



PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

9th IASA World Congress

Alcalá de Henares, July 8–10 2019

Dear Colleagues,

As president of the International American Studies Association, it is my great honor to extend the warmest of welcomes to all the participants who have traveled from near and afar to join us in what promises to be an exceptional conference at a unique venue. I want to begin by thanking Jose Antonio Gurpegui and the outstanding team at the Benjamin Franklin Institute (Julio Cañero, Cristina Crespo, Laura Rey, Ana Lariño, Francisco Sáez, Esperanza Cerdá) for the time and the care they have so generously invested to ensure that our conference is a complete success. I extend our heartfelt gratitude to the University of Alcalá for opening its venerable gates to the IASA community so magnanimously. The massive walls of these ancient university buildings will keep at bay the merciless heat of the Manchegan summer and the hustle and bustle of the world outside, so that we may pursue our scholarly endeavors in the quietude of its halls and the coolness of its secluded patios. The hall where we now stand, the Paraninfo (Paranymph), the University of Alcalá reserves for the most solemn acts and ceremonies, and it is in this room where, on the 23rd of April of every year, the Cervantes Award, the so-called Nobel prize of Hispanic letters, is presented by the king of Spain to the recipient nominated by the Society of Royal Academies of the Spanish Language.

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In his acceptance speech for the 1977 Cervantes award, Cuban musicologist and writer Alejo Carpentier conjured up quite festively the birth and subsequent baptism of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. The news of such a momentous event summoned a motley crowd to the very honorable and noble city of Alcalá de Henares, the Strafford-Up-on-Avon of Spain, and on an autumnal Sunday of the Year of the Lord of 1547, these unlikely and colorful guests gathered together to welcome the newborn:

The true celebration, the big party, must have taken place on a Sunday in October of that same year, on occasion of the baptismal ceremony of Cervantes, inasmuch as, seen through the eyes of the contemporary writer, it was a feast that brought together innumerable literary characters [...] so many and so renowned, in fact, that even Cide Hamete Benengelli the historian, had he been present, would have struggled to keep count of the revelers. For me and for all the novelists writing in Spanish, there is little doubt that among those in attendance were Flaubert's Emma, Proust's Albertine, Pirandello's Ersilia, and Joyce's Molly and Leopold Bloom, along with their friend Stephen Dedalus, traveling from Dublin exclusively for the occasion, Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin, Galdos' Nazarín, that kindhearted thaumaturgist, and even one Gregory Samsa, of the Kafka family, the same Samsa who had woken up one morning metamorphosed into a beetle, all of them rightful members of that future Brotherhood of the Imaginary Dimension, founded by the newborn Cervantes upon his arrival in this world. (Carpentier 57)¹

Such a merry revelry as Alejo Carpentier envisioned took place in this hallowed hall that today hosts our inaugural ceremony and is reenacted every April on occasion of the Cervantes award. We IASA fellows, I have no doubt, have been summoned to Alcalá and its university to partake in the endless Cervantinian revelry, for IASA is indeed gallantly Quixotic in its scope and purpose. Our mission, as inscribed in our charter, is "to further the international exchange of ideas and information among scholars from all nations and various disciplines who study and teach America regionally, hemispherically, nationally, and transnationally." After the fight with the lion is brought to an unusually happy resolution, Don Quixote reflects on the mandate the knight-errant must fulfill in order to prove his real mettle, as he had just done with the ferocious (but tame) lion:

1. Translated by Manuel Broncano Rodríguez.

Let the knight errant search all the corners of the world; let him enter into the most intricate labyrinths; attempt the impossible at each step he takes; resist in empty wastelands the burning rays of the sun in summer, and in winter the harsh rigors of freezing winds; let him not be dismayed by lions, or frightened by monsters, or terrified by dragons; searching for these and attacking those and vanquishing them all are his principal and true endeavors. (Cervantes 566)²

While we at IASA do not usually have to put up with the inclemency of the weather (beyond the scorching heat of Laredo or Alcalá), nor do we find monsters or dragons in our path, like the knights-errant of old, our association is committed to exploring the corners of the earth, and to penetrate the most intricate labyrinths (usually of a bureaucratic and financial nature) in order to pursue and achieve what others have deemed an impossible dream.

In ancient Greece, to inaugurate originally meant to invite the augurs or soothsayers to vaticinate whether the time would be propitious for the opening of a new temple, and later, to seek the auspices of the gods for the activities or professions that a new building would house inside. Paranymp, on the other hand, is a Greek term formed by the prefix *para* (beside, next to), and the noun *nymphē* (a newly-wed wife), and referred to the bridegroom's best man (or the bride's maid), and eventually it acquired the meaning of spokesman. In some medieval universities, the paranymp would advertise the new courses outside the classrooms as a recruiting tool. In time, the paranymp became the speaker who, at the beginning of the academic year, admonished students to develop and practice the habit of study, the antecedent of our inaugural lectures. Dutch universities preserve to this day the figure of the academic paranymp, who escorts a PhD candidate during the "viva" or public defense of his/her dissertation. While the role of the paranymp is now purely ceremonial, for centuries they served as the candidate's protectors, intervening on his behalf if the committee was being unfair or physically abusive. Whether a best man or bridesmaid, a spokesman for courses and their instructors, an advocate for doctoral candidates, or a keynote speaker opening the new

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2. Translated by Edith Grossman.

academic year, a paranymp plays a capital role as the mentor who guides the student through his/her university years. That is why the university hall came to be known as the Paranymp. And thus, acting as paranymp, and in this most gorgeous Paranymp of Alcalá, I hereby declare officially open the 9th World Congress of the International American Studies Association, and invoke the gods, most especially Athena and Apollo, to be most auspicious to our conference.

Two years ago we convened for our 8th World Congress in Laredo, Texas, a city on the riverbanks of the Río Grande, the (un)natural border that separates Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, its twin city on the Mexican side. The 8th congress was a momentous occasion for our association. On the one hand, because 2017 marked the 18th anniversary of the foundation of IASA, and the association became officially of age, which we celebrated with all the fanfare that such birthday demanded. We held our farewell banquet at restaurant overlooking the Río Grande, with Mexico just a few yards across the river, so narrow at that point that a few strokes would have sufficed to swim to the Mexican side. The restaurant provided a most symbolic location for IASA, and an ideal venue for the birthday party. The repast concluded, everyone joined the dancing and the singing, “happy birthday dear IASA” included, in what has by now become a tradition for IASA conferences. In this respect, I am pretty sure our local hosts will honor tradition and deliver well beyond expectations, so that the Alcalá congress raises the standard even higher for these celebratory farewells.

It is not casual that Laredo was the first IASA world congress in the United States. At 18, our association had already reached a solid status as a truly international and independent association that was both global and hemispheric in its approach to the study of the Americas. The time was ripe to travel to US soil, a trip that the IASA governance had postponed sine die, lest the young association be coopted by the large and powerful organizations that dominated the field of American Studies. In Laredo I dedicated part of my presidential address to the history of our association. In a somewhat metaphorical language, I traced the long pilgrimage of the IASA, our surrogate Mayflower, from the time our

vessel was launched into the waters of the Leiden harbor for its maiden voyage to its layover in the waters of the Río Grande, before crossing the Atlantic once more bound to Alcalá and this 9th congress. The IASA vessel had been designed in Bellagio, Italy, by a select group of scholars of different nationalities, invited by Prof. Djelal Kadir, who would eventually become the founding president of the International American Studies Association. The resulting blueprint, that is, the IASA charter, was delivered to the University of Leiden, which built and put the craft to the test of the first IASA World Congress. The vessel proved sound, despite some cracks and maladjustments, and has been ploughing the oceans of the world ever since. In his voyage, the IASA has so far visited three American, three European, and two Asian ports, and Asia will be IASA's next destination for the 2021 World Congress. Hopefully, Africa and Australasia will soon join in the rotation. No other association in the broad field of American Studies has ever accomplished such a feat, and I doubt any other will ever come this far.

This 9th world congress will occupy a very special place in the annals of our association, for it closes a historical phase and inaugurates a new and equally promising one. IASA came officially into existence when the foundational charter was registered under Dutch Law in the Chamber of Commerce of the city of Leiden. And I want to recognize at this time those twenty two scholars who gathered around a table and, after a long and at times heated debate, on the 1st of June of the year 2000 undersigned the foundational document that, some twenty years later, has made this reunion in Alcalá possible. I quote from minutes for that meeting:

Convened by Professor Djelal Kadir (Penn State University, USA) at the Rockefeller Foundation's Conference and Study Center, in Bellagio, Italy, were participants from twelve countries and members of eleven national and multinational American Studies Associations. Those present were: Greg C. Cuthbertson (South Africa), Philip Davies (United Kingdom), Theo D'Haen (Netherlands), Emory Elliott (USA), Winfried Fluck (Germany), Michael Frisch (USA), Cristina Giorcelli (Italy), Ramón Gutiérrez (USA), Heinz Ickstadt (Germany), Josef Jarab (Czech Republic), Mary Kelley (USA), Rob Kroes (Netherlands), Maureen Montgomery (New Zealand), Carla Mulford (USA), Gönül Pultar (Turkey), Hiroko Sato (Japan), Neusa da Silva Matte (Brazil), Werner Sollors (Germany), Tao Jie (China), Sonia Torres (Brazil), and Lois Parkinson Zamora (USA).

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These are our Founding Mothers and Fathers, and to all of them I convey our gratitude and our recognition today, when I am about to become myself part of IASA history, for this is my last institutional act as president. Even though the information about all this is readily available on our webpage, I would not want to leave office without paying due homage to those individuals who had the foresight and courage to address the overwhelming demand coming from all corners of the world to open up the geographical and intellectual boundaries of our field, and thus overcome the atavistic localism or, if you allow me to so say, the “provincialism” that had plagued American Studies since its inception. This, along with its subaltern role to various agendas, national and international, political and otherwise, had been deterrents that the new times could not tolerate anymore. Needless to say, and yet important to say once again, Dejal Kadir deserves a place of honor in our past as much as in our present, for Djelal was, and is, the animus and the anima of IASA. And to Djelal and Juanita Kadir I want to dedicate words of affection and encouragement at this time of tribulation: Juanita, Djelal, each and every one of us in the IASA family feels your presence with us today and want you to know that we are all with you, despite the physical distance between Alcalá and Seattle. Coraggio, partigianos!

The fact that IASA is registered in the Chamber of Commerce of Leiden is indeed symbolic, for it endows our association with some of the archetypal dimension of the Pilgrim Fathers and their departure to the New World to fulfill their utopic dream. However, this registration has been the cause of a chronic headache for the IASA governance. On the one hand, the Leiden Chamber charges a yearly fee to keep the inscription active, and while the amount was not significant, processing the payments on a timely basis became an almost impossible task. On the other hand, our foundational charter is registered in the Dutch language, and only in Dutch, as the law of the land requires in Holland. Despite our best efforts, past and present IASA officers have been unable to locate a single copy of the original document as it was registered in Leiden. Comical and irrelevant as the whole affair may sound, its implications are however quite serious, for they may endanger the legal status of IASA as an officially recogni-

zed nonprofit academic organization. All these circumstances led the IASA Executive Council some years ago to explore what the best course of action to solve this quandary could be, and subsequently agreed to take the necessary steps to inscribe ex novo IASA in the Registry of Associations of the kingdom of Spain, as was announced in our last general assembly in Laredo. In light of all this, I am quite sure you will understand the great relief I feel by announcing that, barely a week ago, it came to our knowledge the confirmation, even if still unofficial pending a last signature, that our application has been approved and IASA will find its way into the Registry, thus recovering its full legal status. Please join me in a round of applause to recognize the invaluable assistance of our local hosts at the Franklin Institute to make this possible, despite the many bureaucratic hurdles they had to overcome along the way.

And so, here we are, two years later, picking up once again the scholarly conversation that began almost two decades ago in Leiden, and has not come to a halt ever since, both through our conferences and our journal, the *Review of International American Studies*, which is by now a well-established publication that meets the demanding criteria of the most important scholarly indexes, enjoying the recognition and visibility it certainly deserves. *RIAS* is on its way to be the journal of reference in the field of International American Studies, thanks to the efforts of a number of our colleagues who never gave up on the project, despite the many, and at times, seemingly unsurmountable obstacles. *RIAS* current editor-in-chief and past IASA president, our dear friend and colleague Giorgio Mariani, will offer an update on the state of affairs of the journal. I will just state, loud and clear, my sincere gratitude as an IASA member who sees an old dream come true, and as the president of our association, I will add the institutional recognition of our indebtedness to each and every individual who at one time or another have dedicated their time and their work to *RIAS*. To all of them, *gracias, gracias, gracias!*

The International American Studies Association is in a perpetual state of crisis. And yet, far from being a negative factor, I am convinced that it is *precisely* because of it that our association is well and thriving today. IASA was conceived at a time of crisis

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in the field of American Studies, a crisis that in fact had been brewing for a long time. And IASA was literally born through a crisis, after a tense standstill in the negotiations among those founding parents who had gathered in Bellagio to give shape to the future association. Those negotiations reflected the broader climate in our field at the turn of the 21st century. I cannot bear first-hand testimony of the Bellagio meeting, since I was not present, and therefore my understanding of things is necessarily partial, for the only evidence I have are the bits and pieces of information I could collect from several of those who were present. I think it is accurate to say that the discussion in Bellagio was between the “traditionalists” and the “dissenters”, the “institutionalists” and the “freelancers”, if you allow me to use such picturesque epithets to refer to the two main sides involved in the talks. The crux of the dispute was whether American Studies as an academic discipline was, had been, and should be, limited to the study of the United States, as the “traditionalists” defended, or whether the discipline should, or could, be inclusive of all matters American in a hemispheric sense, as the “dissenters” vindicated. The debate over the discipline involved another, more subtle debate as to whether the new association was legitimated to include the term “American Studies” in its name, or should rather seek an appellative that clearly distinguished it from the various American Studies associations already in place. Most especially, the American Studies Association (ASA) and its counterpart, the European Association of American Studies (EAAS), both professional organizations with a long history behind and a large constituency. Both associations were quite sensitive to the idea of establishing a new organization of worldwide reach that would encompass all extant organizations in the field of American Studies. On the one hand, ASA had already assumed, quite explicitly, the critical importance of opening up the field to international scholars and perspectives, and had taken its first, even if timid, steps in that direction. EAAS, on the other hand, was already an international (or continental) organization, for it integrated, and still does, all national associations in Europe under its umbrella. However, novelty always brings some concern, and more so in a field like ours, in which academic and political interests have

always been intertwined. Both ASA and EAAS were ready to open up the field to international scholars and scholarship, but they were not so willing to reconsider the field itself, and much less to engage in candid and constructive dialogue with what by then was a growing trend among scholars who sought to restore the original meaning of the terms America and American, beyond their restrictive usage as a synonym for the United States.

We should not forget that American Studies as a discipline and a field of research was to a great extent the result of geopolitical strategies in the aftermath of WWII and the ensuing Cold War, when the United States implemented programs to promote American Studies, first in Europe, and eventually across the world, that resulted in the creation of several centers in Germany, such as the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies in Berlin in 1963, and others across the country, which were followed in time by other centers and university departments in various European and non-European nations. The Fulbright program, on the other hand, proposed by Senator J. William Fulbright in 1945 and signed by President Truman in 1946, was meant to promote peace and mutual understanding through international exchange between the US and other nations, and soon became an impressive exchange program that is still in existence. In the mid-1980s I was one of the beneficiaries of the program, in what has been by far the most decisive event in my career, through a Fulbright fellowship that made my dream come true, for it gave me the opportunity to join the American Studies Department at Rutgers University and concentrate solely on my dissertation for a whole year, while serving as a teaching assistant for several courses taught by the department. Like Robert Frost in "The Road Not Taken," I can also say that made all the difference. And I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the Fulbright Commission in Spain, and to the Fulbright program at large, for their generous and life-changing support.

While the Fulbright program is, and was, open to all disciplines and fields of knowledge, the role it played in the promotion and consolidation of American Studies was capital. The Fulbright ultimately depends on the United States Department of State, commonly known as the State Department, equivalent to the Minis-

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try of Foreign Affairs in most countries. The State Department oversees the US embassies and diplomatic missions, including the different services that embassies typically house, from intelligence to cultural affairs. I do not intend to offer here a crash course on US diplomacy, but simply to point out the convergence of academic and cultural pursuits with the geopolitical strategies and interests of the United States that resulted in the worldwide promotion of American Studies as a distinct discipline, while simultaneously the new academic field proved a very effective instrument to disseminate American values and policies in a world still bleeding through the open wounds of the Second World War, especially in those nations who had suffered defeat, like Germany or Japan.

In retrospect, I cannot but wonder at the fact that IASA did actually come into existence, considering how much was at stake in Bellagio. I leave for later historians the task of finding out the precise circumstances that led to the crisis of that impasse in the foundational meeting, resulting in the redaction and signature of the foundational charter of the association. And so, IASA was born. From a crisis, through a crisis, and, I am afraid, in crisis, as it became evident, at least to me, at the time of the first world congress in Leiden. The conference was the debut of the new association and had attracted a large number of Americanists of various nationalities, with many of the leading scholars from both sides of the Atlantic in attendance. The occasion was the address that the founding president pronounced before an expectant audience, eager to learn what the masterplan for the new association would be. The presidential address was titled “Defending America of its Devotees,” and it was responded by Amy Kaplan, the then president of the American Studies Association, with the paper titled “The tenacious grasp of American Exceptionalism.” The talks are published in essay form and readily available, and I invite you to read both, since they lie at the beginning of our history as an academic organization.³ I simply want to recall here, in case that future IASA historian finds it of use one day, the reaction to the presidential address that I could perceive among some colleagues, as they

3. See: Kadir 135–152 and Kaplan 153–159.

were expressed in the more distended atmosphere of a pub where many of us sought to quench our thirst after the session. I will spare the names of those present in the conversation, for in truth what is relevant is the what, rather than the who. While some colleagues were quite positive in their reception of the president's speech, some others were rather skeptical of what they took as the president's hidden agenda to coop the field of American Studies and redesign its parameters and its priorities. Those sharing this view saw in the presidential address the uncontested proof of what they had suspected ever since they first heard the news of the IASA project, namely, that the field of American Studies was under attack by a group of outsiders from less relevant and reputable fields like comparative and world literature, and even Latin-American studies, who sought to delineate a whole new academic order by transgressing the well-established boundaries among neighboring disciplines.

While I recall these events now, almost two decades later, I realize their true import as they clearly reveal that IASA was generally received with suspicion, if not open hostility, by existing American Studies organizations, an attitude that I am afraid largely continues today. I think back in those days we Americanists lost, all of us, a unique opportunity to overcome barriers and create new synergies among complementary, rather than competing, academic perspectives and geographies. And I will always regret our collective failure at articulating shared goals and cultivating fruitful understanding through conversation among the different sensibilities and approaches. As a result of the Leiden congress, a conference which was truly successful in terms of attendance and academic quality, IASA was declared, even if unofficially, *persona non grata*, or if you want, heretical in its unorthodoxy. The end result was institutional invisibility in the United States and Europe, while at the same IASA was becoming quite visible and was warmly welcome in regions of the world traditionally relegated to a marginal position in the field. And now, in my last institutional act as your president, I want to verbalize my hope to see one day in the not distant future this lost opportunity reversed as the field of American Studies becomes an open house offering common shelter to all scholars and academics who

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pursue the understanding of America in every sense of the term, and there are many senses to it, and all equally valid and valuable. I have been honored by the privilege of serving IASA under various capacities for almost two decades, from the time I was appointed as its treasurer at the Leiden conference until today. In closing my address, I will just add that these years as an officer have been most rewarding in every sense, and today I renew my commitment to IASA and its mission, as necessary now as it was at the time of its birth. This is a very especial day for me, a reminder of my increasing age, tinged with nostalgia and filled with warm memories, but above all, a day of gratitude and a day of hope. My best wishes to our new board of officers for the road ahead, and to you all, dear colleagues. Enjoy the conference, enjoy the city of Alcalá, and if possible, renew once again your commitment to this wonderful enterprise that binds us together.

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