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HOW FAR IS AMERICA FROM HERE?

Theo D'haen

Organizer of the 1st IASA Conference,
Universiteit Leiden, 22–24 May 2003

In the various meetings leading to the founding of the International American Studies Association it was decided that the official birth of the new association would coincide with the organization of a World Congress to be held at Leyden, the Netherlands, in 2003.

Leyden, the oldest and most famous university of the Netherlands, founded in 1575, has shown an interest in American Studies as of the emergence of the discipline in Europe right after WWII, with a Chair in American History and another in American Literature. From early on, in Leyden there has been a pronounced interest in US minority cultures, particularly African American and Jewish, as well as in the immigrant experience, particularly the Dutch experience, in the United States. It was only logical, then, that these Leyden interests found perfect expression also in the theme of IASA's First World Congress: 'How Far is America From Here?'

The aim of 'How Far is America From Here?' was to approach American nations and cultures from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective. It is very much at the heart of this comparative agenda that 'America' be considered as a hemispheric and global matter. It discusses American identities relationally, whether the relations under discussion operate within the borders of the United States, throughout the Americas, and/or worldwide. The papers given at the Congress interrogate the very notion of 'America': which, whose America, when, why now, how? What is meant by 'far'—distance, discursive formations, ideals and ideologies, foundational narratives, political conformities, aberrations, inconsistencies? Where is here—positionality, geographies, spatial compressions, hegemonic and subaltern loci, disciplinary formations, reflexes and reflexivities? These questions were addressed with regard to the multiple Americas within the USA and the bi-continental western hemisphere, as part of and beyond inter-American cultural relations, ethnicities across the national and cultural plurality of America, mutual constructions of North and South, borderlands, issues of migration and diaspora. The larger contexts of globalization and America's role within this process were likewise discussed, alongside issues of geographical exploration, capital expansion, integration, transculturalism, transnationalism and global flows, pre-Columbian and contemporary Native American cultures, the Atlantic slave trade, the environmental crisis, US literature in relation to Canadian or Latin American literature, religious conflict both within the Americas and between the Americas and the rest of the world,

with such issues as American Zionism, American exceptionalism, and the discourse of/on terror and terrorism. In short, the Leyden Congress acted both as a summa of what had spurred on the institutionalization of IASA in the first place, and as a prefiguration of future IASA Congress themes.

The Leyden Congress counted some 300 participants, the core of what in later years would become IASA's regular membership.

A selection of the papers given at the 2003 Leyden Congress appeared with Edns Rodopi (Amsterdam/New York) as *How Far is American From Here* (2005). The volume can be ordered via www.rodopi.nl—for a direct link see <http://www.rodopi.nl/functions/search.asp?BookId=TEXTXET+47>.