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## Convergences: IASA in 2007 - president's report Lisbon, September 21, 2007

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## CONVERGENCES: IASA IN 2007—PRESIDENT'S REPORT LISBON, SEPTEMBER 21, 2007

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The first thing to report about the International Association of American Studies is that the Association has now consolidated and stabilized itself. There are nearly 300 participants here at this Congress in Lisbon, a slight increase from the numbers in Ottawa two years ago and also from Leiden two years before that. We are very grateful to João Ferreira Duarte, Elena Buescu, and the organizing committee here in Lisbon for all of their splendid efforts. IASA has also been active in producing publications, both in the two impressive volumes of conference proceedings edited by Theo d'Haen and Patrick Imbert, and in the excellence of the new online journal, the *Review of International American Studies*, or *RIAS*, edited by Michael Boyden, Paweł Jędrzejko and Cyraina Johnson-Roullier. All of those involved in these undertakings deserve our profound thanks, but the success of IASA has, I believe, derived fundamentally not just from the efforts of individuals, but from a larger sense of its being the right project for the right time. The story of its provenance is outlined on the IASA website, with the Association having been formed initially out of discussions held in Bellagio, Italy, in June 2000. I myself was not present at that meeting, but rumours about its contentious and combustible nature have been circulating ever since. The point I would make, however, is that the growth and development of IASA has been at heart not a question of personalities or professional feuds, but of what Fredric Jameson would have called historical necessity. When future chroniclers of academia look back in 50 or 60 years time, they will surely see that the shift to an international version of American Studies around the turn of the 21st century was brought about by a change in social, economic and cultural conditions that facilitated a convergence of three academic disciplines: Comparative Literature, Area Studies, and World History. Fifteen months after Bellagio, the jolt of 9/11 brought the conditions of globalization into more immediate and urgent focus, so that by the time the first world congress of IASA assembled in the Netherlands in May 2003, the intellectual landscape of American Studies had changed dramatically.

When IASA first appeared, some, particularly in the traditional American Studies community, asked where on earth it had come from. In fact, the organizational model for IASA had been drawn clearly from that of the International Comparative Litera-



ture Association, founded at Oxford in 1954, which was designed to act as an umbrella or partner for many comparative literature associations around the world; thus, on the ICLA website today, the American and the Indian and the German Association and so on are still rather patronizingly designated as 'regional associations'. The ICLA has held regular congresses every three years, starting in Venice in 1955, though these rotated on an exclusively European and North American axis—Montreal, Budapest, New York, Paris, and so on—until 1991, when the ICLA first went to Asia—to Tokyo—since when it has convened in South Africa, Hong Kong, and Rio de Janeiro. The transition here from being merely a European and American to being a global organization is significant; as Rey Chow has observed, the old version of Comparative Literature tended to privilege European languages and literatures and to marginalize the rest as a mass of undifferentiated others, but the field itself has gradually evolved from being one driven from a universal center to one more respectful of alterity. Nevertheless, the specter which still haunts Comparative Literature is that of a top-down system of philosophical idealism, within which local or regional variations are referred back to some central point of theoretical authority. We see this in Pascale Casanova's recent book *The World Republic of Letters*, with what seems to me its most peculiar assumption that Paris is what Casanova calls 'the capital of the literary world ... the chief place of consecration in the world of literature' (127). Although Casanova's theme is the way in which Paris functions institutionally as a symbolic center through which authors are 'made universal' (127), there is, as the author herself observes uneasily, something 'paradoxical' about adopting such a 'Gallocentric' position to describe how literary capital circulates (46). We also see such centripetal inclinations further back in the religious propensities of comparatists such as Northrop Frye, who sought in the 1950s to dissolve material difference into ordered mythical archetypes. Such nostalgia for universal order also manifests itself in the hub and spoke organizational model of the ICLA, which in the period after the Second World War fitted well with the scholarly impetus of Comparative Literature to assimilate itself within universalist paradigms.

This Neoplatonic idiom of essence and accident is, however, much less obviously compatible with the phenomenon of area studies, which is where IASA has sought to make its intervention. Area studies, which emerged in the geopolitical circumstances of the Cold War with the aim of fully comprehending (and therefore containing) particular, bounded areas of the world, is much less amenable to any kind of universalizing temper. In addition, since area studies had succeeded in establishing and institutionalizing itself so firmly within the academy in the second half of the 20th century, this meant that the idea of an International American Studies Association in the year 2000 was bound to be more controversial and difficult to countenance than the idea of an International Comparative Literature Association had been in 1954. Fifty years ago, the field was, comparatively speaking, a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate; but recently there have been many more entrenched professional investments to negotiate.

One of the best discussions of these issues in recent years has been Gayatri Spivak's book *Death of a Discipline*, published in 2003. Here Spivak charts the strengths and limitations of both Comparative Literature and Area Studies, and she calls for a new form of intellectual dialogue between them. In Spivak's eyes, the specificity of area studies, its close attention to foreign language and social context, might help to rein-

vigorate comparative literature, which is the dying discipline of the book's title, since in her eyes 'Comp. Lit.' is in danger of being reduced to the empty homologies of global literature or of world literature in English translation. At the same time, the systematic commitment of comparative literature to theoretical issues, to tracking undecidable meanings and irreducible rhetorical figures that confound notions of 'immediate comprehensibility by the ideological average' (71), might help to renovate what she calls 'the arrogance of Area Studies where it retains the imprints of the Cold War' (70), that in-built conservatism within the area studies community which would seek to exclude anything threatening the bounded circumference and secure platform of its own power. This idea of an interface between comparative literature and area studies seems to me a much more promising direction for IASA than the old centrist hub and spoke model. Such a direction is commensurate as well with recent developments in world history, a subject which until recently tended to be dismissed by academic historians as genteel and amateurish—recalling, for example, the attempts of Arnold Toynbee and others 100 years ago to encompass all of history within a grand narrative sweep—but which is now again becoming increasingly important, as scholars recognize the ways in which national histories necessarily intermesh and overlap, so that the description of any tightly circumscribed field risks appearing simply delusory. Thomas Bender and others have written well about the need to recontextualize American history, to position it within a wider global framework, while for example Ian Tyrrell's work on environmental history, a field that by definition crosses national boundaries, has traced the constant contacts between California and Australia in the second half of the 19th century over irrigation issues, thus raising the question of how uniquely 'Western' the California experience really was. To rotate the old maps on a transpacific axis so that the American West becomes an American east, or to re-examine slavery on a hemispheric basis by juxtaposing Mississippi with Brazil so that the Old American South becomes the new American north, would seem to me precisely the kind of provocative perspective that an International American Studies Association should be raising.

Internationalization is now of course a buzz word in many scholarly organizations, as well as in many Dean's offices on university campuses throughout the world. Within the mobility of the new global economy, international students have become a prized commodity. There are all kinds of problematic ethical and political issues associated with this kind of fluid movement across national borders, and quite how internationalization will play itself out within an academic framework will, I think, continue to be a matter for intense scholarly debate. Indeed, one of the interesting things about being involved in the administration of the last three IASA Congresses is to see the disjunction between what the organizers have conceived of as the central theme of the event and what participants have actually wanted to talk about. These disjunctions and contradictions are creative, I believe, since no Association of this kind can or should seek to be excessively prescriptive or programmatic about the nature of its agenda. The field itself is much too wide for what Haun Saussy, in his excellent essay in a recent report on the state of Comparative Literature, called 'delusional questions of identity' (22). Rather than seeking prescriptively to lay down the proper object of study, argued Saussy, we should acknowledge the pragmatic and experimental qual-



ity of our comparative critical engagements, the kinds of things we might learn that would have remained obscure to us if we had continued to regard individual objects within the conventional frame of a traditional discipline.

The crucial questions here are strewn throughout this conference: what does 'America' mean, how does the idea of a nation intersect with the idea of a continent, how can American Studies interface with globalization—or 'planetarity', as Spivak calls it (71)—how do transnational issues of ethnicity, race and gender interact with the national idea, how do controversies around the environment and global warming factor into this equation, how is history to be reconceptualized within an international framework, what is the role of language in foregrounding questions of difference? This last issue of language is, I think, a particularly thorny one: there was a very good issue of our online journal *RIAS* a few months ago devoted to the question of 'American Studies and the Dilemmas of Multilingualism', with contributions from Doris Sommer, Patrick Imbert, and others, and I want to acknowledge in passing how this is an important but complicated question which IASA will certainly have to grapple with long into the future. On one hand, of course, the idea of close reading in original languages could be said to open up the possibilities of recognizing otherness in ways that translation cannot, as Spivak among others argues; on the other hand, as David Ferris observes, there are always too many languages to learn, and a quest for pure authenticity can sometimes be intellectually counterproductive, particularly in a situation where, as David Damrosch puts it, world literature can be known intensively as well as extensively, through theoretical juxtapositions as well as ever-expanding circles. I'm more than aware of my own scholarly limitations in this regard—I can read ancient Latin and Greek, two of the very few languages which are not of much use within the world of IASA, and I have a smattering of French and German—but I always advise my graduate students these days that they will be entering an Americanist academic world where languages will be of considerably more importance than they were for my generation, and I hold up Werner Sollors's Longfellow Institute at Harvard and the Oriental School at Naples, which specializes in bringing together Eastern and Western languages, as admirable models to follow. But I don't feel it would be right that language should become a coercive instrument or political tool within IASA, or that it should put people off engaging with cultures which are not their own and of course never will be. Many of the languages within the continent of America have always functioned in a double or hybrid context, and, to take just one example that David Shields remarked on recently, examining the complex interactions between Dutch language and English writing in 17th and 18th century New York is a scholarly project that is long overdue: why is early New York culture still generally represented as monolingual, when it manifestly was not? There are, in other words, many different scholarly contexts within which multilingualism can function, and I believe it can be employed usefully as a nexus to facilitate dialogue and exchange, rather than in order to set up standards of authenticity that might be used, even if inadvertently, for intimidatory purposes. The scope of international American Studies is quite daunting enough as it is: on a lecture tour of the American Midwest a couple of years ago, I talked of Frederick Douglass's interest in the German Biblical Higher Criticism, philosophers such as Ludwig Feuerbach and David Friedrich Strauss, and was met with

an aghast response from some graduate students who seemed to have opted for American Literature as their chosen field precisely so they would not have to get entangled with all these different languages and difficult foreign stuff. But Douglass himself of course read Feuerbach and Strauss in translation, encouraged by his German-born mistress Ottilie Assing, and I don't think it helps to be too purist about our international engagements.

IASA has been a difficult organization to be president of for lots of reasons. Bringing people together from all different parts of the world, whether for actual conferences such as this one or merely telephone conference calls, is always an expensive operation, much more so than an equivalent meeting of a national committee; moreover, disparities in wealth and gross national product have made subscription levels within the Association difficult to standardize, since demands of outreach always have to be balanced against questions of financial sustainability. The Internet has helped immeasurably in all this, of course—indeed, I doubt that IASA could have been brought into existence in its current form without it—but again gross discrepancies in access to information technology always have to be taken into account in formulating IASA policy. What I feel, though, is that the inchoate administrative structure is in some ways an interesting reflection of the current inchoate state of the scholarly field of American Studies. While the first IASA Congress in Leiden unfolded in 2003 against the shadow of the invasion in Iraq, the second Congress in Ottawa in 2005 took place one week before Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, and both events might be seen in different ways as symptomatic of a disturbing lack of legibility in 21st century America, the ways in which politicians and administrators on all sides have found it hard to comprehend how America is now interwoven inextricably with a complex global environment. The disaster of Iraq bears witness to how the old Manichaeian axis of evil, which would seek to divide the world into fixed zones of good and evil, is no longer viable in an age when boundaries have become more constitutionally amorphous and when nation-states can no longer be regimented in the way they used to be fifty years ago, while Katrina brought to light a drastic failure of political intelligence as well as of planning. If for example there had been a prospect during the Cold War of a missile attack on New Orleans which would have destroyed the city's infrastructure and killed 2,000 people, I think it's safe enough to assume that the White House would have been concerned enough to take precautions against this; but faced with the less visible threat of warming sea temperatures in the Gulf of Mexico, the US government was, and continues to be, completely clueless. One of the challenges for international area studies is to trace phenomena which impact upon discrete areas without being exclusively confined to them, and this crucially differentiates the subject from the old American Studies models that grew up in the 1960s, when it appeared to be much easier to categorize what was specifically 'American'. This old-style method led, of course, to all kinds of sentimental projections about American national ideals, but it also led to successful reifications—often around romantic notions of Civil Rights, Beat writing, and so on—which made it relatively easy to draw students into an American Studies orbit, one centered almost exclusively around US interests. In today's world, however, part of the problem is that American narratives are everywhere—in the mass media, in popular culture, in strategic studies, in global finance, and so on



—so that it is naturally harder to cordon the field off and demarcate it as ‘American Studies’. Indeed, students, always cannier than we think about their future economic prospects, find it difficult to see any clear rationale for attempting to do so, and in many cases they have simply voted with their feet and left the subject behind.

Quite apart from anything else, then, there is a clear practical and pedagogical need for American Studies to evolve into an international framework, something that is related to, but not reducible to, the urgent theoretical and political business of figuring out how lines of US power and influence circulate globally. IASA can, I think, play a leading role in rising to this intellectual challenge; indeed, a lot of the hand-wringing in Europe over falling enrollments in American Studies can be attributed directly to the way the subject became institutionalized there during the years after 1945, when it was organized on a doggedly nationalistic basis, and when the European Association of American Studies was not even permitted to have a scholarly journal for fear that such a move might diminish the power and prestige of its constituent national associations. There have of course been many outstanding individual scholars within EAAS, but the organization as a whole has always been wary of transnational perspectives, so that the impulse to modernize American Studies within Europe has tended to come from other pressures of a more marginal kind: cultural studies, postcolonialism, media studies, and so on (Paul Gilroy has never been a member of the British Association for American Studies, for example.) IASA has been called a lot of things over the past few years, many of them derogatory, and in general I’ve tried to assume the persona of a soccer manager turning up his trench coat in the face of a hostile crowd and have just ignored them; but one charge that I was surprised to hear levelled against IASA by a well-known European Americanist was that it was an ‘elitist’ organization. Maybe such an idea derives again from the implicit association with Comparative Literature, a field which has frequently been charged with elitism on the grounds that you need to have fluency in at least three languages before you can begin working in it. But so far as political elitism goes, given its scarcity of resources, the absence of a national base and its consequent lack of weight within the murky power politics of academia, it would surely be hard to find a less elitist association than IASA. The Association is also deliberately anti-elitist in the way its flat membership structure makes its resources openly accessible to all via the web, including the opportunity to participate in open web forums, thereby circumventing the rigid bureaucratic structures of authority in some of the more venerable American Studies associations, which still insist on preserving for the elders the right to grant a license to speak. Nor does IASA seek a position of imperial hegemony: much as I would like to be emperor of the world, I can assure anyone who might be interested in running for IASA president sometime in the future that this position, exalted as it is, is by no means a sure gateway to global dominance. Affiliation to IASA, which is currently offered at the rate of 10% of a national association’s subscription base, was humorously described by another European Americanist a few years ago as ‘an invitation to a tithing’, as though this were an old feudal system of governance with the lord of the manor intent upon simply raking in the proceeds; but I’m glad to say that the Italian Association for American Studies has signed up for this arrangement, whereby 10%, 4 euros out of their 40 euros annual membership fee, is passed to IASA. Four euros per head per year rep-

resents a tremendous bargain for the Italian members in relation to their access to the Congress, to the online journal and so on, and it's certainly much lower than the individual subscription rates, even if 4 euros a year is not something, alas, that is likely ever to keep me comfortably furnished as lord of the manor, nor to make IASA itself rich. My purpose here is not to insist on a particular formula for how IASA should operate, but to emphasize how there are many kinds of local arrangements which could have practical benefits for all concerned, and that such agreements should be seen as mutually constructive rather than as part of some grand global conspiracy. Local interests will always have an important part to play within professional organizations, in terms of the protection of programs and so on, but, as I've suggested, the capacity to deal with these specific pressures will never amount to very much if the overall conceptual framework for the subject is defined too narrowly. In some parts of the world, American Studies has not been well represented at all through professional organizations—Africa is the obvious example of this, though there are others—and these are areas that IASA can (and should) work on in the years ahead. One of the reasons we have kept *RIAS* as an online journal is to keep down the costs of distribution and printing, to ensure that particular regions are not denied access on a cost basis, and thus, hopefully, to increase the presence of IASA as a clearing house for ideas in many different parts of the world.

Given that IASA encompasses such a broad conceptual scope, one of the fascinating things about its World Congress is the way it changes shape every time, partly on account of the theme, of course, but also because of the different location. Some conferences tend to be pretty much the same every year, and you know in advance, often with a sinking feeling, what is likely to be said there. But IASA perhaps mutates more radically than any other conference of its kind. In Leiden in 2003, the primary focus was on origins, with the contested inauguration of the Association running in historical parallel both with the exodus of the Puritans from Leiden to New England in the 17th century, and with the apocalyptic fervor of Bush's war in Iraq. In Ottawa in 2005, the emphasis was more on inter-American relations, the dialogue between francophone, Latino and English versions of a hemispheric America. Here in Lisbon the discussions have been centered around the black Atlantic, the triangle between Africa, America and the Iberian peninsula, the tensions around contact zones which the work of Mary Louise Pratt, one of our plenary speakers, has done so much to illuminate. In Beijing in 2009, the globe will rotate again, and the perspective that emerges will no doubt be different, foreshadowed here perhaps by Takayuki Tatsumi's fascinating pioneering work on Asian-American cyberpunk and the ways in which what Spivak calls 'the immensely changeful and vast scenario of the evolving Asia-Pacific' (84) is setting a radical new challenge for American Studies in the 21st century. In part, of course, these shifts in balance are impelled by a different clientele among those who attend the Congress: because of travel costs, any conference of this kind is bound to get a higher percentage of local or regional participants, and this is one reason why I think it is only equitable that IASA should be prepared to move around worldwide. But I also think such constitutional variety is good for the Association: it ensures that every conference has a slightly different feel and make up in terms of personnel, and it helps to ensure a kind of heterogeneity within an overall pattern of continuity.





The US scholar Eric Sundquist once remarked that he tended to prefer going to conferences in History, rather than in his home field of Literature, because that was where he was more likely to find out useful things that he didn't already know, and I think the formal organization of IASA, despite or perhaps because of its lack of the kind of corporate structure so beloved of some other organizations, is particularly conducive to this kind of intellectual curiosity and element of surprise. One of the things we've tried explicitly to do in the program for this Congress is to make sure the different regions of the world are not kept segregated: we didn't want just to have a Latin American session with only Latin Americanists speaking, or a transpacific session with just Asian-Americanists, and we've tried as far as possible to mix these up with perspectives from other continents. The axiom in relation to gender studies in a 1998 issue of the journal *American Literature*, 'no more separate spheres', might be redefined here as 'no more separate continents'.

No professional organization can substitute for the finished product of scholarly endeavour, nor can its logistical matrix ever do the thinking for you, but such structures can certainly facilitate that intellectual labour by opening up lines of inquiry that might otherwise have remained occluded. This, I think, that IASA, with all of its multiple dimensions and even its potential forms of incoherence, is particularly well placed to do. I have found that IASA discussions and controversies have fed productively into my own new work on the global mapping of American literature, and I'm pleased to have followed on from the pioneering work of Djelal Kadir and to have enjoyed the honor of being this new Association's second president. But, like Lyndon B. Johnson before me, I have always felt that one two-year stint as president was enough, and in LBJ's immortal words 'I will not seek, and I shall not accept, the nomination' for a second term. I am, however, delighted to pass on the baton to Jane Desmond, who has been heavily involved with the internationalization of American Studies for many years through her work with Virginia Dominguez on the International Forum for US Studies, which started life at the University of Iowa, and which has now moved along with Jane to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I know that she will do an outstanding job as the next IASA president. I shall continue to be interested and involved in the Association, and I wish it well in the years ahead.

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