

From the President

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As a proud, lifelong New Yorker I can hardly wait to celebrate LASA's 50th Anniversary Congress in the Big Apple, now less than two months away. Like so many of us, I savor our annual events for the serendipitous and personal experiences they afford. I always benefit as much from leisurely conversations with old friends and newly met colleagues in hallways, bars, and restaurants during the meetings, and from my impromptu excursions through the streets of the host city, as I do from the lively sessions themselves. All of these experiences contribute to the special *ambiente* that makes LASA LASA. This year New York beckons with a dizzying array of opportunities: the chance to visit vital neighborhoods in several city boroughs, each with its own musical scene and ethnic cuisines; a broad spectrum of theater and performance art catering to diverse budgets; iconic historical sights and destinations; a lineup of big-time sporting events across several professional leagues; some of the world's largest and most distinctive museums, libraries, and special collections—the smorgasbord of possibilities is stunning. Early on, the Program Committee decided that it made little sense to schedule cultural activities when most of us would likely already have identified more extramural options than we could hope to satisfy—and when the formal program of “LASA at 50” was packed with more presidential panels, regular sessions, roundtables, and workshops than any Congress to date.

The theme and content of the watershed 50th is indeed ambitious and encompassing. Above all, it will offer us a unique opportunity to both celebrate and critically engage the record of our first half century of existence even as we begin to plan for the next 50 years. We will pursue

this broad agenda in the same place where we held our inaugural Congress—the great metropolis whose own growth, complexity, and rampant diversity mirror changes in the field of Latin American studies.

LASA itself has transformed dramatically. When we initially met in New York in 1966, our members barely reached triple digits, and the preponderant majority of them were male North American scholars. We now return 50 years later, an association over 12 thousand strong, nearly half of whose members reside in Latin America. Not only will “LASA at 50” be the largest Congress the association has ever sponsored, with as many as six thousand of us descending on New York City; it will also be the most international in character, with more than 60 percent of the paper presenters based outside the United States. Moreover, as befits a more diverse membership, the great majority of LASA's recent leaders have been women. Today, more than 20 percent of our members are students, giving LASA a younger constituency that requires greater and more adequate forms of representation, communication, and accommodation. LASA has just drawn up a five-year strategic plan that will address the needs of its ever-expanding and more diverse membership. Whereas LASA's founding generation committed itself, in the face of repressive dictatorships during the Cold War, to preserve and enrich social science scholarship in the hemisphere's cosmopolitan capital cities, today LASA members, through initiatives like *Otros Saberes*, also seek to strengthen intellectual collaborations and activist relationships between academic scholars and nonelite epistemic communities. In the process they are expanding an appreciation of, and dialogue among, different ways



of knowing, as well as posing novel inquiries into the process of knowledge formation itself. Some of the new trends in Latin American studies—especially poststructural preoccupations with cultural studies, subaltern studies, studies of gender and sexuality, transnationality, and the postmodern condition—have challenged members of LASA's founding generation to stretch their thematic, disciplinary, and methodological comfort zones. What remains constant, of course, is the association's abiding commitment to ecumenism: LASA continues to honor classical fields of social science scholarship as well as emerging fields of academic inquiry and social action, often more closely related to the humanities.

LASA's return to the Big Apple is particularly fortuitous, for reasons more profound than historical symmetry. Over the course of LASA's first half century, New York itself has become an important part of our field, a critical crossroads for the study of Latin America in its rich transnational and multilayered contexts. It is therefore fitting that Nuyorican salsa musician and social activist Willy Colón and New York and Puerto Rico-based Dominicana Milly Quezada (the celebrated “Queen of Merengue”) will headline the Congress's Sunday evening *Gran Baile*. It is also appropriate that two of “LASA at 50's” 39 program tracks privilege Latino/a studies, and several panels promise a continuing discussion of how specialists in that field might better communicate with those who work on what is traditionally regarded to

be Latin America. A variety of sessions will engage Latino New York, and one special symposium, “Between Neighborhoods: Outerspace Innerborough,” at the City University of New York’s Graduate Center, will link Cold War–era and present-day New York City and Latin America. That session, organized by Queens-based audiovisual historian and media artist Seth Fein, will also premiere an interdisciplinary multimedia installation that interrogates conventional notions of North-South encounters, imperial core and periphery, and spatial concepts of “interborough” and “outerborough.” Another of the Congress’s presidential sessions will feature a timely interview, six months before the U.S. presidential election, with Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas, a Cuban American who was a principal architect of the Obama administration’s DACA program. Mayorkas will be interviewed by *New York Times* national immigration correspondent Julia Preston regarding the dilemmas posed by international migration and border security and the prospects for comprehensive immigration reform.

Two other presidential sessions will feature high-profile dialogues among the leading Cuban and U.S. diplomats and policy makers behind the normalization of relations between the two nations. In addition to the diplomatic challenges the nations will continue to confront, these dialogues will engage the flow of people, goods, and ideas between the two nations as normalization proceeds. Yet another presidential session, “Latin American Transformations: Fifty Years of Change,” will bring some of the most distinguished interdisciplinary thinkers in our field, including John Coatsworth, Alejandro Portes, Maria Herminia

Tavares de Almeida, Florencia Mallon, and Steve J. Stern, to assess changes over the past 50 years. The panelists will focus on U.S. power and hegemony, migration and demographic trends, democracy and dictatorship, economic paradigms and policies, and new grassroots constituencies—and speculate on what the decades ahead will bring. A companion presidential session, on 50 years of journalistic coverage of Latin America, will include some of the hemisphere’s most renowned reporters and photojournalists, an intergenerational cohort, all of whom seek to promote a deeper exchange with academic scholars.

The 50th also takes particular pride in fostering a dialogue on the achievement of and prospects for democracy in the hemisphere between two of Latin America’s most enduring statesmen and thinkers, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Ricardo Lagos; a presidential session on political and economic development that will showcase Costa Rican president Luis Guillermo Solís; and a blue-ribbon panel that will commemorate the late Guillermo O’Donnell’s classic work on democratic transitions. Finally, from the cultural studies/performance side of LASA’s constituency, the 50th Congress will feature a presidential session sponsored by Otros Saberes and dedicated to the role of hip-hop artists and activists in diverse political, social, ethnic, gender, sexual, and linguistic movements of the global South (which also includes the immigrant imaginaries in the global North).

The Congress that awaits us is ambitious and rich enough to require the addition of an extra day. LASA2016 will showcase the association’s new directions and constituencies, even as it celebrates the

efforts of its founders and mainstays during its first half century. It will represent the culmination of 12 months of frenzied but purposeful activity that have included a major 50th anniversary fund-raising drive that will yield hundreds of thousands of dollars to LASA’s Endowment to support Latin America–based research and international travel. I hope you will join me in celebrating our 50th birthday and planning for the next half century! ■