

The Changing Landscape of American Studies in a Global Era

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Introduction and State of the Field

What is the future of American Studies in a global era? Does it make intellectual sense to retain the national referent of “American” as an organizing system of knowledge at the current moment, and is there something identifiable as American in an increasingly global culture? American Studies emerged as a distinct multidisciplinary research field during the Cold War, and its intellectual assumptions, some argue, have tended to be bounded by the era’s incipient nationalism. Yet the field’s founding limitation—brought into stark relief in the current global moment—has actually generated one of the most significant intellectual opportunities in humanities scholarship in recent history.

How might we conceptualize American Studies research once we pry it loose from the geographic assumptions that have so long defined it and that reinforce the notion of a uniform, “united” nation or state? What happens to our research tools and techniques once we put pressure on the “American” part of the terminology used to designate American Studies as a distinct object of inquiry? These are the questions that are currently reconstituting how scholars undertake research across the fields of American literature, American history, and American religious studies.

Over the past two decades, interdisciplinary work that moves beyond analysis of any one nation in isolation and that places urgent intellectual questions in the larger matrix of the Americas as a hemisphere has begun to assume prominence across humanities and social science disciplines. New graduate and undergraduate programs at institutions such as the University of Southern California, Indiana University, and the University of Toronto; new journals such as *Comparative American Literature* and *Review of International American Studies*; and new associations such as the International American Studies

Association mark a dramatic shift in focus away from nation-based frameworks. Remarkable new possibilities for Americanist study are opened up when “America” is understood not as a synonym for an isolated nation but as a network of cultural influences that have extended across the hemisphere from the period of colonization to the present. Clearly, future research and curricula on all regions of the Americas will increasingly emphasize comparative and cross-regional studies.

This seismic shift in the field imaginary has generated an unprecedented need for innovative research tools and methods. Scholars are faced with the challenge of finding new ways of doing research as well as new objects of study. We must create nimble and interactive communities of scholarly inquiry that reflect hemispheric studies’ essential dynamism—communities that allow us to develop new research methods that emerge out of an understanding that national boundaries are overlapping and multiform rather than fixed. The traditional humanities research model of single-author books is giving way to collaborative research that is being undertaken by scholars who recognize that hemispheric studies work requires collaborative ventures across diverse fields of expertise. Increasingly, multiauthor books and articles, as well as grant proposals by scholars working in this interdisciplinary field, are challenging longstanding models of humanistic academic achievement. These collaborative research ventures are slowly transforming how humanities research is conceived. In the next decade, more new communities, methods, and tools are sure to emerge to meet the challenges and opportunities that a hemispheric studies approach affords.

The transition from a national to a hemispheric American Studies promises to reinvigorate existing fields. At the same time, however, it poses a serious challenge to received models of intellectual training, research, disciplinarity, and curriculum development. Although many now recognize the importance of this transformation, there is scant existing infrastructure for researchers who want to conceive their intellectual work within the rubric of this new research area. Archives, universities, academic presses, and federal funding agencies tend to reinforce national research communities, to organize knowledge within national rubrics, and therefore to inadvertently circumscribe the very questions that scholars seek to address. New learning communities, research tools, and methods are therefore urgently needed for those scholars interested in developing hemispheric learning communities.

Research Potential

Innovative digital environments, resources, services, and infrastructure are essential to the success of this new research field. In fact, rich digital media are uniquely suited to address the challenges and opportunities of reconstituting American Studies through hemispheric, transnational approaches for the following reasons.

First, the amount of data sorting that researchers must do ne-

cessitates greater flexibility across knowledge and textual fields. Scholars trained as Mexicanists, U.S. Americanists, or Brazilianists can manipulate national archives to conduct nation-based research, but these research skills and data fields are insufficient for research that endeavors to engage multinational and transnational contexts. The sheer amount of material defies traditional research methods, even as the intellectual focus of the research makes nation-focused archives and nation-organized search engines largely irrelevant.

Second, the shift from nation-based to hemispheric research models requires the development of new research tools that simultaneously capture spatial and temporal data. Geographic areas become dynamic, fluid, and multilayered research fields from a hemispheric perspective. Likewise strict, linear narratives of modern development—be they historical, anthropological, literary, religious, sociological, biological, or economic—fail to capture the multidimensional, multidirectional, and palimpsestic nature of hemispheric research. New tools that enable researchers to explore spatial and temporal dynamism are essential to hemispheric studies scholarship.

Third, this new scholarship requires the creation of an interactive research community that focuses on the overlapping histories of the states and nations of the Americas from the vantage point of a hemispheric, rather than a nation-bound, academic environment. The effort of many U.S. universities to internationalize by establishing satellite campuses expands institutional reach but fails to create a truly transnational scholarly climate. By creating a virtual world that overcomes barriers of time, space, language, economic, and cultural difference, digital media specialists and hemispheric studies scholars can transform graduate education and faculty collaboration by creating a transnational research culture. Functioning as a hemispheric university that is sustained and enhanced not by annual conference attendance and scholarly publications (as now tends to be the case) but by ongoing, interactive virtual engagement, such a community has the potential to create intellectual environments not bounded by disciplinary tradition, national culture, and monolingual norms.

Fourth, a hemispheric studies method requires dramatic pedagogical innovation at every level of teaching. The study of history, literature, and languages has been partitioned into national categories, and existing teaching tools assume the stability and inevitability of national borders. Innovative geographic models are beginning to replace categories of national literature and history with transnational rubrics such as the Pacific Rim, the transatlantic, the formerly colonized world, or the Black Atlantic. Yet the questions remain: How does one teach the Americas? How do courses with traditional U.S. foci (U.S. literature survey and U.S. history survey, for example) engage other, often lost or marginalized stories? What different technologies are needed when these stories become part of our teaching toolbox? How do research databases address the challenges of multilingualism that an Americas approach raises? Is it possible to teach the more complex, multilayered, and often-obscured literary, religious, and social histories of the Americas given existing institutional

and curricular constraints? These questions confront teachers at all levels, and answering them will necessitate increasingly rich digital environments. Students' ability to manipulate innovative digital media can offset their tendency toward monolingualism and can serve as a bridge between cultural worlds.

Rich Digital Environments: Archives and Learning Contexts

As is now probably quite clear, one of the most daunting research challenges for Americas scholars is the archive itself. Primary research material has been sifted, sorted, and processed in ways that obscure and impede non-nation-based inquiry. From subject headings to search terms to national archives, extant humanities knowledge has been organized around the idea of nation, state, or area as homologous entity. Yet, as scholars from Jacques Derrida (*Archive Fever*, 1996) to Carolyn Steedman (*Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, 2001) have observed, archives are far from objective repositories of knowledge.

To complicate matters even further, the history of print has always been in close relationship with the history of nationalism in Western culture. This relationship began in the fifteenth century, and at least since the eighteenth century, Western print culture has traditionally reinforced the importance of the nation-state as the default frame of literary and historical reference. What, how, and why certain documents are published and others are not therefore reflects particular cultural pressures and expectations. Still today, widely disseminated historical collections and literary anthologies tend to include those materials that uphold, rather than complicate, national paradigms. In short, most aspects of producing and archiving print matter militate against organizing knowledge differently. Once we recognize the extent to which print and archive cultures can collectively work to shore up strategic ways of conceptualizing the past and present, we can begin to see the profound importance that innovative digital archives might have for Americas scholarship.

Digital archives can offer new opportunities for rethinking the nation-state as the organizing rubric for literary and cultural history of the Americas. The digital medium offers unique opportunities for a hemispheric approach to historical and literary analysis in two important ways. First, because digital archives can be published not for profit, they are free to bring together materials irrespective of cost or profit from throughout the Americas, including, but not limited to, the U.S. American nation-state, as well as rare texts and texts in the original language that offer a new level of access for research and pedagogy. The second key advantage of the digital over the print medium is the former's potential for international access and scholarly collaboration as well as editorial partnership. A digital archive can reach an international audience of scholars, researchers, and students who may not otherwise have access to documents housed in U.S. archives or to published materials. Unlike the print medium, the

digital medium makes possible an unprecedented level of editorial collaboration through hypertextual cross-referencing in cyberspace. Because digital archives make available materials that are dispersed in different geographic locations, the archives facilitate collaboration and intellectual exchange among an international audience.

In short, the digital medium offers rich opportunities for transnational exchange and is therefore uniquely suited for a hemispheric approach to history. These observations are no doubt already familiar to many, but they are worth emphasizing because digital archives have the potential to radically reconceive the organizing premises of stored knowledge and to make hidden texts, material, and pasts immediately apparent.

One example of such an archive is the Our Americas Archive Partnership, or OAAP (<http://oaap.rice.edu/>). This collaboration between Rice University (Houston, Texas), University of Maryland, and Instituto Mora (Mexico City) was funded in 2007 by a three-year National Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The project brings together Americas-focused archival material from all three institutions in order to innovate both information science and academic research. Two online collections of materials in English and Spanish—the Early Americas Digital Archive (EADA) at University of Maryland and a new digital archive of materials being developed at Rice with Mora—provide an initial corpus for testing the tools. The multilingual archives illustrate the complex politics and histories that characterize the American hemisphere, but they also provide unique opportunities to further digital research in the humanities. Geographic visualization, as well as new social tagging and tag cloud cluster models, are just some of the interface techniques that the OAAP will develop with the goal of creating innovative research pathways. Users will have geospatial search, social tagging, and faceted-browsing tools to aid their manipulation of multilingual documents focusing on the Americas from the late fifteenth to the early twentieth century. As a result, new research themes, such as the contingency of nation formation, the unpredictability of national histories, and the protean character of the nation itself, come into view. New political and cultural relationships along and across national borders emerge. Translations and transcriptions of handwritten documents will make the broad range of documents more accessible to diverse audiences. The OAAP aims to innovate information science as well as academic research, and its open source technological infrastructure and interface will provide an important model for other digital library projects. Because the architecture supports integration of multiple repositories without the need of a common repository infrastructure, OAAP is meant to promote collaboration with other digital libraries. The goal is to gradually reorganize knowledge and access to material relevant to the Americas in such a way as to encourage innovation by scholars and digital media specialists across the Americas.

With these kinds of digital archives as one of their features, new research environments can become an important next step in devel-

oping a vitalized, fully realized hemispheric studies research climate. They will allow us to envision the shape, texture, and contours of the Americas over time and space: what it looked like, how it developed and changed, and why some parts of its story are dominant while others are not. They will allow us to produce, as well as to absorb, knowledge collaboratively. They will generate new questions about disciplinary practices and humanistic study, not only as they get institutionalized through study of the territory comprising the Americas but also as they confront new opportunities and limits in a global economy.

Embedding rich archives like the OAAP, such a new research environment or collaboratory, for example, might focus on building an urban environment (replete with amphitheater, classrooms, exhibit space for interactive research, lectures that take different aspects of the hemisphere as their focus, and new search tools) that facilitates transnational collaborative research. Rather than having to overcome the boundaries—be they cultural, national, linguistic, disciplinary, or institutional—that separate distinct learning communities across the hemisphere, such an environment could focus on what a truly transnational learning environment would look like. It could ask questions such as, What research opportunities emerge once academic collaboration occurs within the primary context of the hemisphere rather than the nation? What new methods and technologies best generate rigorous and innovative research in this growing field of hemispheric studies? What happens when researchers' learning environment as well as their object of study becomes transnational and hemispheric? By developing new methods of research as well as new objects of study, such a research collaboratory would create a new, interactive community of scholarly inquiry and constitute a collaborative and transnational research environment. It would function as a sort of hemispheric university—generating new research and learning models that develop out of a transnational scholarly climate.

Through visualization of diverse archival records—for example, linguistic maps, population records, regional religions, agricultural data, climatological change records, and archaeological information on migration and settlement—such an information-rich environment would allow users to develop a deeply contextual and multiperspective framework for formulating ambitious questions and research projects. Bringing into synergistic engagement ways of knowing that are often isolated by disciplinary method, such an environment has the potential to transform how humanities does its work—the questions it asks, the goals it sets for itself, and the disciplinary order it generates.

Conclusion

New research communities are springing up to meet the needs of an emerging field of inquiry in the Americas. The challenge to rethink the field's intellectual premises within the context of new geopolitical formations has generated a renaissance in scholarship in Ameri-

can Studies. While outstanding universities and scholars are producing innovative research and new book series are providing critical venues for scholarship that capture this shift in intellectual perspective, little attention has been paid to the overarching methodological, institutional, and pedagogical issues resulting from the growth of inter-American or American hemispheric studies. The oversight is unfortunate because this scholarly paradigm shift challenges us to reconsider almost every assumption that we have as humanists. From data collection and archivization to scholarly dissemination and pedagogical practices to how we organize humanistic knowledge and the questions we can imagine asking, the turn to Americas scholarship has put pressure on the very terms in which we work as humanists. Given the nature of these pressures—exponential increases in material that scholars need to process and challenges to the intellectual coordinates we use to orient ourselves, to name only a few—rich digital resources, innovative technical infrastructures, and new tools are essential if we are to ask the questions that matter and find the answers that will stand the tests of time and space.