

## **Introduction**

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When work on the project that eventually became this volume began four years ago, “Inter-American Studies” was more a desideratum than a reality. Today the study of the Americas has become a central focus of much research, many collections, and now a new center at Vanderbilt University. The publication of this volume of the *Vanderbilt e-Journal of Luso-Hispanic Studies* not only celebrates the work of the contributors but also the endeavors of the College of Arts and Science at Vanderbilt to turn Inter-American Studies into an exhilarating compliment to traditional disciplinary fields.

Approximately five years ago, the Department of Spanish and Portuguese along with French and Italian, German and Slavics, and Comparative Literature had just carried out the academic exercise called an External Review. A major, though not unanticipated, finding was that each of these units was fairly insular. The structures of academic disciplines had kept the faculty isolated within their own departments even though they were housed in the same building and shared many of the same aims. Communications were so limited that many professors did not even know the expertise of colleagues in the other departments.

As Chair of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, I suggested to my colleagues William Luis and Earl Fitz that the opportunities provided by the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities might allow us to draw attention to the interdisciplinary work that we had been carrying out. The three of us agreed that we had often painted outside the lines -- in great part because we are Latin Americanists and we have worked in areas that require thinking across borders. Earl Fitz approached the challenge from the perspective that he had advocated for many years, that of Inter-American Studies, in the most widely accepted sense of the term. William Luis came to it from the perspective of a discipline that he had worked to create, that of, to use a controversial but recognizable label, Latino Studies. I provided a bridge between the two perspectives.

The three of us came together to draft a proposal for a faculty seminar to be run out of the Warren Center for the Humanities. The goal of the faculty seminar was to examine the various ways in which the cultures of North, Central, and South America have been defined, especially since the

beginning of the nineteenth century. It was to concentrate on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, because this period saw the establishment of independent nation-states throughout most of the hemisphere as well as the increase of the Hispanic population within the United States. As a result, the tension between the struggle for national identities, on one hand, and the development of close cultural, commercial, economic, and political ties, on the other, comes to the fore during this specific time-frame. In this regard, the role of the Hispanic diaspora, which has come to find a new “home” within the United States, is particularly revealing, for the tension between monocultural and multicultural orientations is acute within this new “community.”

While the nineteenth and twentieth centuries crystallize the issues that were to be taken up, the entire history of the New World is linked and was to be open to examination. An additional goal was, therefore, to reveal points of similarity and difference across the hemisphere that could be traced from the first days of the “discovery.” The seminar would also look ahead to the impact of ever tighter involvements among the three Americas during the twenty-first century. The last decade of the twentieth century saw, for example, the signing of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, which promised increased Inter-American economic cooperation that would benefit the entire hemisphere. The complex issues tied to the redistribution of wealth and resources are an outgrowth of the historic and cultural encounters that were to be explored in the seminar.

We believed that the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities was the perfect place to develop this cross-disciplinary endeavor, for, as indicated by Vanderbilt’s Chancellor, E. Gordon Gee, “[s]ince its inception, the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities has acted as a hub for interdisciplinary intellectual activity and exchange. The Warren Center is a space where scholars from different communities can form their own community through collaborative scholarship, probing discussion, and critical examination. It allows them a place both to benefit from and contribute to the scholarship of others, and by these actions to enhance, fittingly enough, our humanity as an institution.” Faculty seminars, in particular, were designed to offer faculty members from across campus a venue for extended contact, in-depth explorations, and cross-disciplinary dialogue. The three of us also believed that a faculty seminar on “Rediscovering the New World: Exploring Lines of Contact among the Americas and within the United States” would be the ideal way to highlight the naturally interdisciplinary character of our work. At the same time, the faculty seminar would enrich our understanding of materials that we knew well through active interaction with Vanderbilt professors from other fields. Finally, a faculty seminar on “Rediscovering the New World” would

provide an opportunity to showcase the field of Inter-American Studies, which was just beginning to draw the attention of the Vanderbilt community.

Since then, as a result of the tireless efforts of Professors Earl Fitz, Marshall Eakin, Michael Kreyling, and many others, Vanderbilt has come to the decision to fund a new Center for the Americas, which, as described, on the Center's webpage, is expected to increase intellectual vigor and activity on campus.

The Center builds upon and enhances the strengths of Vanderbilt's existing programs while creating an institutional framework to address the shift toward more integrated perspectives. The goal is to bring the expertise, resources, and fine-grained knowledge developed through our disciplines and programs in Latin American, European, American and Southern Studies, African American Studies, Comparative Literature, and Women's Studies into conversation with each other and with global change. By promoting understanding of relations among peoples of the Americas, the Center will prepare students, scholars, and professionals to work effectively in the universities, careers, and communities of societies in transition to ethnic diversity and global connectivity.<sup>1</sup>

Those of us who are eagerly awaiting the realization of the Center fully expect that it will become a valuable meeting point for the exchange of ideas, a veritable philosopher's stone of enlightened and creative contact that will help turn outstanding ideas and approaches into gold. We are hoping, of course, for the type of interdisciplinary contact that American university practices have traditionally, however unintentionally, worked against.

The faculty seminar was accepted for support by the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities for the academic year 2000-2001. The initial three professors came together as co-directors and were able to attract to the project four additional, dynamic faculty members from diverse fields: Jane Landers and Marshall Eakin from History, Ted Fischer from Anthropology, and Anne Demo from Communication Studies. In addition, the young literary scholar Deborah Cohn, who started out at McGill University and who would wind up at Indiana University, became the visiting fellow for the year.

This group of eight met every week for two hours to discuss points of common interest from divergent perspectives. While much discussion

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1. <http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/centerfortheamericas/centerfortheamericas>.

focused on the cross pollination of ideas, tendencies, policies, laws, images, and political structures from all quarters of the Western Hemisphere, everyone was acutely aware that participants from the English Department, particularly someone to represent the Canadian perspective, were missing. This absence, along with a number of other fairly common academic lacunae, points to persistent problems at American universities for Inter-American studies.

Another concern that floated in the background was the central issue of how to go beyond disciplinary structures and move toward a true Inter-American approach. What distinguishes an Inter-American perspective from one adopted by an expert, for example, in Spanish American literature or history who is keenly aware of the international forces that are constantly at play? Could we, as participants, actually re-educate ourselves to become leaders in this new field for our new Center? Would we simply be carrying out our old research under a new label? Would it be old wine in new skins?

The members of the seminar struggled with these questions cognizant of the fact that we aspired both to re-tool and to meet the needs of our home disciplines and departments. The junior faculty members were particularly sensitive to their need to meet the expectation of senior faculty members, who may not fully appreciate the value of their interdisciplinary work. The final products inevitably reflected these tensions.

As the seminar came to an end, we sought to find a way of sharing our thoughts, if not our laughter, joy, and passion for the material, with the larger community. To this end we designed the conference out of which this volume grew. To complete the vision of "Rethinking the Americas" the participants invited distinguished scholars who could add perspectives that we alone could not provide. These distinguished scholars came to Vanderbilt in the Spring of 2002 from across campus and from around the United States and Canada. The one additional speaker from campus was Lucius Outlaw. The four outside guests were Philip Howard from the University of Houston, Gordon Brotherston from Stanford University, Michael Dash from New York University, and Barbara Godard from York University. What appears in this volume is essentially what occurred during those exciting three days in April of 2002. The textual divisions reflect the different sessions that gave structure to the divergent issues under discussion. "Crossing Disciplines: The Theory and Practice of Inter-American Studies" offers reassessments of traditional disciplinary constraints and possible ways of rethinking these limitations. "Redefining Literary Boundaries: Writing the Americas" provides three examples from literature of the benefits of broadening one's perspective to include both Anglo and Hispanic America within one's critical field of vision. "Defining and Redefining Identities: What History and Anthropology Make of the

Americas" brings, from an Inter-American point of view, fresh approaches to the question of culture and identity. Missing are the papers from the session entitled "Crossing Borders: Discourse and Diffusion."

This journal was conceived from the outset as an electronic text available in cyberspace. What you have before you is a paper copy of the first volume of the *Vanderbilt e-Journal of Luso-Hispanic Studies*. We offer a print version of our virtual journal for the most obvious of reasons. It is a tangible artifact that can be shared with the contributors, friends, and libraries in ways that the e-journal cannot. It is, however, our goal that the e-journal be the primary outlet for our efforts. The journal website is [http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/spanport/eJournal\\_index](http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/spanport/eJournal_index), and this issue is located at <http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/spanport/ejournal>. The careful reader will notice that we decided to allow the contributors to maintain the academic formatting standard within their disciplines. We preferred independence to imposition and kept the footnotes and bibliography as they were presented to us.

I end with a few words of appreciation. I would like to thank Professor Carlos Jáuregui for his commitment to the creation of this journal. He took the edited papers and put them into camera-ready form and labored diligently until text and pictures were ready for printing. I would also like to express on behalf of the seminar and symposium participants our sincere gratitude to Mona Frederick, Executive Director of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, and Sherry Willis, the Center's former secretary, for their suggestions and assistance throughout. Finally, we would like to thank Dean Richard McCarty for his support of both our symposium and Vanderbilt's new Center for the Americas.