



PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

for IASA 8th World Congress

Laredo TX, 12–21 July 2017

My dear colleagues,

Today is a very important day in my life, and certainly the most significant moment in the thirty years that I have dedicated to the study and the teaching of the literature of the United States and of the Americas at large. Today I am doubly honored by a rare coincidence that is a first in the history of IASA, since I appear before you wearing two hats. One is the hat of the president of the International American Studies Association, a hat that was passed on to me two years ago in Seoul by our former president and dear friend Giorgio Mariani, after wearing it for four hectic but highly productive years. The hat is well-worn and has been honorably carried by some of the best minds in our field of enquiry, most of whom happen to be here with us today, demonstrating their continued commitment to our association—as if any such demonstration were necessary. The hat was designed and made in the best Italian fashion, and acquired in June 2000 at one of the finest stores in Bellagio, northern Italy, after a long and at times heated debate among a select group of scholars from various countries across the world, who had a hard time reaching a consensus about the shape and the materials of the symbolic chapeau. The hat was first worn by Djelal Kadir, the “founding father” who envisioned what is IASA today back in the 1990s, if not earlier, and invested the best of himself until his long-cherished dream became a tangible reality. Djelal’s vision

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is now inscribed in our charter, declaring our mission and vocation: “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 trans-nationally.” Paul Giles and Jane Desmond followed suit at the helm of the Association and have both kept our boat on course, despite contrary winds and stormy waters we encountered along the route.

Without Paul, and Jane, and Giorgio, I have little doubt that our boat would have foundered a long time ago, even perhaps in that ominous maiden voyage that set sail from Leiden in 2003, like a modern-day *Mayflower* bound for the Americas (and here I use a poetic license, for in truth it was the unseaworthy *Speedwell* that took the Pilgrim Fathers from Holland to England). Our boat was at the time but a humble vessel whose seaworthiness had not been tested yet, a boat equipped with rigging and sails not much stouter than those of the *Mayflower*, and a truly worrisome scarcity of provisions. Yet the IASA boat was manned by a superb crew of well-seasoned mariners who were fearless in their mission. The appearance of this peculiar vessel in the waters of an ocean dominated by the mighty fleet of national and continental associations was perceived by some as a true act of piracy, an act of flagrant defiance to the status quo enjoyed by academic societies whose territorial and even ideological dominion had gone unchallenged for decades. The IASA set sail with the white flag permanently displayed atop the main mast, a manifest emblem of its amicable and well-meaning mission. However, a number of scholars in the field of American Studies insisted, and in some cases still insist, on despoiling instead of the white flag a black banner inscribed with the skull and crossed bones proper of buccaneers. Our boat took to sea with the explicit mission of exploring global waters that remained largely uncharted, and we have circumnavigated the globe twice already in the course of that exploration.

From Leiden, we sailed to Canada to convene in Ottawa in 2005, in what was our second world congress, “America’s Worlds and the World’s America. Our dear Patrick Imbert and his outstanding team put together an exemplary congress that proved beyond doubt the soundness and potential of our common endeavor. Patrick’s scholarly stature and professional savvy

secured academic rigor in the papers presented as well as generous financial support through various grants and donations, which resulted in a number of outstanding publications. Equally important, I should say crucial, was the fact that once the final accounting was completed, Patrick managed to transfer to IASA an impressive amount of funds. So impressive, in fact, that they guaranteed the continuity of our association for quite a few years. Thus, the fragile vessel that arrived in Ottawa left the Canadian shores much better equipped and provisioned for the arduous voyage ahead. On behalf of the International American Studies Association, I extend our heartfelt gratitude to Patrick Imbert, who happens to be with us here today, for his unwavering and continued commitment to IASA.

I cannot revisit in detail, for obvious reasons, the subsequent layovers in the course of our navigation: From Ottawa to Lisbon, from Lisbon to Beijing, from Beijing to Rio de Janeiro, from Rio to Szczecin in Poland, from Szczecin to Seoul, and from Seoul to the banks of the Rio Grande/Bravo where we are convening today. Our voyage has been and continues to be a true Odyssey, even if our Ithaca is a place of the mind and our Mediterranean a textual sea that encompasses all the world's waterways and overland routes that lead to the Americas:

As you set out for Ithaca
 Hope your road is a long one,
 Full of adventure, full of discovery [. . .]

Keep Ithaca always in your mind.
 Arriving there is what you're destined for.
 But don't hurry the journey at all [. . .]
 (From Costantin Cavafy, "Ithaca")

Long as the voyage has been, it has barely started. There still is ahead of us an immense *mare ignotum* whose intellectual treasures await to be revealed. Each of our conferences has had its unique story full of anecdotes and even comic situations, and I hope that intra-history gets written some day before it is forever lost to memory. We owe it to the future generations of scholars who will eventually replace those of us convening here today, for IASA's seafaring will endure and will prevail, do not have the least doubt,

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my dear colleagues. How to forget Paul Giles and his karaoke feats, or Ana María Mauad's crash course on samba dancing during our last night in Río, while a group of elderly musicians drew from their old fashioned instruments the finest and most hectic of rhythms. And how to forget the sanitary emergency caused by the avian flu that awaited the IASA at the Beijing harbor, dictating a quarantine that forced upon the local organizers, to their great dismay, a mandatory change of venue from downtown Beijing to a conference facility miles away from the center, turning our congress into a peculiar retreat. And let me tell you how, despite the inconvenience of the relocation, the whole experience turned into a complete success, since the convivial proximity of participants and organizers allowed for an enriching academic exchange of ideas and perspectives inside and outside the conference rooms.

The International American Studies Association is, thus, alive and kicking. This year we celebrate its 17th birthday. IASA is about to become officially of age. However, the Association is still in its adolescence and, like all teenagers, suffers from occasional growing pains, especially because of the tall stature it is reaching. One additional reason for celebration is the momentous accomplishments achieved by our colleagues in the editorial board of *RIAS*, the *Review of International American Studies*, which is the official journal of IASA. On behalf of our Association, I want to express our heartfelt gratitude to those individuals who have made these achievements possible: Cyraina Johnson-Roullier for her eight years of invaluable service, first as associate editor and then as editor-in chief; Giorgio Mariani, long involved in the journal and our new editor-in-chief since January of this year; and György Tóth, associate editor since 2011. There are other names that deserve recognition, and I refer you to the *RIAS* website for a detailed history of the journal. It is our esteemed Paweł Jędrzejko, however, who deserves the warmest of accolades as well as our public recognition of IASA's profound indebtedness to him. Always working behind the scenes, and stealing long hours from his overcrowded agenda, Paweł has generously given, and continues to give, the best of himself to our journal. Ever since he picked up the gauntlet thrown down by the IASA Executive Council during a meeting at the Rothermere Institute in Oxford back

in 2004, which approved the proposal to create an academic journal for the Association, Pawel has been the heart and soul of our journal. Pawel, thank you, thank you, thank you!

During our General Assembly on Friday, Giorgio Mariani will provide more details of the current state of *RIAS*, but allow me to advance some of the feathers *RIAS* has added to its cap. The first, bringing the journal up to speed, so that there are no back issues stuck in the pipeline anymore, which had been a perpetual source of headaches for all those involved in the journal. The second has been the inclusion of *RIAS* in several academic indexes and databases whose rigorous criteria we finally meet. This inclusion provides *RIAS* with worldwide visibility as well as recognition of its quality. Scholars who in the past felt discouraged by the lack of objective evidence to demonstrate the impact of their articles, which universities and research centers increasingly demand, may now reconsider *RIAS* as their journal of choice. *RIAS* is quite unique, both in scope (since there is only one other journal dedicated to international American Studies that I am aware of), and in philosophy, for *RIAS* is the only academic journal in the field that grants full, unrestricted open access, with a print-on-demand option for a small fee, in case someone needs the physical volume. This means that IASA underwrites all the expenses involved, in the conviction that it is our duty and our mission as a worldwide association to disseminate innovative knowledge free of charge. And this commitment brings me to one of the most pressing issues imperiling the growth, even the survival, not only of *RIAS*, but of IASA itself.

As a worldwide association, IASA has suffered from an endemic malady that has proven almost impossible to eradicate, beyond some palliative treatment that has allowed us to pull through so far. With its constituency literally spread all over the world, and its itinerant vocation (or if you allow me to say, its “manifest destiny” of nomadism), our Association represents an “exceptional” case, for there is no other academic society in the field of American Studies that systematically rotates its conference venues so that we visit equally Asia, Europe, and the Americas. So far, we have been unable to secure enough support from any African country/university, and it remains as one of our major challenges to include

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Africa in the rotation. The same can be said about Australasia, even though in this case we count some members from Australia and New Zealand, including our former President Paul Giles, who is currently serving at the University of Sydney. Let's hope that in the coming years we are able to overcome this incidental blockade and encompass both regions in our navigation. As wandering scholars, we have the fortune to get first-hand exposure to the varied, and often competing, understandings of American Studies around the world, and thus expand our horizons with each new conference and each new publication stemming from them. An added and equally important benefit is the fact that by convening in such varied locations, IASA facilitates the participation in our reunions of local and regional scholars who would be unable to attend otherwise. We should be aware, however, of the fact that our inalienable mandate to academic vagrancy (and I use this term on purpose) carries along with it the inescapable reality of an unstable constituency, many individuals of which become transitory members, just for the purpose of admission to a specific IASA congress. We keep record of all present and past members, and distribute relevant information among all of them, regardless of their status. The real problem is budgetary, since we have recurrent expenses (especially relating to *RIAS* and the IASA webpage) while we can never forecast the funds that will actually be available in our coffers at any given time. We depend on those members who renew their commitment on a regular basis, and I want to acknowledge publicly their invaluable contribution to ensure the continuity of both IASA and the journal. The only other source of income is the surplus generated by our biennial congresses, and so far, each venue has contributed funds, in a varying amount, to the general IASA account. I can proudly say that no officer, past or present, has been reimbursed for any IASA or *RIAS*-related activity. This includes travel and accommodation at our conferences, as opposed to the usual practice in many academic societies in which the membership has to shoulder the expenses of their governing bodies. We can be truly proud that all members of the IASA governance have always covered their own expenses, oftentimes out of their own pockets, since

universities across the world are reducing travel grants dramatically. I think this deserves unanimous recognition from all of us.

Allow me now to change hats to address you as the chair of the local organizing committee. The fact that we are convening in Laredo, Texas, is a first for IASA, and a first of iconic significance for the history of the Association. Ever since its foundation, IASA made it its unwritten policy to postpone a conference on US soil because of the potential risk for such a young association to be coopted by any of the larger and more established associations in this country. Thus, the decision was adopted to delay such a visit until IASA had proven beyond doubt its true nature as an international and independent association that was both global and hemispheric in its approach to the study of the Americas. When the proposal for the conference that we inaugurate today was first submitted, few of us would have anticipated the geopolitical changes that were to take place in the United States in the interim between the Seoul and Laredo conventions. Before I continue any further, and on behalf of IASA, I want to extend our gratitude to Texas A&M International University for its enthusiastic and generous support to our 8th World Congress. I also want to warmly thank the City of Laredo and its Conventions & Tourist Bureau, whose logistic and financial support has been crucial for the success of our reunion. Joel Vazquez, our liaison with the Conventions & Tourist Bureau, as well as all the staff serving at the Bureau, deserve a loud round of applause for their commitment. I also want to recognize the International Bank of Commerce and its Senior Vice-President, Gabriel Castillo, for hosting the roundtable, "Living the Border," that we will celebrate on their premises this evening. And I want to express our especial thanks to all the individuals who have kindly accepted our invitation to participate in this event, which aims to explore the dynamics of daily life in our border region, beyond the stereotypes oftentimes displayed by the media: Carolina Zaragoza Flores, Consul General of Mexico in Laredo; Enrique Rivas Cuellar, President of the City of Nuevo Laredo; Nelly Vielma, councilwoman for the 5th district; Margarita Flores, IBC Vice-President for Marketing; Olivia Varela, Director of the Laredo Development Foundation; Minita Ramírez and Marissa Guerrero-Longoria,

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representing Texas A&M International University and Laredo Community College, respectively, will engage in a conversation about the uniqueness of the transnational community composed by the two Laredos. There are many other names that I should mention in our acknowledgments and I apologize for not enumerating one by one all the individuals, companies, and institutions that have made this conference possible. To all of them, I convey IASA's gratitude and recognition for their support.

We find ourselves today in the vicinity of the Rio Grande/Bravo, in many senses the epitome of the border, of the frontier, of the "limen" in its etymological sense of "threshold," "doorway," or "limit." The general theme of our reunion is "Marginalia: The Borders of the Border," and the papers we are going to listen to address this theme from multiple perspectives, which will lead to very enriching discussions about one of the most written about topics in the scholarship of the last few decades. Such topic has rekindled new interest, especially in the light of the recent political transformations in many regions of the globe, which are leading to revived feelings of essentialist nationalism and its atavistic fears of the other, call it the immigrant, the dissenter or, if you want, the barbarian. It is happening in Turkey, it is happening in Poland, it is happening in Britain, it is happening in the US. In this context, borders and walls, both physical and ideological, are being erected once again.

In an article published by *The New York Times* on November 22, 2015, Hispanic journalist Manny Fernandez brought to the attention of mainstream America one of the starkest realities of the Mexican-American border. According to Fernandez, based on data provided by the Migration Policy Institute in Washington D.C., there are about 130,000 undocumented immigrants living in just two of the four counties that the Rio Grande Valley comprises in the state of Texas. This territory represents a true "no-man's land," a space in which many lives are spent in perpetual entrapment, a twilight zone caught between two borders. One is the official that separates the United States and Mexico, and the other, the unofficial but equally effective frontier that separates from the interior of the US a stretch of land of a width that varies between 25 and 100 miles, from the banks of the Rio Grande

to the checkpoints that the Border Patrol operates in southern Texas. As Fernandez states:

Those stuck here have little choice but to stay put. They cannot go north for fear of either being caught while trying to cross the checkpoints by car or dying in the vast expanses of brush while trying to walk around them. And they will not go south for the same reasons they left Mexico in the first place.

These individuals exist in a limbo, a “jaula de oro” or “golden cage” as some refer to this twilight zone, according to Manny Fernandez, which seems quite symbolic of the thousands, if not millions, of displaced individuals forced to occupy the margins, or peripheries, of the Americas and of the world at large.

Marginalia is a Latin term that in its origins referred to the inscriptions that monks and other amanuensis made on the empty space surrounding the body of text inscribed on a parchment. Romance languages are largely the product of marginal inscriptions on Latin manuscripts. Thus, the first manifestations of the Spanish language are found in the glosses that monks scribbled on the margins of those manuscripts to clarify and comment on words whose meaning was already obscure for the medieval reader, and those annotations were made in the new romance language, which was nothing but macaronic Latin. By extension, *marginalia* refers to those writings that do not belong in the canonical body of works of a culture or civilization, and is close in meaning to apocryphal. Furthermore, it can be understood as referring to the interstices that exist between two or more cultures, nations, or religions. In our usage of the term, *marginalia* refers to those areas of the world that are populated by displaced or uprooted individuals, limbic spaces in which mere survival may become an illegal activity. In this respect, *marginalia* is a synonym for Gloria Anzaldúa’s “third country,” as she defines it in her classic work *Borderlands/La Frontera*:

The US-Mexican border es *una herida abierta* [is an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland

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is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los atravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the halfdead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal."

For Anzaldúa, the border is both a place *of* transit and a place *in* transit; the geographical, cultural, linguistic, political materialization of rootlessness; the space of displacement and impermanence; the realm of the freak and the queer, and the habitation of the grotesque. Anzaldúa's border is both the negation and the reaffirmation of nationhood. It is the dumpsite where nations deposit their human dregs, their social detritus, and the debris generated by the construction of their national master plan. Anzaldúa portrays the US-Mexico border from her personal experience as a Chicana growing up in the Texan Rio Grande Valley. Her classic *Borderlands* was published in 1987 and the vision of the border it conveys largely responds to the reality of the frontier at the time. In 2017, however, the reality of that frontier is rather different. A reality resulting, among other factors, from the events of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing Patriot Act, the increased violence generated by the drug dealing business (violence exerted by the so-called "drug cartels" as much as by the State itself), and the renewal of nationalistic and isolationist fanaticism, especially in the United States of the Trump era. As a result, the border between Mexico and the United States has lost its fluid nature and, instead, has turned into an immense prison of sorts, confining within its limits a large number of individuals subjected to a permanent social political stasis, as Manny Fernandez describes in his 2015 article.

Herman Melville, perhaps the most visionary of American writers, already prophesied the (in)human condition in our contemporary world more than a century and a half ago. Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" is significantly subtitled "A Story of Wall Street," and walls play a conspicuous role in the narrative. Furthermore, Melville's allegory, or parable, is the perfect materialization of the marginalia, or of the space assigned to outsiders who do not belong anywhere, neither within nor without the walls, and who are thus perpetually trapped in between. Bartleby is forced to dwell in a modern-day version of the Platonic cavern, a simu-

lacrum of reality in which individuals become mere metonyms of their jobs; beings who only deserve a mere nickname, Turkey, Nippers, Ginger Nut, or whose family name is replaced by his job: “scrivener.” Bartleby wastes his life away in the perpetual penumbra of the lawyer’s office, his desk by a window that looks on a brick wall three feet away. Once the scrivener decides to cease all forms of labor, he becomes an embarrassing (if not dangerous) inconvenience for the almighty lawyer who exerts his patriarchal rule over that shadowy realm of puppets and puppeteers. Declared unfit for his job and thus a misfit for society, Bartleby is banished from the world of the living and secluded literally in a tomb, as the nickname of the New York jail makes explicit. Perhaps moved by pity or perhaps by remorse, if not by morbid curiosity for the fate of the employee who dared to challenge his rule, the lawyer decides to visit Bartleby in the Tombs:

I found him there, standing all alone in the quietest of the yards, his face towards a high wall, while all around, from the narrow slits of the jail windows, I thought I saw peering out upon him the eyes of murderers and thieves.

Like a soul penancing in Purgatory, Bartleby confronts a blank wall that imprisons him in the Platonic simulacrum of the jail, a repetition of the lawyer’s office, while the eyes of the inmates watch (like us readers) such odd individual in disbelief. He is thus displaced to the marginalia of the page containing the ordinances dictated by the lawyer and his peers, a page that Bartleby refuses to copy anymore, thus his death sentence. Bartleby is like the undocumented migrant who is allowed to enter a country through the backdoor as long as he is willing to undertake a most menial job and remain socially and politically invisible forever. Devoid of rights and deprived of an identity, the migrant Bartlebies of the world are denizens of the marginalia of the page written and enforced by the State, serving a life sentence from which there is no redemption, perhaps not even in death.

In his poem “Mending Wall,” which should be one of the mandatory readings for all politicians, Robert Frost summarily declares: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall / That wants it down.” While that “something” is never made explicit in the poem,

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the attentive reader concludes that such resistance to walls stems from nature as well as from man, and to a great extent world history is an endless succession of walls that are erected and walls that are demolished. with subtle irony, Frost parodies the supposed wisdom of folk proverbs like “good fences make good neighbors,” as the owner of the land next to his stubbornly intones like a mantra. with the practical and inquisitive mind proper of a good New Englander, Frost does not fail to observe: “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out, / And to whom I was like to give offense.” Trapped in the eternal return of the same blunders, humankind erects unwanted walls, only to see them down in due time. But walls are not only made of brick, or metal, or solar panels. The thickest walls are hardly visible in plain sight, but their presence is felt as much as the walls enclosing *Bartleby*, or the buildings that have trapped the Lomans and their dream in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, which could be aptly retitled “death of a delusion”: “The way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks,” Willy Loman bemoans in an epiphanic moment that has come too late for him and his family. Like *Bartleby*, the Lomans have also become forced denizens of the marginalia, as perhaps we all are in one way or another.

All the papers and plenary lectures in the program for the congress that we now inaugurate address this “marginal” space from multiple perspectives, and I heartily hope that you, all of us, finish our conference with a treasure trove of new ideas and projects.. From border studies to hospitality studies, from research in migratory movements to research in global relations, we already have a dearth of scholarship related to our theme, and I have little doubt this reunion will produce even more innovative contributions to the field.

I will leave the floor now to Giorgio Mariani, who will announce the winner of the Emory Elliott Award for 2017. Some of you may be unfamiliar with the late Emory Elliott, and Giorgio will explain in more detail why why IASA instituted the prize some years ago, after Emory’s untimely death in 2009. Emory was one of our founding fathers and a very active member of the Association. He was also a truly generous scholar and mentor, and thanks

to his help hundreds of international scholars from all regions of the world could visit the US and thousands of students benefitted from his multiple visits to other countries. In many senses, he was the archetype of the wandering scholar that is the staple of our Association. I was honored by his friendship, like many of us here, and through him, I can assure you that I became a better professor and a more humble scholar. I want to thank Emory both personally and on behalf of IASA for having been such a unique person and scholar. In 2009 we lost the person, but his legacy will survive forever.

I welcome you all to Laredo and to TAMIU in hopes that your stay with us proves enriching and enjoyable. Many of you have traveled from abroad, from Europe, from Asia, from Central and South America, from Canada, despite the distance and despite the proverbial Laredo heat, at this time of the year called “canícula.” We will do our best to prove your journey worth the while.

Thank you!

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