

INTRODUCTION

*Whatever whenever wherever has happened
is written on the water of Babel.*
W. Szymborska¹

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The 6th World Congress of the International American Studies Association, 'Oceans Apart: In Search of New Wor(l)ds', in August 2013 attracted scholars from all over the world to Szczecin, a Polish harbor city with a long multicultural, multinational, and multilingual history. Offering their multidisciplinary perspectives, the participants answered the call of Paweł Jędrzejko (the initiator and organizer) for debate on 'the transoceanic dynamics of history'. This publication is a collection of papers presented at the conference; the first volume centered on literary topics, and the present one takes a broader, cultural angle, with articles from the world of politics, literature, education, and sociology.

The waters of the oceans that wash the shores of our continents keep us apart, forming the blue bands separating 'us' from 'them'. But, at the same time, they also move restless and anxious travelers across, enabling contacts inspired by curiosity of the difference and provoking different ways of handling it. The oceans manage the difference in an admirable way. They humbly embrace various waters flowing into them from distant places, smoothly accommodating variety. Through their patient moves, they soften the sharp edges of the objects embraced.

¹ from the poem 'Water' by Wisława Szymborska, translated from Polish by Magnus J. Kryński

The present volume contains articles on transcending values, ideas, disciplines, cultures, or political divisions. The consecutive sections group them around different management of differences: overcoming, strengthening, recognizing or creating them. Navigating and understanding America's differences is a difficult task; the oceans can offer a good practice.

In the opening essay of the present volume, Patrick Imbert attracts our attention to the idea of overcoming differences by focusing on the transpacific travel of the immigrant Piscine from India to Canada in Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi*, which allows him to revisit the dynamic of exclusion, the idea of nation and place, and to recognize alterity in a perspective emphasizing transculturalism and multiculturalism. The author attempts to juxtapose and compare the trans-multi-interdisciplinary and trans-multi-intercultural perspectives so as to establish links between the trans, the multi, and the inter in the context of the legitimacy of symbolic/geographic displacements because, in his view, they are linked to the Americas and globalization. In a kin vein, Tomomi Nakagawa takes a trans-disciplinary approach to elaborate on the scientific thought of Lafcadio Hearn and his interpretation of Japanese art. Mátyás Bánhegyi and Judit Nagy deal with the notion of overcoming cultural differences in their essay 'A Transatlantic Transfer of Cultural Values: Constructing a Canada-Related Cultural Reader Series for the Secondary English Classroom in Central Europe'. The authors stress the significance of facilitating cultural discourse and cross-cultural learning via the cultural reader series and discuss the theoretical background of their project as well as the activities leading up to the preparation and compilation of the completed volumes.

Strengthening the differences appears to be one of the focal points for Edgardo Medeiros da Silva, whose essay 'Theme and Subject Matter in Francis Parkman's *The Old Régime in Canada*' examines the failure of France to establish the basis of a well-regulated political community in North America in the context of the Anglo-French rivalry for the control of this continent. Relying on Francis Parkman's historical narrative, the author analyzes the relations between two colonies—New France and New England—and sheds some light upon their political culture. In the subsequent essay,

entitled 'Zones of Discomfort in US Latino Politics: When Sharing a Sea Does Not Suffice', Virginia R. Dominguez addresses the questions of diaspora and nation-ness, exploring the fundamental differences between Puerto Rican and Cuban-American engagement with the United States. The author is interested in finding the reasons why some US Latino groups manage to incorporate themselves into the US society while others still refuse to perceive the United States as their homeland.

The theme of recognition of differences is raised in the volume by María Luz Arroyo Vázquez, whose main concern is the empowerment of American women during the Great Depression era. The author attempts to show that women appointed to relevant government positions in the years 1933–1945 not only played a key role in the development of Roosevelt administration; their voices reverberated and inspired women in other countries, especially in Spain. Finally, Lei Zhang in her essay 'The Cultural Logic of America's Pivot to the Asia-Pacific' examines the cultural logic of the current US foreign policy toward Asia-Pacific, stating that it is inextricable from the Imperialist Imaginary, American Orientalism, and American Sublime. Taking a closer look at the transpacific project promoted by the US—the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement—Lei Zhang discusses the US hegemonic vision and free-trade imperialism, which may emphasize the emergence of further political/cultural differences between the East and the West.

Oceans apart but connected by various waterways, the authors of the articles collected in the present volume expose and discuss the selected differences describing some aspects of life in America. And though these can only refer to a small sample of issues, their universality enhances the understanding of the whole. The Polish Nobel Prize winner in literature (1996), Wisława Szymborska, expressed the feeling in her poem 'Water', quoted in the opening:

A drop of water fell on my hand,
 Blood-let from the Ganges and the Nile,
 On my index finger the Caspian Sea is open
 and the Pacific meekly joins the Rudawa,

The drops of water, however small they seem with the perspective of the ocean, are, after all its constituting elements. And though

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their comprehensive and exhaustive study can never be completed, the fragmental analysis makes an important contribution to the field, leaving space for ideas that ‘wait to be named’ in other articles, presentations, conferences and places; in an endless search for the new wor(l)ds:

There are not enough mouths to utter
all your fleeting names, O water.
I would have to name you in all tongues,
pronouncing all the vowels at once
while also keeping silent—for the sake of the lake
that waits to be named
and doesn’t exist on this earth, just as the star
reflected in it is not in heaven.
[...]
How light is all this in the raindrop.
How gently the world touches me.
Whatever, whenever, wherever has happened
Is written down on the waters of Babel.

Sonia Caputa and Anna Gonerko-Frej