

# Cyraina Johnson-Roullier

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## (Un)imagined shores

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

## (UN)IMAGINED SHORES

The theme of the IASA 6th World Congress, 'Oceans Apart: In Search of New Wor(l)ds' was a fitting context in which to ask the question how did the Americas become America? And, inversely, how can America be turned inside out to reveal the Americas to which it is ineradicably, albeit perhaps surreptitiously—yet certainly historically—linked, and what might that mean for our understanding of American Studies as a field? How does the ocean itself, and its boundaryless significance, figure in whatever understanding of America and/or the Americas comes to the fore. The essays included in this issue of the *Review of International American Studies* each consider this question in very different ways, from the exploration of the role of the ocean in American literature, to that of the power of the ocean's imaginary reality itself to shape our understanding of that literature. Ever present within these questions is that of the long history of empire embedded in the idea of America and all things American, what exactly that history is to mean, and how it is to be understood, especially when contextualized by the cultural significance of the ocean. With the ocean in mind, in keeping with the Congress theme, the meaning of America seems to radically shift, as the reality of the Americas becomes more evident. As this stable meaning is troubled, as traditional boundaries begin to reform in new configurations, the possibility for new discoveries about the meaning of America comes into greater prominence.

But this view from the ocean, with its new perspective on old understandings, doesn't necessarily have to mean 'out to sea'.

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As Giorgio Mariani asserts, there is often a certain anxiety, even among those, like the members of the International American Studies Association, who adventurously leave their academic and intellectual points of origin to carve out new epistemological roadmaps, leading not infrequently beyond known disciplinary parameters, as these have been structured within the university. What is it about the unboundedness of uncontained knowledge, for which the sea is a striking metaphor, that can hide a subtle yet nonetheless yawning fear? There is the ever-present possibility of drowning, requiring the superhuman control necessary to calmly tread water until a familiar shore appears, rather than using every reserve of energy to flail uselessly about in panic, destroying all possibility of potentially adaptive measures. There is the desire to return to the power of what is known even in the midst of a willful voyage to the unknown, a siren's song of familiarity slamming shut the door to the new visions that the amorphous reality of limitlessness can invite.

But once the idea of treading water is accepted to the point of dictating action, once calm acceptance is allowed to set in, so too does the ocean begin to seem less of an enemy, the mind clears, solutions appear, and direction based on sharpness of thought and intrepid decision takes flight. Previously unthought avenues to understanding open up, and then, new shores. This, then, is the spirit in which the President's Address and the three plenaries to follow are offered, couple with Paweł Jędrzejko's fitting examination of Polish literature filtered through an oceanic American literary encounter. Taking America to sea, they are all a compass leading not to what is already known, but to what can be, if we but continue to calmly tread on.

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