

Introduction

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O my America, my new found lande,
My kingdome, safeliest when with one man man'd,
My myne of precious stones, my Empiree,
How blest am I in this discovering thee!

--John Donne, "To His Mistris Going to Bed"

An abstraction grew around him . . . the ruling
abstraction of himself which he saw reflected nowhere.
He was a ruler of men and a ruler of nothing. The sun
rose into the blinding wall and river before him filling
the stream and water with melting gold. He dipped his
hand in but nothing was there.

--Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960)

At the beginning of the 21st century, divisive regional thinking continues to dominate relations among the countries and territories that comprise the Western Hemisphere. For many, "America" is still only the United States. In this construction, Canada is, at best, an afterthought, a nation indistinguishable from the U.S. even at the level of international telephone dialing codes. Others use "America," as in José Martí's famous phrase "Nuestra América," to refer exclusively to Latin America, bypassing Brazil and the Caribbean (except for Martí's native Cuba). Much is lost, at times nearly destroyed, in these limited, and limiting, constructions of the hemisphere. What is one to do about this? How can one begin to dispel the misapprehensions that so many American—in the extended sense of that plural—hold about each other?

The Center for the Americas at Vanderbilt and its new journal, *AmeriQuests*, believe that the answer lies in furthering the beneficial impact that ideas and academic research have on lived realities. Bringing together scholars and innovators of all sorts, the Center for the Americas at Vanderbilt investigates the cultural, economic, and political interactions between the countries and territories of the Western Hemisphere and between the region and other parts of the world. Using its research, the Center develops and helps sustain lasting partnerships that solve problems of particular importance to the Americas. In the process, the Center reshapes the ways in which the academy conducts research, evaluates research results, and trains future generations of scholars. This is the Center's mission. In practical terms, the Center develops innovative research, pursues endeavors that cross disciplinary, social, and national borders, and endeavors to make it widely accessible in languages other than English, notably Spanish, Portuguese, and French.

The list of the problems that trouble the Americas today and thus create the subjects of the Center's work is, regrettably, a long one. It includes immigration and human rights tensions, poverty, racial and ethnic discrimination, the limited quality and availability of education, public health crises, and widespread abuses of natural resources. But since these problems are hardly unique to the Americas, what, beyond wanting to

make one's own backyard more hospitable, makes the Americas so worthy of special attention?

The answer lies in the Americas' shared, often contentious and violent, history. There is a reason why the clash between local and global interests seems so much more palpable in the Americas than elsewhere in the world: the Western Hemisphere is the place where the only remaining global superpower, the United States, came into being and cut its teeth. In 1823, U.S. President James Monroe informed France and Spain that his nation would not countenance any further European territorial ambitions in the New World. When he first announced what became popularly known as the Monroe Doctrine, he constructed the entire Western Hemisphere as a potential US protectorate. With the Spanish- American War at the end of the nineteenth century, this "protectionism" was extended even to the European colonial holdings that had previously been exempt from it, in this case, to Cuba. Monroe, with the help of John Quincy Adams, for the first time put into political practice the Puritan dictum of "American (read: United States) exceptionalism." On this foundation, the US built its national and international strength not as a *colonial* power but as a *superpower* with imperial ambitions (however veiled those have been at different points in time). Unlike the European colonial powers of old, who set out to create miniature versions of themselves whenever they expanded abroad, the US, shrewdly, did more with less. Instead of colonizing its neighbors by invading them, the US offered them "protection" against incursions from elsewhere; "freedom" was not an absolute value but meant the opportunity to join the "free world" and share its political and cultural values. The nearly two-hundred-year history of other American nations and peoples at once accommodating and resisting this ever-present implied threat to their sovereignty and cultural integrity makes the Americas a unique laboratory for a case study of global proportions and importance. Nowhere else in the world can we observe and study the intricate play of political, economic, and cultural processes that, over the course of almost two centuries, have gone into the making of a modern superpower.

The history of how the US has interacted with its hemispheric neighbors, then, has direct bearing on a question of global proportions, one that acquired new urgency after the end of the Cold War: Exactly what role should the US, as the last remaining global superpower, play in international affairs, both in the Americas and beyond? Should the present course of US globalization be reinforced, or should it be adjusted?

AmeriQuests is an important tool for the Center for the Americas to begin to debate and answer question such as these. It is a journal that invites contributors to develop methods and paradigms that reach beyond the familiar binary oppositions—us/them, self/other, center/margin—that beguile most current theories of economic dependency, nationalism, and cultural identity. For instance, none of the prevailing theories in postcolonial studies have adequately accounted for the layers of interaction between the United States and its neighbors, in part because they tend to treat culture, economics, and politics as static and separate, rather than dynamic and interlocking, spheres of social activity. By increasingly sharing intellectual resources across fields and imagining more dynamic models, interdisciplinary methods to research have slowly started to redress this situation. But much work remains yet to be done. In this sense, *AmeriQuests* is a call to action.

For its inaugural issue, *AmeriQuests* encouraged submissions that compared and contrasted ideas of “America” and “América” with lived realities in the Americas and explored where constructs and realities converged and diverged. We also called on potential contributors to consider that “America” stands for much more than an actual geography, or a single part of that geography. It also stands as shorthand for the imaginative force behind the dreams of those who try to make it their own. Since the days of the early European “discoverers” of the New World, America has been the location of countless quests: for a lost world (call it Eden, Atlantis, or El Dorado); for the fountain of eternal life; for gold and other material riches; for political and psychological freedom; and for spiritual renewal. What we know as “the American Dream,” whose gradual whittling down to what would more properly be called “the Dream of the United States of America,” has significantly shaped inter-American relations, is but one of these “quests” on which this journal hopes to shed light in order to find what “treasures,” in the form of lessons, it may offer an effort to shape a more peaceful and productive future.

When Robert Barsky named *AmeriQuests*, he thought mainly about the movement of peoples--immigrants, migrant workers, and refugees among them-- across international borders as quests for safety, for a better life, or, ideally, for both. Before September 11, 2001, one might have rightfully thought of these movements primarily as manifestations of a bright and promising America-in-the-making. The promise of “free trade” throughout the Americas, of a possible amnesty for illegal immigrants in the United States, and of bringing US law more into accord with international treaties and obligations (regarding, among others, the human rights and the environment) all seemed within imaginable reach. But since 9/11, it has been difficult, to say the least, to think of borders and border crossings in the Americas without considering the context, and the human cost, of “security” and deferred dreams in a world with permanently permeable borders. Is the quest for “national security,” especially in the United States, protecting or snuffing out actual and mythical quests for a new New World? Should the U.S. remain the central force behind “The American Dream?” Can it? These inescapable, grave, and urgent questions trouble people from across the Americas, notably among them, the migrant workers and refugees, whom several of the essays in our first journal issue feature and to whom the cover photograph by Rick Nahmias is dedicated.

The realities of hemispheric and global interconnectedness raise yet another question: Why will *AmeriQuests* primarily reside primarily in cyberspace? As an on-line publication, *AmeriQuests* has the opportunity to reach readerships that traditional print journals cannot, either because many readers cannot afford to subscribe to print journals or because there is no viable distribution system for them in many areas. Easy access is crucial if one wants to reach audiences in both academic and non-academic settings, and in regions outside of North America and Western Europe. Publishing a journal on-line increases the speed with which discussions and research results can be processed and disseminated to all potential readers, including those who do not have the benefit of major research libraries or Interlibrary Loan services. Given how difficult it is becoming nowadays to convince university and college libraries, even in the US, to subscribe to a new print journal, to expect that foreign libraries, in the Americas and elsewhere, would regularly purchase and house issues of a new print journal is wishful thinking. Even if storage and other library costs were not an issue, a print journal still would not make cutting-edge research and current debates broadly available to diverse American

audiences. Unlike printed matter, cyberspace can survive and even thrive in the heat, humidity, and utter remoteness of rainforest jungles, and it just as effectively reaches the desolate Arctic tundra. There is no good reason, for instance, why those whose lives and fates become research subjects for articles should not themselves read articles that discuss them and respond to what they read via email. An on-line journal can become a space where readers and authors can engage with one another directly. Bound volumes on dusty shelves just cannot open the door wide enough to invite a reader to become a contributor, either actively or passively.

AmeriQuests invites contributions from writers in all fields and professions in English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and other languages of the Americas. We publish materials in these languages, for now only at the level of abstracts and, eventually at the level of entire articles. Our multi-lingual publishing is but one step toward achieving the ultimate goal of the Center for the Americas: making this hemisphere, in every way that rigorous thinking and decisive action makes possible, a better place.