

## From the LASA2016 Congress Program Co-Chairs

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Planning for “LASA at 50” began in the middle of 2014, gaining intensity around November 2014 and moving into full steam in 2015, and it continued until just last week. With this last communication to the LASA membership, we are officially signing off as program co-chairs. We wish to thank everyone who added their time, creativity, knowledge, and intellectual energy to make this Congress happen. It was the largest in the association’s history. The number of registrants, numbering over 6,400, broke LASA’s previous record, set in 2009 in Rio de Janeiro.

For at least the past decade, LASA, because of its truly international character and unusually large membership, has had to work hard to strike a delicate balance to make the conference a productive, pleasant, and inspiring experience for attendees.

Increasing the number of accepted sessions and therefore the size of the Congress risks making it overly large and overly long; keeping the size smaller necessitates rejecting more proposals from members. This year, at a planning meeting that took place at LASA headquarters in Pittsburgh in October 2015, we decided to extend the conference from the usual three to four days to accommodate more acceptances. Even after adding an additional day and squeezing in additional panels wherever possible, the rejection rate of proposed sessions was one of the highest in LASA’s history.

Track chairs are at the heart of this difficult decision-making process, and it is their expertise and labor that made the conference a success. We were endlessly honored and amazed that 79 scholars, all authorities in their respective fields and busy professionals, agreed to serve as track chairs. They were the ones who truly shaped the conference program by

reading and evaluating all submissions in their track and taking the initiative to organize special featured sessions of their own. It would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of their intellectual (and administrative) labor, as well as their valuable feedback on the process of putting the conference together. While track chairs are appointed by the program co-chairs to work on one particular conference, the elected leaders of the LASA sections also play a fundamental role in LASA. Such a vast and ecumenical association would not be able to meet the needs of its many constituencies were it not for the work of the sections, which are organized either thematically or geographically and provide important continuity from year to year. Track chairs and section chairs were able to work together to organize sessions of mutual interest with great results.

This year, in addition to the usual attrition that occurs at all conferences, the rapid onset of the economic crisis in Brazil and the almost complete cutoff of funding for conference travel for university faculty there contributed to some last-minute changes in the program. We understand that in much of the region, and indeed much of the world, funded travel to attend academic conferences is scarce or nonexistent, particularly for graduate students and junior scholars. LASA was able to offer 403 travel grants to Latin America–based scholars, students, untenured professors, and scholars from around the world. Due to Gil Joseph’s unprecedented fund-raising efforts, we expect that LASA will be able to expand the number of travel grants offered to Latin America–based participants in future congresses.

We were especially gratified that the Congress was able to react to emergent situations in Latin America and to open

up space in the program to accommodate sessions that were organized in the preceding weeks in response to these situations. In particular, LASA attendees could participate in discussions held at two notable presidential panels. In one, “Mexico after Ayotzinapa: A Conversation with the International Investigatory Panel,” a group of human rights experts, including three members of the international investigatory panel appointed by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, discussed the disappearance and cover-up perpetrated against young students and their families in Ayotzinapa, Mexico. The other panel, “Dialogue on the Current Crisis in Brazil / Diálogo sobre a atual crise no Brasil,” probed from several different disciplinary perspectives the causes behind and the political, social, economic, and culture contexts of the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff.

The LASA conference has also deepened its contemporary relevance by encouraging critical reflection on the very concept of area studies; indeed, the 50th anniversary of the association provided a perfect setting to initiate challenging but productive conversations about the area studies paradigm and its meanings in today’s radically realigned academic landscape and through the lens of our contemporary sensibilities as Latin Americanists. LASA2016 featured a track called “Area Studies: Critical and Historical Analysis,” led by the track co-chairs Greg Grandin and Christy Thornton, dedicated to this intellectual endeavor. In addition, special initiatives, such as a LASA workshop titled “Chinese Diaspora in the Americas: Tracing Transnational Communities, Enterprises, and Trajectories” held at the City University of New York, Queens College campus on the eve of the Congress, pursued this conversation in the most Asian and the most Latin American part

of New York City. Continuing this rich and important line of inquiry, the next conference in Lima will likewise feature a track called “Interrogating Latin American Studies.” Each of the three track chairs work across traditional geographic areas: Verónica Kim is a specialist in the intersection of Latin American and Asian Studies, Roberto Domínguez works across Latin America and Europe, and Gustavo Ribeiro is a Brazil-based anthropologist chosen for his critical reflection on northern-based area studies.

We took very seriously the need to have a program that reflects profound changes in the field of Latin American studies. Accordingly, we created new tracks that attracted high-quality presentations and provided a space for graduate students to become directly involved in the organization of the Congress. Social and Digital Media and South-South/Transregional Interactions are two examples of these new tracks. We look forward to seeing how these conversations develop, as future congresses continue to embrace new trends in our field and open up spaces for cutting-edge research.

The composition of the LASA2016 Congress also marked one of the especially positive developments in recent years. The large presence of colleagues from Latin America contributed to shape a conference characterized by many perspectives and infused the atmosphere of the meeting with a sense of urgency and controversy directly linked to events taking place in Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela, and other countries in the region. It is also important to mention the strong presence of colleagues from Europe and the increasing participation of scholars from Asia.

For most LASA members, the only direct contact that we have with the association

concerns the annual congresses. Is it possible that LASA might help support scholarly research, collaboration, pedagogy, social justice work, and critical thinking about Latin America not just at the conferences but also between them? How might we continue the debates and conversations begun at the Congress in the days, weeks, and months to follow? This is something that both the Secretariat and the elected leadership of LASA surely will be thinking about, particularly in light of the possibilities that digital and social media offer for creating and nourishing long-distance communication networks.

In closing, we would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to and admiration for Gil Joseph, the outgoing LASA president. We witnessed his tireless labor to make LASA, both the conference and the association, the strong, relevant, and distinguished organization that it is, even while still working full-time as a dedicated history professor and mentor and fulfilling other professional duties. We were endlessly amazed by his strong vision for the “LASA at 50” Congress, his intellectual energy, his commitment to fairness and inclusiveness, as well as his kindness, patience, and diplomatic skill. We also would like to acknowledge the hard work of Milagros Pereyra-Rojas, the association’s executive director, and Pilar Rodríguez Blanco, the congress coordinator and operations manager, as well as their support staff at the University of Pittsburgh, who make both the congress and the very association itself possible.

We offer our warmest wishes to the new president, Joanne Rappaport, and the two LASA2017 program co-chairs, Juliet Hooker and Mauricio Archila Neira, as they lead LASA into its second half century.

