a pseudonym), from the Petén region of Guatemala, who was working with others to color in a beautiful design that was part of a large mural on a plastic banner. I lay on my stomach as we chatted and he drew. In front of me I read the words, “Feliz Navidad Donald Trump, te desean los de la caravana de inmigrantes.” Another part of the mural said, “Déjenos entrar.” Luis explained to me that he was an orphan. His parents died when he was 6 years old. After they died, he was placed in an orphanage and grew up there until age 18. He is currently 19. He spent a lot of time looking for work and sometimes found work as a carpenter, able to use the skills he was trained with. But more often than not, he could not work and was constantly pressured by gangs to join and engage in criminal activities. “Thanks to God I was able to survive and resist that, but I am here looking to be safe and find an opportunity.” Luis has applied to work in Tijuana and was waiting to receive his papers and permit. He planned to work in the area and hoped to be able to move into his own room after he had earned some money.

Alfredo (a pseudonym), from Santa Bárbara, Honduras, joined the caravan after he heard about it on TV. He shared with me, “They said that the caravan was coming here and I decided to come with it.” Alfredo is 24 years old and was working in Honduras at a maquiladora that made electrical harnesses (networks of wires) for cars. His biggest worry, however, was his safety and the presence



Impromptu soccer game inside the shelter.

of gangs. He also expressed anger and frustration with the political situation in Honduras and the repression of the opposition.

In November 2017, after elections, vote counting was interrupted. Before the interruption, Juan Orlando Hernández was losing. Twenty-four hours later, the results shifted and he was declared the winner. Thousands took to the streets to protest and a military curfew was imposed. At least 30 people died in initial demonstrations and more people were killed, wounded, arrested, and detained in subsequent demonstrations. While the US recognized Hernández as the winner, the Organization of American States called for a new election. Nevertheless, Hernández was sworn into office for a second term in January 2018.

When I asked him why he joined the caravan, Alfredo replied at length. I include a long piece of his testimony here as it illuminates the multiple factors that have pushed young men like Alfredo to leave behind parents, siblings, and everything, walk for weeks in very difficult conditions, and gamble on the caravan. He has a work permit and plans to begin working soon in Tijuana with the hope that after some time he may find a way to enter the US and work there as well.

*I got here through the strength of my soul. The road wasn't easy. Believe me, there were very difficult days. Through the strength that God gave to me, I was able to keep going and make it. I walked a lot.*

*I left because I couldn't find work, but also for another reason. Listen, there are a lot of gangs in Honduras where I live. If they say to you, "hey do you want to join us" and you say that you don't want to, well, you have to go join up. You are forced to. If you don't, then they kill you. And young men like me, we are at the highest risk because we are the ones they constantly try to recruit. And the police don't do anything. And one more thing. . . . Our president is really bad. He didn't win the elections. He stole the elections and committed fraud. That isn't fair. He didn't win the elections but he stayed in power. The reason is that he had the support of the military. In other words, they are his dogs, his enforcers. You can't protest anything. . . .*

*People ask me if it's dangerous here in Tijuana. I don't feel like it's very dangerous here. I am always alert and on the lookout. The truth is that I felt a lot more danger in Honduras because of the constant pressure of the gangs. It's always present there, every day. Here I don't really feel it's dangerous.*

*They say that they won't let us into the US right now. But I just want to say that I have a lot of love for Mexico now. The people have really helped us and have treated us really well. Here we haven't lacked food, clothing, or anything. They have taken really good care of us.*

Alfredo, José Luis, and the sisters with their kids from Honduras were full of hope and gratitude. Even after walking for weeks and living through very difficult days and conditions they were optimistic. Their hope was infectious as were the many demonstrations of kindness, help, assistance, and love that I witnessed that afternoon. Some in Tijuana were not so happy with the arrival of the caravan and pointed to the homeless and poor who already live in the city. But a great majority were welcoming and inclusive.

On the other side of the border, in the US, ICE is releasing women, children, and others who have applied for asylum onto the street outside the Greyhound Bus station in San Diego. Once there, they have no resources or places to stay. A local group known as the San Diego Rapid Response Team has cobbled together a temporary shelter to house people and volunteers to help them contact relatives and to buy bus tickets. The shelter has moved five times and is often full to capacity. On a daily basis, families primarily from Honduras and Guatemala are released onto the street. On one recent night, the shelter was full and young children and their parents were faced with sleeping on the street until a local church opened its doors. The Rapid Response Team is working to find a more permanent and larger shelter.

The human relations of care, love, and material and emotional assistance I have seen in the caravan and those who support it in Mexico and through organizations such as the San Diego Rapid Response Team are at the heart of our search for

justice and inclusion in Nuestra América. Please come and join us in Boston as we work together to spread this message. //