

## Biography and Vision Statement

LASA Executive Council Elections, 2024

Paul A. Schroeder Rodríguez

R. John Cooper '64 Presidential Teaching Professor of Spanish

Amherst College, Massachusetts

<https://www.amherst.edu/people/facstaff/pschroeder>

I am honored to have been nominated to the LASA Executive Council. If elected, I will contribute my perspective as a humanities scholar and teacher who is deeply committed to structured dialogue, in particular circle practice, as a proven method of democratic governance.

I grew up in a middle-class San Juan neighborhood. Like many such neighborhoods in Puerto Rico, it has lost many of its trees to hurricanes over the past decade, and few neighbors are planting new trees because there's not enough money to deal with the yearly maintenance of torn branches and fallen trunks. My current research, even though it focuses on film, has helped me to better understand this problem and its possible solutions. The research centers on how Indigenous communities throughout Abyayala use community-based cinema as part of a broader non-violent strategy to recover, defend, and revitalize their languages, cultures, and territories. Two philosophical concepts are central to this cinema's ongoing evolution: ubuntu (Nguni for 'I am because we are') and suma qamaña (Aymara for convivial coexistence). As we consider ways to better prepare ourselves and our students to address the growing climate crisis and the ongoing threats to democratic principles

and practices, these ancestral philosophies provide a clear path away from continued destruction and towards a more convivial coexistence within our own communities, with other human and nonhuman communities, and with our Mother Earth.

The concepts used to refer to the praxis of convivial coexistence are as varied as the Indigenous and Afrodescendant cultures in Abiyala, and are in constant evolution. Take for example the evolution of the role of director in the Andes. About two decades ago, a number of film directors in Bolivia began to refer to themselves as the person who is "responsible" for the film project, *el/la responsable* in Spanish, instead of director.<sup>1</sup> I find this to be a perfect metaphor of how to decolonize one's work with others. As teachers, for example, we can act like a director, imposing our own epistemology and methods; or we could be the class *responsable*, the person responsible for making sure that the class is student-centered and that the learning environment is respectful, safe, and joyful. I recently made the switch from director to *responsable* in my classes. For many years I acted like a director, heavy on lectures and focused on final projects. Most of my students did well under this system, but the physical and social isolation forced on everyone during the COVID pandemic called for a radically different approach. Like many other teachers, I reflected critically on my teaching and concluded that the director method was no longer working for my students, or myself. How could I engage

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Reynaldo Yujra [*responsable*], *Qati qati* (Whispers of Death, 1999; Bolivia: CEFREC-CAIB.)

students so that they would be more present and concentrated in the classroom, even excited to come to class?

About a year and a half into the pandemic, I received an invitation to attend a three-day workshop with Hands Across the Hills, a grassroots peacebuilding organization near my home campus.<sup>2</sup> Renowned peacebuilder Paula Green led the workshop, titled *Dialogue Across Divides*. This is where I learned circle practice, an ancestral dialogical method that promotes deep listening and purposeful dialogue, and that is practiced in culturally distinct ways by Indigenous peoples throughout the world. The following semester I experimented with the method in one of my classes, and today I use circle practice in every class. The most visible benefit of circle practice is that students quickly establish a sense of community where everyone feels safe to speak from their hearts. Mary Davenport has written an excellent resource titled "Using Circle Practice in the Classroom."<sup>3</sup> It's a great starting point, along with an in-person or virtual workshop.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Home," Hands Across the Hills, accessed August 5, 2024, <https://www.handsacrossthehills.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Davenport, "Using Circle Practice in the Classroom" Edutopia.org, accessed August 4, 2024, <https://www.edutopia.org/article/using-circle-practice-classroom/>.

<sup>4</sup> The literature on Indigenous pedagogies is extensive. A good starting point is Pete Shauheen, "The Circle As Pedagogy: Creating Authentic Elder/Youth Engagement. A Literature Review," Centres of Excellence for Children's Well-Being, Fall 2024, [https://archives.studentscommission.ca/pdf/CircleAP\\_FINAL.pdf](https://archives.studentscommission.ca/pdf/CircleAP_FINAL.pdf).

Circle practice is also at the heart of a project where a group of students, a staff member, and I are collaborating with the Latin American Council of Indigenous Peoples' Film and Communication (Coordinadora Latindoamericana de Cine y Comunicación de Pueblos Indígenas y Originarios, CLACPI) to create a digital map that will plot CLACPI member organizations and highlight films selected by the communities themselves. The CLACPI map was first conceived during a seminar in Spring 2022, out of a desire to better visualize the landscape of community-based cinemas in Abyayala, and it will soon be available on the revamped CLACPI website, [clacpi.org](http://clacpi.org). As in community-based cinema, the process for creating the map—collaborative and decolonial—has been informed and guided by the ideals of ubuntu and suma qamaña.

My own upbringing and value system, the part not associated with colonialism, aligns closely with the value systems of ubuntu and suma qamaña. If elected to the LASA Executive Council, I will bring the decolonial praxis of these value systems to our meetings, and in general work to normalize decolonial perspectives and approaches to our conversations and decision-making processes.