



THE QUINTESSENCE OF THE QUINTESSENTIAL

Let us imagine, for a moment, that we have become characters in our own Robinsonade (in a time long before Daniel Defoe chronicled Robinson Crusoe's epic journey). Engaged in a half-magical, early Renaissance exploratory endeavor, like so many others before us, we set out full of hope into uncharted waters in a well-provisioned ship, certain that our quest will end in the success we seek, the discovery of heretofore unknown lands, full of untold riches that will be ours for the taking. Fuelled by an uncommon mixture of hope, desire and determination, we rush headlong into the indiscernible future, filled with visions of the life of gods we will lead upon our successful return, heavily laden with the wealth of our exploits. But it is, unfortunately, not to be: not long into our journey, we are beset by a raging storm, whose almost demoniac power shatters our ship—and our hopes—to bits, a situation from which we only just barely escape with our lives. The intangible imagined life of gods that was ours just a few hours before is brutally and abruptly transformed, now finding objective reality in the shards of our ship washing up on the hated shore that we were in fact blessed to find, though tortured by the painful realization that it is nothing like the shore we had hoped, imagined or sought to find. The storm having dealt with our clothing in much the same way as it did our ship, thus presenting us with an unaccustomed physical reality of near nakedness, this new shore, previously unknown to our imaginations, greets us with an immediate inhospitability that finishes the job by also stripping us figuratively bare, leaving us completely naked to our own understanding as well. We are shipwrecked—castaways—most definitely not gods, lacking now not only the force that imagined a potential god-like existence, but the hope it generated. Of determination, however, we must

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put that to good use, and quickly. Life now takes on a very different quality, one of a more stark contact with the laws of nature than ever we have felt before. We are hot, we are hungry, we are cold, wet, exposed, and excoriated by the wind, whose fingers, gentle or sharp like claws, are a constant presence. Life is now raw existence, and in that existence, we grasp only the enormity of the sea and its deep mystery, the enormity of the heavens, its broiling sun by day and its shimmering stars at night, and the thankful—or thankless—certainty of land underfoot.

It is at this juncture that we may most fruitfully encounter the essays contained in this issue of the *Review of International American Studies*, which highlights several works from the 7th World Congress of the International American Studies Association, held in conjunction with the American Studies Association of Korea's 50th International Conference in Seoul, South Korea, August 17–19, 2015. The conference theme, “Constellating Americas,” seeks a more complex international engagement in the field of American Studies, one that would foster a greater de-centering of the US within the field than even the inherently international approach of transnationalism has up to the present accomplished. By borrowing Walter Benjamin's notion of the constellation as a theoretical construct allowing for a different way of thinking about the interrelationships between the US and other instances of America within American Studies, the emphases of the conference bring about a radical shift in the field imaginary, pointing to both a horizontal and a vertical path toward greater interrelational understanding, the one reaching outward in space, the other in time.

Returning to the extended metaphor with which this Ed/Note began, shipwrecked, one's hopes for the achievement of imagined desires are demolished; but the unhinged imagination remains, going out to sea and settling on the horizon, where hope may yet furtively live, or rising to the night sky where it may restlessly flutter in the figuring and refiguring of the phantasmic patterns it recognizes between its multitudinous celestial bodies. In this regard, if the assertion of the unachieved dislodging of the US-centric perspective in American Studies advanced by the conference may be viewed as an intellectual shipwreck of sorts, the US becoming the figurative island one seeks to “constellate” into a more rela-

tional reality, then the horizontal path to this change in the field imaginary becomes akin to the aims of celestial navigation. Among the ruins of our figurative shipwreck may have been found a mariner's astrolabe, an early instrument used to determine position on the earth by calculating latitude through the identification of positional relation to celestial bodies, the most important often being that of Polaris, or the North Star. Position, both physical and intellectual, is crucial, because it is the point from which subsequent movement originates. For early navigators, the night sky was important because the location of Polaris helped them to determine all relative positions. In a sky filled with millions of stars, the constellations provided relational patterns, transforming what could have been an otherwise overwhelming actuality to one more manageable by establishing the relative positions of other celestial bodies. By filtering this incomprehensible mass of stars through the imagination, a constellation, or pattern of interrelationships, is created, and suddenly the multitude of stars becomes intelligible not just in terms of their relationships to each other, but to the world of whatever culture imagines them.

And so it is with the infinite relational possibilities that exist between the cultures of the Americas. Like Ptolemy's *Almagest*, which catalogues the 48 classical constellations in their imaginary relational positions, our efforts in the face of "constellating" the Americas are limited only by our own imaginations. The possible patterns by which we may understand the interrelationships between the cultures of the Americas are infinite, and it is to us to explore and find them. This issue of the *Review of International American Studies* represents just one beginning on this path in search of a new kind of discovery. As the early 20th-century American author, Kate Chopin, describes, it is a timeless endeavor, reaching to the stars:

Ah! that moving procession that has left me by the road-side! Its fantastic colors are more brilliant and beautiful than the sun on the undulating waters. What matter if souls and bodies are failing beneath the feet of the ever-pressing multitude! It moves with the majestic rhythm of the spheres. Its discordant clashes sweep upward in one harmonious tone that blends with the music of other worlds—to complete God's orchestra.

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It is greater than the stars—that moving procession of human energy; greater than the palpitating earth and the things growing thereon. Oh! I could weep at being left by the wayside; left with the grass and the clouds and a few dumb animals. True, I feel at home in the society of these symbols of life's immutability. In the procession I should feel the crushing feet, the clashing discords, the ruthless hands and stifling breath. I could not hear the rhythm of the march. (Chopin 2008: 158)

Timeless, Chopin recuperates Aristotle's *On the Heavens*, in which he describes the relation between the two spheres of the earth and the heavens in terms of elements. Fire, air, water and earth comprise the earth, the elements of which one immediately becomes aware in any shipwreck, real or imagined. But the heavens are something else again. For Aristotle, the heavens, the home of the celestial bodies, must be described by a circular motion not possible for the other elements, which must move only up or down. Timeless in their circular, unending trajectory, for Aristotle the heavens are therefore described by another element, ascribable only to them, where such eternal continuity is the norm. Later commentators on Aristotle called it "aether," of which the Latinate name is "quintessence." Let us, then, view this volume of the *Review of International American Studies* as serving that function: of quintessence to the several quintessential essays it contains from the Seoul Conference, and beyond. In both the nominal and verbal meanings of the term "essay," these hopeful efforts seek to lead the way—to the imagining and reimagining, in endless variety, of new constellations of the Americas, prosecuting a more truly international, International American Studies.

Constellating Americas

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