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Presidential address

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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

It is a great pleasure to open the 6th World Congress of the International American Studies Association (IASA). After meeting in Leiden, in Ottawa, in Lisbon, in Beijing, and then in Rio de Janeiro, we are for the first time convening in an Eastern European country. The places where we have met are themselves indicative of the planetary vocation of our organization, as are the nationalities of the many participants who have made it here today, or will be arriving over the next couple of days. The number of countries and institutions represented at this Congress is impressive—even more so in light of the enormous financial difficulties academics, both young and old, are facing these days nearly everywhere. This is of course especially the case with students and teachers in the humanities, a class of people that has come to be regarded in many corners of the globe as an endangered species. So I want to begin with a heartfelt thank you not only to those who have made this Congress possible—first and foremost the local organizing committee, chaired by the indefatigable Paweł Jędrzejko, IASA Executive Director Manju Jaidka, our vice president and treasurer Manuel Broncano, all the members of the Executive Council, and the various members of our association who helped in manifold ways—but all of you who traveled to Poland from afar—Japan, Korea, China, Brasil—as well as those who have come from neighboring, or nearly neighboring countries.

Before I say something about the Congress that we are now opening, however, please allow me to spend a few words on the two-year interval in which we have not met as an association physically,

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but only through the world wide web. It has been a great honor for me to serve as President of the IASA—an appointment I consider one of the most important recognitions of my academic career. I have strived to build on the excellent work done by my predecessors—Djelal Kadir, Paul Giles, and Jane Desmond. My task has been facilitated not only by their example and expert advice, with Djelal and Jane in particular always ready to answer my queries and offer counsel and comfort, but also by the kind words, the emotional support, the intelligent and useful suggestions that have come from so many of you. I am, however, also grateful to those of you who have written to me to complain and express dissatisfaction over this or that issue. Criticism, when it is constructive and delivered in a friendly spirit, is always welcome and as much needed as gratitude. Your criticism is, I think, a sign that you care. I wish I could have done more to meet your expectations and the needs of the IASA, but the fact itself that we are here today to inaugurate our 6th World Congress is an indication of our association's strength and vitality.

As I said a moment ago, these are difficult days even for academic institutions and associations whose financial resources are infinitely greater than ours. Yet, even in such tempestuous times, thanks to the dedicated work of so many of you, the IASA ship—to switch to a nautical metaphor more appropriate to the context and theme of our Congress—has been able to keep what Melville's Ishmael famously described as 'the open independence of [the] sea' (Melville, 2001: 97). Let me stress, however, that the independence I speak of is not only an intellectual quality—the bold, independent spirit of inquiry animating all of us IASA members. When I speak of independence, I refer, first and foremost, to what all of you can read on our institutional website: 'IASA is the only world-wide, independent, non-governmental association for Americanists'. This kind of independence comes at a high price. Lacking any sort of institutional sponsor, and relying exclusively on our members' annual fees—which, as you know, can be as low as five dollars per year (and most of them are, alas, quite close to this figure)—we can only count on our members' willingness to devote part of their precious time to do whatever work is necessary to maintain our vessel in good order. So I hope you won't mind if, by breaching

perhaps the etiquette of the presidential address with an invitation better suited to the general assembly of tomorrow evening—in which I heartily recommend all of you to participate, resisting the many temptations of this wonderful city, at this particularly exciting time of the Tall Ships Race—I literally beg you to seriously ask yourselves what you can do for the IASA. Though I draw here on Jack Kennedy's words, I am *not* asking you *not* to ask yourself what the IASA can do for you—on the contrary, I am recommending that, not only over the course of the next few days, but in the weeks and months after our Congress, you *do* ask yourselves what the IASA can do for you. Please do that, keeping in mind, however, that your desires can be realized only as far as your input as an IASA member is a tangible one. It would be unfair to ask others to do things *for* you, whereas it is not only legitimate but highly recommended, that you ask others to do things *with* you. Within the IASA there aren't—to use once again terms from *Moby-Dick*—'knights' and 'squires'. Or, better, there are some of us who may look like 'knights'—the IASA officers, the members of the Executive Council, the editors of our journal—but the 'layers' (remember? a 'layer' is the percentage of the profits each member of a whaling ship was to receive, based on his role) they are entitled to are not profits, but labor—a labor that I hope is not too melodramatic to describe as, truly, a labor of love.

Let me put it this way, sticking to the maritime imagery of our present Congress. The IASA ship sails on, weathering the storms—the storms of an economic crisis that has caused so many to cancel their participation once they found out their universities had no money to support their travel; the hurricanes of a neo-liberal economy that asks most of us to take on more teaching, administrative, and organizational responsibilities without any higher monetary returns; the many small or large gales affecting our everyday lives, our families, our dear ones. But what about our intellectual adventure, our goals, our efforts to discover and explore new territories and boldly go where few, or no Americanists, have gone before? Whither the IASA? Does it make sense to ask a question like that, or should we rather feel that, by its very nature, the IASA is supposed to roam across the seven seas with no precise direction? That, to quote again from *Moby-Dick*, our ship is not so much 'bound to any haven ahead as rushing from

all havens astern' (Melville, 2011: 327), consistently with the notion of America 'not as a terminus but rather as node through which people are passing', described by Brian Edwards and Dilip Gaonkar in the introductory essay of their collection *Globalizing American Studies* (Edwards and Gaonkar, 2010: 26)?

Whatever my obligations as President of the IASA might be, I am certainly glad that providing institutional answers to such complex questions is not part of my duties. However, I encourage all of you to keep these questions in mind over the next few days, as you will be delivering your papers, listening to the presentations of others, chatting during the coffee breaks and other informal moments. On my part, I would only like to offer a modest contribution to this debate, by sketching in an extremely cursory fashion some of the problems that arise when we bring together the 'American Studies' that is literally at the 'heart' of our association's name, with a disciplinary field that is central to the theme chosen for this 6th World Congress: oceanic studies. I must say at the outset that, though a Melvillean of sorts, I am no practitioner of oceanic studies. Yet, like all of us, I recognize the significance of what, in her splendid opening essay of a 2010 special issue of *PMLA*, Patricia Yeager identifies as the oceanic turn in literary and cultural studies. 'We have grown myopic'—Yeager writes—'about the role that seas and oceans play in creating ordinary histories and culture. Although the sea had been an exciting, deadly catalyst for trade and exploration for millennia, by the nineteenth century [...] oceanic travel and ideas had become routine' (Yeager, 2010: 524). There are manifold reasons why we should not take the oceans for granted. Not only, as Yeager and others have noted, 'we are mostly made of water: not geo- but aquacentric', but we often forget that, 'Earth's commerce still depends on oceans. Ninety percent of the world's goods (most of what we eat or type on or wear) still travels in container ships' (Yeager, 2010: 523). There are further reasons for being concerned with the sea. For one, as Hester Blum notes in the same issue of *PMLA*, we may be able to break new epistemological grounds when we reconsider 'the sea as a proprioceptive point of inquiry. As oceanic studies reveal, freedom from national belonging can make possible other ways of understanding affiliation, citizenship, mobility, rights, and sovereignty, all of which have been read in recent

critical history as overdetermined by nationalism' (Blum, 2010: 671). An excellent example of the advantages of an approach of this kind is provided by Marcus Rediker's recent book on the Amistad rebellion. Treated by Steven Spielberg as a largely 'American' story, the episode is re-situated by Rediker in a larger transoceanic context, with the U.S. being only one of the several 'nodes' traversed by the rebellious slaves, whose interests are shown to be similar yet also different from those of the American abolitionists.

Given the importance of the sea in the literatures of almost any country, and its virtual identification with the experience of travel, displacement, and wonder, oceanic studies have also an intriguing philosophical and theoretical appeal. Iain Chambers, for example, believes that at sea, 'Against the metaphysical desire for certitude and control, rooted in terrestrial and territorial order, we find ourselves confronting the Nietzschean provocation of the marine horizon [...]. Not to cross but to inhabit this space is to abandon the theoretical temptation to "strike through the mask"' (Chambers, 2010: 679, 680). An oceanic turn might allow us to further deterritorialize the American imaginary by focusing more on what Cesare Casarino has identified as the floating foundations of modernity.

The sea is the source of so many seductive metaphors, and is so important to so many writers, of so many different ages that, raptured by its seeming endlessness and inappropriability, we may forget how our relationship with the oceans has always been mediated by technology and that today, no sea, however remote, is immune to the ravages brought about by global capitalism. In the essay I already referred to, Yeager speaks in fact of a 'techno-ocean' crossed daily by industrialized fishing fleets and used as a place 'for stealing resources, dumping trash, and making money through shipping, oil drilling, and so on' (Yeager, 2010: 533). Once we think about the role that American institutions and corporations play in the shaping of oceanic economic policies, for American Studies to go transoceanic would seem not only advisable, but also necessary.

I am sure that considerations like the ones I have briefly sketched, and several others concerning the possible connections between American Studies and oceanic studies will occupy many of us over the course of this Congress. In the hope of encouraging and making even more significant the conversations we are going to engage

in here in Szczecin, I would like to recount a bit of IASA history only a few amongst you are likely to be familiar with. Two years ago, on the margins of the Rio de Janeiro Congress, our colleague Cyraina Johnson-Roullier, the editor-in-chief of *Review of International American Studies (RIAS)*, our association's journal, presented to the Executive Council and the officers an elaborate, engaging assessment of the journal's past and present, suggesting, among other things, that a way in which our journal could find a more distinctive voice amongst other publications devoted to international American Studies, such as *NeoAmericanist* and the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, was by changing its title. Two titles were proposed, and in both the word 'transoceanic' featured prominently. To quote directly from the document that Cyraina, along with *RIAS* associate editor Paweł Jędrzejko, had drafted:

The rationale for the title change has to do with how we intend to differentiate the journal from its competitors. In its critical, theoretical and intellectual emphases, the journal brings something radically different to emergent transnational and hemispheric discourses on America and the Americas. With the title change, we will emphasize that, rather than focusing on either the hemispheric or the transnational, the journal places them in dialogue with one another, providing scholars seeking to move beyond conventional limitations of nation, geography, culture, race, ethnicity and/or history a forum in which to explore the transdisciplinary, transcultural and/or transhistorical reality of intercultural connection and exchange in the cultures of America and the Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia, Old World (Afro-Eurasia) and New (Americas and Australasia).

Oceanamerica(s)

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I cannot do justice here to the sophisticated arguments Cyraina and Paweł mobilized in favor of a transoceanic turn, and since no official document was ever produced of the more or less informal discussion that followed the proposal for a title change, I cannot likewise give a fair, balanced account as to why some members of the Council objected to it. I guess, however, that it would be fair to say that what some found problematic was not so much the idea of giving the journal a more global, or perhaps should I say, a more planetary scope. As the *International Association of American Studies*, why should any of us have objected to embracing what the document identified as 'a new paradigm' meant

to provide a more comprehensive frame of inquiry than those central to the hemispheric and the 'transnational' models? What some of us were perplexed by, I suppose, was the idea of having the words 'American Studies' take a backseat position. Were those of us who resisted this change simply nostalgic and/or fearful that we would have decentered 'America'/the Americas to such an extent that our object of study would have well-nigh disappeared? Were the anxieties that coagulated around this issue of the title change yet another version of that anxiety I have often detected in some of our debates—namely, that a virtually boundless 'American Studies' might in the end turn into some version of a nebulous 'World Studies' where, so to speak, anything goes? Were some of us worried that by shifting 'American Studies' to a subtitle position we would have encouraged the melting down of 'America' or the Americas into an undifferentiated oceanic liquid modernity, or that, by performing such operation we would actually be claiming *for* America the high seas? Wasn't this a confirmation of what, at some point or another, many of us have feared—that the internationalizing or globalizing of American Studies may be the lengthened shadow of America's empire gone global? After all, only a few months after some of us engaged in this informal discussion over the merits of the transoceanic paradigm, Barack Obama, in his speech at the Australian parliament of November 2011, proudly claimed:

The United States has been, and always will be, a Pacific nation. Asian immigrants helped build America, and millions of American families, including my own, cherish our ties to this region. From the bombing of Darwin to the liberation of Pacific islands, from the rice paddies of Southeast Asia to a cold Korean Peninsula, generations of Americans have served here, and died here—so democracies could take root; so economic miracles could lift hundreds of millions to prosperity. Americans have bled with you for this progress, and we will not allow it—we will never allow it to be reversed. (Obama, 2011)

This passage, like much else in his speech, is exemplary in the way that Obama sees reflected in the waters of the Pacific the image of America. Aligning together World War II, Korea and, without explicitly mentioning it, Vietnam, Obama vindicates America's war-making in the region claiming it has all been for the better

(‘so democracies could take root’), ignoring the over one million Vietnamese killed during one of the United States’ most shameful acts of aggression against a third-world country. Nor will you find in his speech any mention of the CIA-sponsored coups in Indonesia and East Timor, which cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Indonesians and of tens of thousands of Timorese. Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton reinforced the presidential line, noting in an article for *Foreign Affairs* that,

[b]y virtue of our unique geography, the United States is both an Atlantic and a Pacific power. We are proud of our European partnerships and all that they deliver. Our challenge now is to build a web of partnerships and institutions across the Pacific that is as durable and as consistent with American interests and values as the web we have built across the Atlantic. That is the touchstone of our efforts in all these areas. (Nolan, 2013: 87)

A reading of Obama’s and Hillary’s texts is perhaps the best way to remind all of us why we need a vibrant, independent, and critically minded international and transoceanic American Studies, today as much as yesterday.

As you would have certainly noticed, my last remarks may adhere too closely to the land-locked preoccupations central to U.S. ‘interests and values’ in the region, thereby marginalizing once again the actual seas. So, as I near my conclusion, let me focus, however briefly, on an extremely important point Yeager raises in her own concluding remarks. How can the boundless oceans be protected from the greediness of blind capitalism? Should the oceans have legal standing, Yeager asks, echoing the well-known title of Christopher Stone’s book, *Should Trees Have Legal Standing?* The question is an important one—one that I am sure will be debated in at least some of our Congress’s papers and panels. Here I can only call your attention to some of the challenges posed by any attempt to deal with this issue. While, as Grace Slick used to sing decades ago, ‘human nature don’t mean shit to a tree’, humans, at least in theory, can advocate the legal standing of trees, mountains, lands, and seas (Kantner and Slick, 1969). This means that our best hope for the preservation of ocean life would lie with those transnational institutional bodies, like the UN, responsible for the well-being of those areas and resources falling outside

the space of the nation. Unfortunately, the oceanic policies pursued by the UN not only should make us skeptical concerning their ability to protect what many of us would consider 'common goods' to be preserved for the sake of the whole of humankind. Such policies are also an indication that some of our theorizing about the oceans as a space beyond the nation may have been too hasty.

What I am referring to specifically is UNCLOS, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, wonderfully dissected by Peter Nolan in the March-April issue of this year's *New Left Review*. As Nolan explains,

Prior to UNCLOS, maritime states had sovereign authority over their territorial waters, which extended to a distance of 22 kilometres (12 nautical miles) from the shore. UNCLOS effected a revolutionary change in the law of the sea by allowing countries to establish a new resource zone called the 'exclusive economic zone' (EEZ) adjacent to their territorial sea, and which extends 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the territorial sea is measured. Within the EEZ, coastal states have sovereign rights to explore and exploit the natural resources of the waters immediately above the seabed, as well as those of the seabed itself and its subsoil; they also have rights to other forms of exploitation of the zone, such as producing energy from the water, currents and winds. (Nolan, 2013: 77-8)

Keeping in mind that islands are entitled to the same maritime zones as land territory, as well as the fact that, notwithstanding the dismantling of the old colonial empires in the post-World War II period, the U.S., France, the U.K., and other former masters of the universe, have retained administrative control of remote islands and atolls—often only a few square kilometers wide, and with no population—UNCLOS must be understood as the latest act of colonial appropriation. The UNCLOS provisos are not only the late 20th century maritime equivalent of the Acts of Enclosures. As Nolan notes, 'These far-distant territories are often of immense strategic significance, with many of them containing American naval and air-force bases, as well as reconnaissance facilities' (Nolan, 2013: 79). I have no time to quote all of the amazing, shocking figures mentioned in the essay, which I would encourage all of you to read. Let me only give you a few examples.

The EEZ of Britain, thanks to its overseas territories, is over 6 million square kilometers, eight times the total EEZ of the U.K. itself. France, however, manages to do much better, with an overseas EEZ thirty times that of metropolitan France. What about the U.S.? The United States did not sign UNCLOS, though they formally acknowledged its legality. As Nolan explains,

A year after UNCLOS was enacted, Reagan duly proclaimed the EEZ of the United States. It is the largest of any state by a wide margin, encompassing more than 12 million square kilometers, larger by a fifth than the land area of the United States; according to one legal scholar, 'Reagan's proclamation can be characterized as the largest territorial acquisition in the history of the United States'. (Nolan, 2013: 84)

Washington is still in possession of most of the Pacific islands it acquired with the Guano Act in 1856. As a result, a land area of largely uninhabited rocks totaling a mere 87 square kilometers, due to their dispersion across the sea, is entitled to an EEZ of 1.55 million square kilometers.

In theory, the scope of UNCLOS is a noble one—to turn imperiled oceanic regions 'from open-access "global commons" into regions of conservation' (Nolan, 2013: 91). It can hardly escape anyone's attention, however, that the powers that have been placed in charge of such high-minded ecological protectionism are the same ones which, through outright conquest and violence, and especially through what Alfred Crosby long ago dubbed as biological imperialism, have devastated the peoples and pillaged the resources of these lands and seas. To entrust the great colonial powers of the West with the mission of protecting the oceans is in many ways like asking the big bad wolf to escort little red riding hood through the forest.

In sum, the notion of the inappropriability of the sea as a space-beyond-the-nation is one in need of revision. This is not to say that there is no watery expanse where 'clear national boundaries exist only in the dry, cartographic world', as Kate Flint has put it (Flint, 2009: 334). However, it would be unwise to think that the appropriations sanctioned by international laws exist only on maps. The critical imagination may well wish to replace the old, nation-based idea of the frontier, of conquest and explo-

ration, with the language of the oceanic, concerned 'with fluidity, transmission, and exchange' (Flint, 2009: 325). Nations, and the old, colonial Western nations in particular, however, are very unlikely to let go of the oceans, and what in the past may have been a watery commons is nowadays seriously threatened by a system of late-capitalist enclosures. What I have in mind here is very much analogous to what the winner of this year's Emory Elliot Prize writes in her fascinating exploration of the ocean as 'one of the leading metaphors for the Internet' (Schober, forthcoming). Like the open sea, also the world wide web holds the promise of being an open, deterritorialized space that allows for an infinite variety of points of views and ideas but, as the author of the winning essay rightly notes, the internet

[...] is still largely controlled by Western particularly, by American business organizations. As the ultimately 'global' technology, the Internet crosses national, legal, and cultural boundaries, but its dynamics and the way we navigate through it remain largely dominated by American corporations such as Google, Apple, or Facebook, thus granting the United States a privileged position in the representation and dispersion of seemingly global experience and information. (Schober, forthcoming)

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There are therefore excellent reasons for American Studies to be concerned with the material as well as the metaphoric oceans.

Like American Studies itself, the oceans have been traditionally a storehouse of both Utopian and dystopian images and concepts. One of my favorite examples comes, unsurprisingly, from *Moby-Dick*. In the same chapter I quoted earlier apropos the need to keep 'the open independence of the sea', Melville makes clear that the maritime sublime is at one with its apocalyptic reversal. In Ishmael's words, 'all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore' (Melville, 2001: 97). Like 'the storm-tossed ship', 'earnest thinking' must fight against 'the very winds that fain would blow her homeward' thus 'forlornly rushing into peril; her only friend her bitterest foe'. 'Better is it to perish in that howling infinite', Ishmael rapturously concludes, 'than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety!' (Melville, 2001: 97) With less fanfare,

but with a similar intellectual determination, our IASA ship has been fighting against the notion that American Studies is a 'home-ward bound' discipline, geographically and culturally confined to the Americas, and to the U.S. especially. Our congresses have been, literally and intellectually, efforts at crossing oceans so that, as we sailed over them, we could afford unexpected vistas of our 'ports'—the port from which each one of us has originally embarked and the more distant ones we wish to reach through our studies.

Unlike Ishmael's at once utopian and dystopian ship, the IASA vessel, I think, has not and should not 'fly all hospitality'. We are all thankful to the city of Szczecin and to our Polish colleagues for having us here. Many of us are probably less romantically inclined than Ishmael and actually appreciate those things that are 'kind to our mortalities'. And probably not all of us, no matter how fascinated we may be with the notion of deterritorialization, would be willing to accept the idea that 'in landlessness resides the highest truth', the truth of American Studies included. All of us, however, should be sympathetic at some level with Ishmael's oceanic feelings. Having embarked on the IASA ship, we are all errant scholars who have left our ports of origin behind. Whatever our differences in terms of research interests, methodologies, and human aspirations, we all share that decision to become, to a greater or lesser extent, strangers to ourselves. What this means is that, while geographically and sometimes intellectually we may indeed be 'oceans apart', we all welcome the challenge that the search for new words poses to all of us. Without necessarily melting our identities into a mystical liquidity, as Sigmund Freud feared was the case when people were swept away by oceanic feelings, we can reach for that experience of limitlessness that Freud's interlocutor, the Nobel Laureate Romain Rolland, saw as one of the positive features of the oceanic.¹ So let's be open to the thoughts and intellectual provocations of our fellow voyagers, and to the ebb-and-flow of the currents this Congress, as was the case with all previous ones, will undoubtedly generate. I wish all of you, all of us, three days of exciting, adventurous intellectual exchanges, across continents, across oceans. Thank you.

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1. On the exchange between Freud and Rolland, see Rooney (2007).

This issue of *RIAS* brings together—for the first time in the history of the IASA—revised versions of the three plenary lectures delivered at the Sixth World Congress in Szczecin. Other issues of our journal will feature selections of what are not simply ‘the best of’ the papers read at the congress, but also those that most readily coalesce around its overall theme, and its most significant subthemes. Here we publish three longer, more ambitious pieces, which have contributed considerably in setting the tone of the congress as a whole, and were followed by lively debates that unfortunately cannot be reproduced here, but which the authors have kept in mind in revising their work for publication. The three plenary speakers—John Matteson, Bruce Robbins, and Tadeusz Sławek—each approach the ‘Oceans Apart’ theme from their own specific perspectives, and their different scholarly backgrounds and research interests. All three, however, propose ways of ‘defamiliarizing’—to use Paul Giles’ keyword in *Virtual Americas—America*, by asking us to re-frame the object of our studies in novel ways.

John Matteson revisits the transatlantic conversation between the New World and the Old, by drawing on the archive of nineteenth-century US writers about Europe. He is not so much interested in highlighting what these more or less celebrated figures had to say about Europe, its history, and its people, as in reflecting on how, through what he calls ‘the intercontinental looking glass’, Americans had to come to terms with the often unsettling stare of the foreigner. Though he knows his use of Du Bois’ famous concept of ‘double-consciousness’ might appear misconceived, Matteson insists that ‘the doubly conscious state that Du Bois ascribed to African Americans differed from other experiences of dual awareness not chiefly in terms of quality, but mostly of degree, though the degree is assuredly vast’. Matteson argues passionately, eloquently and, in his references to his own personal experience, quite amusingly, for the need to safeguard this tradition of cross-cultural comparison, though he ends by confessing his fears that contemporary Americans might be tempted ‘to turn away from the transatlantic looking-glass entirely’.

The historical framework that Bruce Robbins draws up for rethinking 'the newness of the New World as opposed to the oldness of the Old World' is a cosmopolitan rather than a transatlantic one, though Robbins is concerned not only with cosmopolitanism in space, but in time, too. Moving from a consideration of the political work done by the notoriously bizarre 'Blue Water Thesis', according to which only sea-based conquest would count as colonialism, Robbins asks what happens if we do not limit our critical work to studying modern colonialism, but include non-European, pre-modern colonialism into the picture. This is what he means by cosmopolitanism in time—a 'radical expansion in the time frame' that inevitably 'ends up undermining our moralized geographies'. Such unsettling of time-honored historical and moral categories is of course open to the charge of allowing America to forgive itself for its empire building, which considered on a much larger time scale, may appear just as bloody and immoral as older, non-American and non-European imperialisms. On the other hand, this might be a risk worth taking. Rethinking America in a much longer unit of time is a way to escape from the grips of American exceptionalism, and a way to remind ourselves that America may not be 'meant to be the glory and instructor of the world'.

'The risk of America', Tadeusz Sławek writes in the final plenary lecture, 'is [...] America itself—its endless, limitless ambitions [...] to know absolutely everything'. These words resonate in important ways with the diagnosis of the contemporary world offered in *The Transparency Society* by Byung-Chul Han—a German-Korean theorist whose work has only recently begun to appear in English translation. Byung-Chul Han attacks transparency as a contemporary false ideal. The illusion that we can obtain information about everyone and everything—that thanks to technological innovations like the Internet, the world has become transparent—runs counter to the actual impoverishment of our ability to make sense of this wealth of data. We accumulate information, but this does not necessarily mean that our knowledge of the world increases. Through a deft and illuminating reading of poetry by Robinson Jeffers and e. e. cummings, matched by astute references to Norman O. Brown, Jean Luc Nancy, and George Bataille, and others, Sławek traces the poets' brave struggle against the culture and rhetoric

of 'excess'. Jeffers and Cummings, but also D. H. Lawrence, were quick to denounce that America was turning into a 'world in which everything is "far too", i.e., a world subjected to human ambition and desire, a world of hasty activism' where only Theodore Roosevelt's 'one hundred percent Americans' would be welcome. To the nightmarish dream of a panoptical, completely transparent America, Sławek opposes a poetic and cultural tradition that stands firmly opposed to 'the hubristic desires of the American state to know absolutely everything regardless of civil rights and political and economic costs'.

Taken together, the three essays offer plenty of provocative perspectives on rethinking America. They are, in other words, a fitting contribution to the unending international conversation that is the IASA's most important *raison d'être*.

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