

President's Report to SLAS Virtual AGM, 15 April 2021

Thank you for taking the time to read this report to the virtual SLAS AGM. The AGM marks an important opportunity for the Society's officers and the *BLAR* editors to provide an account of our activities over the last 12 months, as well as a forum for any questions arising from those activities. Pre-circulating this report ensures that it reaches all SLAS members and members have the opportunity to respond with comments or questions either during the virtual AGM or via email (my email is at the end of this report).

This time last year we were just starting to understand how different 2020 was going to be for all of us. The SLAS2020 organisers, based at CEDLA, University of Amsterdam, took the difficult (but we now know inevitable) decision to cancel the face-to-face conference. The subsequent weeks involved converting the conference into the first SLAS virtual conference and ensuring that all registered participants had their registration fee fully refunded. When SLAS works with academic colleagues to host our annual conference, we do so on the understanding that SLAS underwrites the conference, paying any losses but also earning any profits. In 2020, SLAS covered the costs associated with cancelling the Amsterdam conference. While it was disappointing for all of us to cancel that event, which we were so looking forward to, I'm proud of the SLAS committee and the CEDLA conference organisers for all their work to deal with the consequences of cancellation, as well as creating an innovative virtual conference at such short notice. The committee remains profoundly grateful to our colleagues at CEDLA for all their work putting together an excellent programme, dealing with a conference that promised to be larger than any of us had anticipated and then dealing with the consequences of cancelling that same conference. Our sincere thanks to Barbara Hogenboom, Christien Klaufus, Fábio de Castro, Gaya Nikolsky and Julienne Weegels for their terrific efforts last year.

After some reflection, discussions with the CEDLA SLAS2020 organisers and the other institutions scheduled to host future SLAS conferences, we decided to plan the SLAS2021 conference as a fully virtual event. Our decision reflected not only the (we now see justified) concern about what travel would be possible in 2021 but also SLAS's commitment to reducing our carbon footprint. Thus, the committee took the pandemic as an opportunity to re-think how we can meet as a scholarly community, looking for ways that are both better for the environment and more inclusive.

The annual conference is always the high point in SLAS's calendar, as it offers both exciting intellectual nourishment and a chance for the SLAS community to come together. We hope that the virtual conference in 2021 will be no different and have planned new formats and new types of engagements. We have 34 panels, 2 workshop discussions, 7 roundtables, 3 'meet the author' events and two virtual exhibitions planned over 5 days. We are also opening some of our panels to the general public for free, seeking to make the conference more widely accessible. As part of our commitment to being inclusive, we have also priced our conference fees at reasonable levels and did our best to plan events to accommodate

different time zones. We are delighted with the interest that SLAS2021 has gained; we will be hosting events which come from a wide range of academic disciplines and methodologies, covering topics from the past to the present. We are also creating opportunities to have discussions which include practitioners, artists, authors and community activists.

The conference working group wanted to find a way to make the event more than a series of Zoom meetings and we are excited to inaugurate the SLAS Gather Virtual Conference Centre, which allows mixing, mingling and meeting in a purpose-built 2D space. This virtual meeting space will be available for future SLAS events and will help us continue to develop innovative, inclusive and exciting virtual events and collaborations. My thanks to the conference working group, Marieke Riethof, Thea Pitman, Paul Merchant, Eamon McCarthy and Jannine Poletti-Hughes for all of their work these past months – especially considering that quick need to create a SLAS2021 virtual conference working group. My thanks to Nicola Pearce and her colleagues at the University of Aberdeen CPD office for their tireless work supporting the conference. Additionally, we have worked with Alexa Morris and Mike Parket of Association Management Solutions in the design of the fabulous Gather Space. Our thanks go to them, as well.

No doubt all of you will have used the SLAS website (<https://www.slas.org.uk>) in the run-up to the conference, with its rotating multi-lingual ‘welcomes’ on the homepage. If there is a language spoken in Latin America that you would like to see reflected on the welcome page (and for which you can provide a translation), please contact Thea Pitman (T.Pitman@leeds.ac.uk). You’ll get credit for helping us! Equally, if you’re interested in contributing a blog piece to the website, please get in touch with Eamon McCarthy (Eamon.Mccarthy@glasgow.ac.uk).

The SLAS Twitter account, launched in March 2018, now has 7,610 followers. For comparison, LASA, with its 13,000 members has 18,400 followers; we are punching well above our weight! This platform has been highly successful in raising the Society’s profile and reach, as well as ensuring a steady flow of information to the broad Latin Americanist community. With so many restrictions on movement globally, the SLAS Twitter account has also been valuable as a way to communicate news in a timely manner and advertise virtual events. Both the website and @SLASLatAm remain a collaborative effort; Christy Palmer researches and writes many of the tweets, while remaining our webmistress, with Marieke Riethof, Eamon McCarthy and Thea Pitman all contributing tweets and website updates. Thank you to everyone involved.

You will all be aware of the very productive relationship that SLAS enjoys with Wiley, who publish *BLAR* and manage our memberships. As the Treasurer’s report shows, this relationship with Wiley is of fundamental significance to the Society’s financial wellbeing. We look forward to continuing that relationship in the years ahead. Despite the uncertainties in aspects of academic publishing, SLAS continues to be in a healthy financial position, thanks to *BLAR* and our relationship with Wiley. Lizzie Brophy, who was our contact at Wiley, has been promoted and is thus losing her everyday involvement with *BLAR*. Our congratulations and thanks to Lizzie. We look forward to working with our new Associate

Journals Publishing Manager, Sarah Ritchie. This is a chance, too, to thank Jasmine Gideon for her sterling work as *BLAR* coordinating editor, to the indefatigable Ken Lestrangle and to the rest of the *BLAR* editorial team. I want to commend the *BLAR* editors for simply keeping going in such challenging times and express my admiration that not only did the editorial team keep going but they put together, at speed, a special issue on the impacts of COVID-19 which came out in December 2020. Jasmine Gideon will be stepping down after 10 years of commendable work as *BLAR* editor, within that period also working as the coordinating editor and sitting on the SLAS committee. The entire SLAS committee thanks her for her contribution and we look forward to working with her successor, Ann Varley, who we have no doubt will be excellent in the role.

The Treasurer's report will provide the financial details for the past year but suffice to say that SLAS remains in a good financial position. The conference cancellation, while impacting on our finances, was balanced by the fact that some of our expenditure went down. Years of careful stewardship of SLAS resources by our long-time treasurer John Fisher and judicious decisions by previous SLAS committees mean that the organisation was in a strong position to cope with the financial repercussions of the conference cancellation. The committee also worked quickly to adapt our existing funding streams to the current restrictions, allowing extensions of spending deadlines and adapting what types of support can be sought. We also introduced emergency funding for PG students and postdocs whose income had been reduced by the pandemic. Our thanks go to the Royal Historical Society who shared their hardship fund guidelines and application materials, making it easier to create a SLAS scheme at short notice.

SLAS is rightly proud of its association with PILAS, our post-graduate wing, which we support in financial and logistical terms. At the same time, the President of PILAS is a full member of the SLAS committee and it's been great to have Armandina Maldonado Deller, representing the PILAS 2021 committee, with us through this year (and the previous one) to ensure that the perspectives of our post-graduate community inform our decisions. We were delighted that the PILAS committee agreed to stay on for this year under the challenging circumstances of 2020. The PILAS virtual conference, 'I, We, They, the Other: Deconstructing Identity in Latin America' 1- 2 July 2021 remains open for paper and panel submissions until 19 April. Further information is available via: <https://pilasconference19.wordpress.com/>.

As President of SLAS I have represented the organisation in the context of national organisations and associations, notably the UK Conference of Area Studies Associations, University Council of Modern Languages, the Arts and Humanities Alliance and the Alliance of Modern Languages, Area Studies and Linguistics Subject Associations UK. The Covid crisis has brought out myriad challenges and changes to higher education and PG study in the UK, which SLAS has responded to, in collaboration with the umbrella associations just mentioned and often working in concert with Prof. Claire Taylor, outgoing president of the Association of Hispanists of Great Britain and Ireland. I am especially grateful to her. Among the issues to which SLAS has contributed are successfully calling for the postponement of the REF, calling for new funding approaches in higher education (see

<https://newdealforhighered.org/>), lobbying UKRI regarding funded extensions for funded PhD students reliant on fieldwork and lobbying to maintain access to the Erasmus + scheme. SLAS also joined those rallying, in the UK and internationally, to stop the proposed closure of the Institution of Latin American Studies, at the University of London, and the whole committee was disappointed with the outcome. We particularly thank Eve Hayes de Kalaf for her work on this issue. Most recently, SLAS has been working with colleagues and sibling organisations to protest the devastating cuts to ODA funding, which have serious consequences for institutional and community partners in Latin America, as well as the UK's higher education research sector and the UK government's reputation. My thanks to Thea Pitman for leading on this lobbying effort. Additionally, SLAS's more routine work has continued, for example responding to requests for nominations to REF panels. As vice-president of SLAS, Thea Pitman has also stood in for past president David Wood, organising the Standing Conference for Centres of Latin American Studies which had an extraordinary meeting in the early months of the pandemic, seeking to understand the challenges and issues faced across Latin American Studies in the UK. The committee's thanks go to her for taking on that important role.

You may have seen consultations over the past year about the SLAS climate action plan, which has largely been due to the hard work of Paul Merchant, to whom our thanks are owed. The plan notes that 'As the representative organisation of one of the UK's most globally engaged disciplines, SLAS aspires to lead the way in articulating and embodying the changes that can be made. And indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic has been a game-changer in forcing us all to use more digital tools to meet and travel less, if at all. We need to learn from what has been achieved during the pandemic in terms of lessening of greenhouse-gas emissions and continue to use those new methods of working in the future'. The climate action plan includes numerous steps which SLAS, as a learned society, can take to reduce our carbon footprint. At SLAS2021, Paul will be leading a public roundtable discussion on climate action in Latin American Studies. Please do attend to share your concerns and ideas.

As this report testifies, the SLAS committee has been busy in the last year. But this report also demonstrates how SLAS can and does work for the field in the UK, lobbying and taking actions on issues which matter to our members. This is my second, and last, report as SLAS President. I want to pay tribute to all my colleagues on the committee, whose commitment over the last year has ensured the smooth running of the Society and its activities, despite the challenges of new working routines and new domestic demands. I particularly want to thank fellow officers Eamon McCarthy, John Fisher and Thea Pitman, who have been so supportive, especially this past year. David Wood, current past president, will be stepping down from the SLAS committee after 15 years. We will miss him on the committee and thank him heartily for his work and contribution over this time period. We look forward to Rebecca Ogden joining the committee as an ordinary member. Congratulations to her. Congratulations, as well, to Marieke Riethof, on her election as SLAS vice-president and to Thea Pitman, incoming SLAS president. I know that the committee will be in good hands under their leadership. And many thanks, as well, to Tony Kaptcia for his continued work as the Society's auditor.

Thank you all for reading this report. I look forward to seeing you at our AGM. Until then, I wish you, your families and your wider communities all the best in what remains a challenging, but perhaps more hopeful, time.

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