

In Quest of “Nuestras Américas”
or
Inter-American Studies and the Dislocation of the Traditional “American” Paradigm
or
(with apologies to José Martí and Stanley Kubrick)
How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Academic Change

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Unsettling and disturbing to some, exhilarating and liberating to others, Inter-American Studies is rapidly transforming the ways in which we, in the Americas, view ourselves, each other, and the sundry relationships that, happily and not so happily, bind us together. Crossing borders and boundaries in ways that increasingly integrate even such historically separate disciplines as the humanities, the social sciences, law, engineering, and medicine, Inter-American Studies allows us to displace our traditional and very restrictive understanding of the term “American” with a nomenclature and a methodology that include all the cultures and nations of the New World. In short, Inter-American Studies allows us to go in quest of a new and less exclusive sense of what it means to be “American,” and to do so in ways that will be beneficial to us all. As the rapidly growing Inter-American bibliography clearly shows,¹ scholars working in a variety of fields are already demonstrating that, from the northern-most reaches of arctic Canada to the wind swept face of the Tierra del Fuego, and from the California coast to the Caribbean basin, the Americas can be understood as having more in common than we have long thought, that, indeed, we can begin to see at least the outlines of similar, though far from identical, historical developments.

This point was first made several decades ago by the historian, Herbert E. Bolton, whose essay, “The Epic of Greater America,” must be regarded as required reading for anyone interested in developing an Inter-American perspective. Speaking from the perspective of the early 1930s, Bolton contends that

[t]here is need for a broader treatment of American history, to supplement the purely nationalistic presentation to which we are accustomed. European history cannot be learned from books dealing alone with England, or France, or Germany, or Italy, or Russia; nor can American history be adequately presented if confined to Brazil, or Chile, or Mexico, or Canada, or the United States. In my own country the study of thirteen English colonies and the United States in isolation has obscured many of the larger factors in their development, and helped raise up a nation of chauvinists. Similar distortion has resulted from the teaching and writing of national history in other American countries.

¹ See Earl E. Fitz, *Inter-American Literature and Criticism: An Electronic Annotated Bibliography* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998).
www.uiowa.edu/~uiypress/interamerican. (accessed October 28, 2004).

It is time for a change. The increasing importance of inter-American relations makes imperative a better understanding by each of the history and culture of all. . . .

Our national historians, especially in the United States, are prone to write of . . . broad phases of American history as though they were applicable to one country alone. It is my purpose . . . to suggest that they are but phases common to most portions of the entire Western hemisphere; that each local story will have clearer meaning when studied in the light of the others; and that much of what has been written of each national history is but a thread of a larger strand.²

It is my contention that a similar argument can be made for virtually every other academic discipline, including “American Studies,” which, from its inception, has been associated almost exclusively with the United States alone.³ Because of this particular orientation, the field of American Studies has tended to embrace a rather insular perspective and to operate from an East/West axis, cultivating studies that concentrate on the presence of European roots or influences in one New World nation alone, the United States, and too often disregarding or giving short shrift to the many and varied relationships, economic, political, and cultural, that link our many American cultures together. As an emergent field,⁴ Inter-American Studies seeks, by way of

² Herbert E. Bolton, “The Epic of Greater America,” *American Historical Review*, XXXVIII (1933), 448-49.

³ Interestingly, American Studies is itself undergoing a conceptual change, one that more and more involves an Inter-American perspective; see Cathy N. Davidson, “Loose Change,” *American Quarterly*, 46: 2 (1994): 123-138, and Janice Radway, “What’s in a Name?” *The Futures of American Studies*, ed. Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 45-75. As Paul Jay notes, “Another model is emerging . . . in American Studies, where a broad critique of the narrow, nationalist conflation of the American and the United States has sparked vigorous efforts to resituate the study of the United States literature and culture in a hemispheric or Pan-American context” (Paul Jay, “Beyond Discipline? Globalization and the Future of English,” *PMLA*, 116:1 [January 2001], 45); see also Fitz, “The Theory and Practice of Inter-American Literature: A Historical Overview,” *Beyond the Ideal: Pan-Americanism in Inter-American Affairs*, ed. David Sheinin (Westport: Praeger, 2000): 153-65. Along similar lines, J. Hillis Miller speaks of the need to create new courses that reject the old, narrow categories and that deal with the “literatures of the Americas” (*PMLA* 115, 7 [December 2000]: 2062).

⁴ One clear sign of this in the realm of literature is that Inter-American sessions are gradually becoming staples of the annual MLA convention. At the 2003 meeting, for example, no fewer than four sessions were devoted to this field: “The United States South, New World Studies, and

contrast, to alter this orientation, to expand the use of the term, “American” to permit the inclusion of the other New World nations and to redirect it toward a North/South configuration, without, however, abandoning either our European⁵ or our African heritages. In theory and in practice, then, Inter-American Studies really represents an alternative way of studying things “American” and not, as some fear, the kind of apocalyptic either/or choice that would eliminate or subvert the traditional, United States centered approach. The primary point of focus is thus different in that Inter-Americanists seek to examine the literatures, histories, legal codes, and cultural practices of the Americas as they co-exist in their own hemispheric contexts and in relation to each other. This cannot be done, of course, without also considering other, related contexts, such as the Native American, the European, or the African, for example, and this explains why Inter-American Studies is perhaps better understood as a new way of looking at old subjects—a new methodology, in other words, or a new and still disputed perspective—than it is a truly new subject matter.

In this essay my intent is two-fold in nature: to identify several of the key problems that must be confronted by anyone seeking to come to grips with Inter-American issues and to show how my discipline, literature, has already begun to solve these problems. The conception of this study, in other words, has been geared not to a theoretical justification of the field (given the rapidly expanding bibliography that currently exists, it is clear that we are already well past the “justification” stage⁶) but to a pragmatic discussion of how scholars from very different areas of expertise are learning to deal with the new complexities and possibilities that Inter-American Studies generates. It is my hope that the reader will view these comments as examples of how certain traditional disciplines are trying to accommodate the many dislocations and reconfigurations set in motion by the (re)emergence of this hemispherically comprehensive approach to the concept of “America” and to things “American.”

Ever since Bolton began offering, in 1918, his famous course on the history of the Americas⁷ at the University of California, Berkeley, in the early years of the twentieth century,

Postcolonial Theory,” “Latin Americanism and Inter-American Studies,” “Revisiting the Colony in Spanish America and Brazil: Comparative Perspectives on the Representation of National Origins and Identities,” and “A Practical Discussion about Reading the Poetries of the Americas.” Another session, focusing on the Brazilian poet, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, features a presentation that compares Drummond to William Carlos Williams.

⁵ See Jean Morency, “Forms of European Disconnection in Literature of the Americas,” trans. Nicole Santilli and Barbara Godard. *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2 (Spring 1998): 11-21.

⁶ See Fitz, *Inter-American Literature and Criticism*.

⁷ In 1928, Bolton published the syllabus of this two-semester course as a book, *A History of the Americas* (New York: Ginn and Company).

the field has attained solid intellectual credibility,⁸ a professional recognition that, its critics notwithstanding,⁹ has allowed it to percolate along, ebbing and flowing in accordance with the times, through most of the twentieth century.¹⁰ Now, in the early years of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves living in a period when Inter-American issues are once again taking center stage on a number of different fronts, from law, music, and environmental issues to literature,¹¹ politics, and economics (NAFTA, for example, or immigration policy). The Americas are, in the year 2004, getting reacquainted with each other in ways and degrees never before seen or imagined, even, perhaps, by Bolton himself. Because of this, his argument seems more pertinent, and justified, than ever, though it also remains controversial,¹² a development that, some fear, appears to subvert the power and prestige of the United States and to unjustly confuse the meaning of the word, "American." It is my view, however, that the United States actually has much to gain in this undertaking, that the term, "American" has always denoted something greater than its referencing to a single country, and that the crucial issue confronting us now is no longer "Can Inter-American literature be done?" but "How can it be done well?"

⁸ See, for example, Lewis Hanke, ed. *Do the Americas Have a Common History? A Critique of the Bolton Theory* (New York: Knopf, 1964); Robert K. Martin, "North of the Border: Whose Postnationalism?" *American Literature* 65: 2 (June 1993): 358-61; and Gustavo Pérez Firmat, ed. *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

⁹ During the 1930s and 1940s, a number of Spanish American scholars, including the Mexican philosopher, Edmundo O'Gorman, and the Peruvian intellectual, Jorge Basadre, took issue with Bolton's central thesis, arguing that the historical differences between North and South America were simply too great to allow this type of approach to succeed.

¹⁰ Another historian, Lewis Hanke, gave new life to the debate when, in 1964, he published *Do the Americas Have a Common History?* Hanke's work is particularly useful to scholars interested in entering the Inter-American debate because it includes essays that represent a variety of views and perspectives, including Latin America (the contributions by Edmundo O'Gorman and Colombia's Germán Arciniegas are exemplary) and Canada, the New World culture, along with Portuguese-speaking Brazil, so often neglected in the Inter-American project.

¹¹ At Vanderbilt University, for example, Inter-American literature has become a major strength of the Comparative Literature program, as it has for the departments of French and Italian and Spanish and Portuguese. Vanderbilt's new Center for the Americas, moreover, will expand the Inter-American perspective into all aspects of the university.

¹² Making reference more specifically to comparative literary developments in the Americas, a more contemporary critic, Cuba's Roberto Fernández Retamar, arrives, in *Para una teoría de la literatura hispanoamericana* (Mexico City: Nuestro Tiempo, 1977), at essentially the same conclusion (pp.134-36) as did such earlier commentators as O'Gorman and Arciniegas.

Seen from this perspective, that of one who has taught and written about Inter-American literature for nearly thirty years now, then, the main types of problems with which we must contend can be grouped under four large headings: the conceptual, the methodological, the linguistic, and the administrative.

Conceptually speaking, any foray into “inter-American comparatism”¹³ these days should probably not proceed until its author has carefully examined both Bolton’s groundbreaking study and the objections it elicited from other scholars. At the same time, we should not allow ourselves to be derailed by delving into this debate because Inter-American studies are becoming ever more commonplace—no matter how difficult, iconoclastic, demanding, or complicated they are to do. Put another way, this means that while we may still harbor doubts about the efficacy of this entire endeavor (some academic units may lose in power and prestige while others will gain), there is no doubt whatever that it is already being done, that researchers in a great variety of fields and disciplines are turning a comparative gaze upon the rest of the Americas and discovering much that is new or that can be seen in new ways. Whether focusing primarily on our rich and diverse indigenous traditions or on Canada, both English and French-speaking, the United States, Spanish America, in all its diversity, the Caribbean, or Brazil, we can learn a great deal by comparing ourselves to each other, by seeking to understand better how, given our many differences, we are collectively living out the greater American experience. The essential question, then, really deals with only one issue: How adroitly will we perform our Inter-American studies? How skillful and comprehensive will we be? Whether we work in history, law, music, anthropology, political science, or literature, our properly done Inter-American scholarship will necessarily involve both a great deal of “homework”¹⁴ and a willingness to see and do things differently than most of us have been trained to do. A lot of books and articles will have to be read in order to eliminate the gaps that most of us who choose to venture into this field will find that we have, and this will demand both time and commitment. Although the issue of whether Inter-American Studies is a legitimate field of study, or whether it can be done at all, could be debated endlessly, what we are seeing at the present time is a proliferation of precisely this type of study, and in a startling variety of fields.

Closely related to the conceptual concern, and especially to how that concern might be allayed, is the question of methodology. Inherently comparative in nature, Inter-American study, in whatever particular manifestation it may take, inevitably deals with both similarities and differences. And just as in the discipline of Comparative Literature itself, it is the differences that will occupy most of our analytical time and energy, for it is here, in the differences, that what is most unique and distinctive about each New World culture, or each New World author or text, can be dealt with most accurately and honestly. Indeed, as an analytical discipline Comparative Literature itself tends to accept and explore difference more than it cultivates the similarities between texts, and this is why the comparative approach, which focuses more on difference than

¹³ Pérez Firmat, *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?*, 4.

¹⁴ Martin, “North of the Border,” 358.

on similarity, will go a long way toward alleviating the concerns of scholars like Fernández Retamar who fear that the very real historical differences between the United States and the rest of the Americas are so great that they make valid comparative study all but impossible.

To hold such a position, however, assumes that successful comparative work is based on similarities when, in fact, it is much more based on a recognition and acceptance of difference, albeit a difference understood as existing not in isolation but within larger patterns of cultural, linguistic, and historical development. Apples and oranges can, in fact, be compared as long as a methodological framework is established that allows us to study them in some sort of common critical context. Although quite different in appearance, both are edible fruits, just as the various American nations, though different, share a common historical heritage or experience. If properly applied, the comparative method, so crucial to the success of the Inter-American project, accommodates and honors difference but without homogenizing or minimizing it.

Two closely related questions have to do with the courses we teach and the scholarship we produce. As Inter-Americanists, can we legitimately expect our students to deal with cultures about which they may have little or no expertise? On the other hand, is not the acquisition of new knowledge the very reason that colleges and universities exist? Should we not challenge our students, asking them to build and expand upon what they already know so as to see the larger patterns that exist? My answer, emphatically, is, yes, that is precisely what we need to do. We fail as teachers if we do not teach our students of American literature, for example, at least something about the literature, history, and culture of Canada, Spanish America, the Caribbean, and Brazil. Writers, artists, and intellectuals from these hemispheric neighbors know a great deal about the United States, and we should not allow ourselves to languish in ignorance and apathy about them. To do so in the twenty-first century is not merely insulting and provincial, it is dangerous. The key issue really has to do with *how* we do this, *how* we achieve this pedagogical end, for not all methods and approaches are as effective as others. Here, too, there are important differences. Readings concerning unknown cultures must be selected very carefully, and each one must relate in some meaningful way to the others. Only by working in this closely coordinated fashion can the student hope to integrate the new material into her existing corpus of knowledge. We must also recognize that, due to the time limitations imposed on us by the academic calendar, there will be real limits to the amount of new material that can be introduced, so once again we must be unusually judicious in terms of what we finally choose to use.

The selection of course materials speaks directly to the second question, the issue of breadth versus depth. Too often we envision our courses only in terms of one or the other, whereas in fact we can, if we are very careful about our readings, our lectures, and our discussions, achieve both breadth and depth, relatively speaking, at least. And, although it is difficult to attain this type of balance, it is well worth the effort, at least insofar as survey courses on Inter-American literature are concerned. The ideal goal, seemingly, would be to create a course that would have a primary focus, one linking most, if not necessarily all, of the primary and secondary readings, but that would also build in the inclusion of other New World cultures, not as tokens but as an integral, if slightly scaled down, version of or comparison with the main thrust of the course. In my course on nineteenth century Inter-American literature, for example, we read, among other things, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab*, José de Alencar's *Senhora*, and

Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* as novels from different regions in the Americas (Cuba, Brazil, the United States) that deal with the institution of marriage, especially as seen from the perspective of the woman involved. By establishing such a triangular perspective, I have found that the students can compare and contrast much more effectively and that our examinations of the texts lead naturally into discussions of a host of related issues and topics. Judging from the student comments, it seems clear that they find the tripartite comparative approach satisfying and engaging and that they also appreciate the fact that the rest of the course can be devoted to an examination of other points, including the birth of the novel genre in the Americas, a fact that allows us to read Felipe Aubert de Gaspé fils's *The Influence of a Book*, a text widely judged to be the first French-Canadian novel and one that fits in nicely with the most germane cultural and political questions of the day.

The triadic approach has also proven popular in my course on twentieth-century Inter-American literature, in which we read Nicole Brossard's *Mauve Desert*, Clarice Lispector's *The Hour of the Star*, and Sylvia Malloy's *Certificate of Absence*, texts which allow for discussions of influence and reception, the emergence of a feminist aesthetic in the Americas,¹⁵ and translation as a political act in the dissemination of Inter-American literature. By focusing on worthy but less well known texts, we are able to link these to related trends in the United States, a culture whose writers the students tend to know and to whom they can more easily and efficaciously make the necessary methodological connections. A variation in the reading list for this course has had students reading such texts as Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (truly one of the most egregiously underappreciated novels of the 1960s), Hubert Aquin's *Prochain épisode*, Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (which influenced a generation of writers in both Canada and the United States), Machado de Assis's *Dom Casmurro*, and John Barth's *The Floating Opera* (a work directly influenced by several of Machado's later works and that helped facilitate Barth's now famous endorsements of the "New Narrative" then emerging from Latin America).¹⁶ A recently appeared novel, Michel Basilières's *Oiseau noir/Black bird* (2003), offers a wryly comic view of the same tumultuous era described by Aquin (the FLQ, Che Guevara, the kidnapping of ambassadors, as in Brazil) while at the same time offering, in its merging of the bizarre, the political, and the humane, an engaging parallel with both Antônio Callado's *Quarup* (one of the outstanding Brazilian novels of the 1960s) and, especially, Márquez's landmark text. One feels, in fact, that the Buendía family would feel right at home with the family Desouche and that they would understand each other quite well! Owing to the abundance of marvelously translated material, the possibilities for organizing a successful twentieth-century Inter-American literature course, including poetry, are almost limitless. Indeed, a wonderful new course could

¹⁵ Barbara Godard, "The Translator as She: The Relationship between Writer and Translator," *The Feminine: Women and Words* (Edmonton: Longspoon Press, 1985) 193-198.

¹⁶ See Fitz, "The Influence of Machado de Assis on John Barth's *The Floating Opera*," *The Comparatist* 10 (May 1986): 56-66, and John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *Atlantic* (August 1967): 29-34, and "The Literature of Replenishment," *Atlantic* (January 1980): 65-71.

even be woven around the emergence of the “New Novel” of the 1960s in English and French Canada, the United States, Spanish America, and Brazil.

The first semester of Bolton’s history class, to once again invoke the original paradigm for this type of course, treated the European heritage, the importance of our various indigenous traditions, and the development of colonial society in the Americas, while the second focused, again comparatively, on the wars for independence, the evolution of the Americas as independent nation states, and the development of Inter-American relations.¹⁷ The scholarship that comes from such a course structure will depend greatly on how much outside reading and research the student and professor are willing to undertake. For undergraduates, it would seem prudent, in order to achieve a clearly focused and cogently argued study, to limit both the direction and extent of the outside readings, while for graduate students, who, presumably, would bring a higher level of expertise in at least one or two of the pertinent cultures under discussion in the course, a somewhat more expansive, though still carefully directed, project would be in order. Additionally, the graduate student would be expected to master more of the germane bibliography for each of the national literatures under consideration and to begin to identify at least some of the possible Inter-American connections. If the student is looking at the origins of the novel in French-Canada, Brazil, and Spanish America, for example, the bibliography for the requisite texts would have to be identified, studied, and then integrated into the background for their own research projects.

And for faculty members seeking to publish their inter-American research, the essential decision will involve focusing, limiting, and structuring one’s work so that it conforms, in size, scope, and orientation, to the prevailing requirements of the appropriate refereed journals and academic presses. Not all journals are as accepting or as flexible as others in terms of the kind of study they will accept (a journal traditionally associated with a single national literature may not, for example, be receptive to the idea of an inter-American approach), and so it behooves the scholar to check beforehand with the journal’s editors to see whether they would consider such a study. To move from narrowly focused work in a single department, moreover, to work that is inter-American in nature nearly always involves both expansion, of scope and of the number of pages expended, and a change of identity, and these issues can become serious, if not insurmountable, problems. As we make this move, it therefore seems wise to keep in mind that manuscripts for many, if not most, academic journals and presses must conform to a page or word limit, and if we wish our work to be considered for these venues, we must do our best to adhere to their editorial requirements—even if this will limit what we can say. Focus of argumentation, selectivity, and concision of both expression and exegesis are thus virtues of the highest order in inter-American research.

A third issue that must be confronted is the language question. In addition to the numerous Native American languages that are still spoken and that thus might well be involved, inter-American scholarship necessarily deals, in alphabetical order, with texts written in Dutch, English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. In terms of its successful long term development, extensive language training would thus appear to be a *sine qua non* for our field, an absolute

¹⁷ Bolton, *A History of the Americas*, iv.

requirement. At the same time, I understand that it is a thorny issue, one freighted with concerns over political, cultural, and individual identity and, on another level, with the potentially divisive issues of professional training and competence and departmental hegemony. English departments, for example, are among the largest and most powerful academic units in the humanities, yet too often their faculty and students are ill equipped to deal with literature written in languages other than English and with the cultural histories these represent.¹⁸ Latin Americanists, Canadianists, and inter-American comparatists, by way of contrast, typically work in four New World languages, English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, and specialize in at least one, and sometimes two (often Spanish and Portuguese), of these. At the same time, it must be said that it would be a mistake to militate, purely on the grounds of linguistic limitations, against the active participation of English departments in the inter-American project since their response to it will have a great deal to do with how rapidly and successfully it develops.¹⁹ Indeed, there is ample reason to be optimistic on this score since, as evidenced by the content of several new anthologies of American literature, it is clear that editors are increasingly making space for the plethora of new voices that continue to pluralize and enrich the culture of the United States, a development which, I believe, will make its recognition as one of many “American” cultures somewhat easier. Still, the problem of language training, so essential to this field of scholarship, must be recognized and confronted for its resolution, or avoidance, will have a decisive effect on the future of inter-American studies generally. As Mary Louise Pratt puts it, “The lived reality of multiculturalism and the imperatives of global relations both fly in the face of monolingualist language policies, while those policies inflict needless social and psychic violence on vulnerable populations.”²⁰

Indeed, the centrality of language training to Inter-American studies closely parallels its importance to Comparative Literature as a discipline, and for similarly compelling reasons (it is always preferable to read texts in their original languages). Yet the reality is that many scholars who wish to engage with inter-American issues or perspectives will have to do so via translations, though the question of how appropriate this reliance is will be a constant concern, as it is in Comparative Literature generally,²¹ and one to which we must all be sensitive. It can be very convincingly argued, in fact, that our entire sense of Inter-American literature as a new field owes its existence largely to the work of skilled and discerning translators such as Gregory Rabassa who have effectively created a large body of texts for the English-speaking audience of North

¹⁸ See Martin, *North of the Border*.”

¹⁹ Conceivably, an English department might wish to create a track for their students that would call for a heavy concentration on the literature and culture of the United States but that would allow, perhaps through the use of translated texts, a more Inter-American approach.

²⁰ Mary Louise Pratt, “Building a New Public Idea about Language,” *Profession* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2003), 111.

²¹ See David Damrosch, “Comparative Literature?” *PMLA*, 18: 2 (March 2003): 326-330.

America to read. At the same time, we recognize that a reliance on translated material will be a greater problem for some fields (literature, for example, where concerns over style are always paramount, especially in a genre like poetry) than for others (economics, political science, or law, where issues of factuality or procedure tend to predominate). As a result, one could argue that for the present time, at least, translation should be viewed as an acceptable way of allowing inter-American research to proceed (we are fortunate in the Americas to have had an abundance of brilliant translators helping us get to know each other), particularly at the undergraduate level. In this same vein, I would like to stress that it is always better to know something even imperfectly (through the lens of translation) than it is to be 100% ignorant of it. To deny one's self the pleasure of experiencing Guimarães Rosa's great epic of banditry and metaphysical speculation, *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, merely because its English language translation cannot match the power and magic of its original Portuguese—it is, after all, a “language novel” in the tradition of *Finnegans Wake*—is absurd. In reading a translation, however, we should always be alert to the inevitable changes that occur in the act of translation, the inescapable process of loss and gain that characterizes even the best translations.²² No matter how successful it is judged to be, no translation, moreover, is ever “neutral,”²³ or an exact reproduction of the original upon which it is based; a translation and its original are always two separate and distinct texts (both of which exert very pronounced cultural valorizations and interplay), and the scholar who would rely exclusively on the translated text should always exercise extreme caution in making stylistic comments about it. At the same time, there is no doubt that Inter-American literature, like Comparative Literature itself, will find that translation continues to serve, oft times aiding and abetting intense language study, as a major part of its attractiveness and success. The two are not incompatible, and the savvy scholar will find a way to weave them together in a mutually beneficial way.

Then, too, it is axiomatic that a scholar who is able to work via translation only is limited to those texts that someone else has rendered into another language, a condition which makes it impossible for the scholar working with the translated texts to evaluate literary progression or developments or to have any secure sense of how a particular author evolved or why. Translations can help us get started and fill in lacunae that we may have in our reading, but they cannot serve indefinitely as the primary basis on which we do our work. Graduate students in particular must be able to work with texts in their original languages, which is why, if Inter-American studies is

²² A marvelous example of this comes from Nicole Brossard's *Le Désert mauve* (Quebec: Hexagone, 1987; English Translated as *Mauve Desert* by Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood [Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990]), in which the process of translation itself comes alive as part of the novel.

²³ Indeed, for certain New World cultures (most notably, perhaps, Québec, though also Brazil), the entire question of translation is deeply politicized. See Kathy Mezei, “Speaking White: Literary Translation as a Vehicle of Assimilation in Quebec.” *Canadian Literature* 117 (1988): 11-23; and Sherry Simon, *L'inscription sociale de la traduction au Québec* (Montréal: Office de la langue française, 1989).

to flourish in the long run as a field, it must require serious, extensive study in at least three of our New World languages as an integral part of its academic training. As this field develops, we must call for more language study, not less. In our ever-more interrelated world, monolingualism can only be regarded as a fundamental weakness, and to become a professional Inter-Americanist must always mean that one is multilingual, regardless of the language in which one wishes to specialize.

The real issue involving translation and the Inter-Americanist thus involves not how we are prepared to work in this field right now but how we, as scholars, will insist that our graduate students be trained in the years to come. Our real concern, therefore, should not be with how things are at the present but how they will be twenty years from now, when, in one form or another, Inter-American Studies will have established itself as an academic field. Representing the future, these young scholars must be required to steep themselves, as undergraduates, and even earlier, if possible, in at least three New World languages, ideally the three or four, they will eventually wish to work with professionally. Moreover, it is simply not sufficient for a student who wishes to become a serious Inter-Americanist to take a course or two in even intermediate French, Spanish, or Portuguese since “Knowing a language well enough to get by in the day to day is very different from knowing a language well enough to read sophisticated texts, write, develop adult relationships, exercise one’s profession, move effectively in a range of contexts, and adapt quickly to new situations.”²⁴ Committed, long-term language study is required to reach the level of proficiency required here. While, as Martin notes,²⁵ this kind of rigorous language training is not easily embraced by many of the traditional units of “American academic life,” how we deal with it—what kind of language training we demand of ourselves and of our doctoral students especially—will largely determine how well or how poorly future Inter-American scholarship is done in the years to come. Some literature and humanities units, Comparative Literature, French, German, Spanish and Portuguese, History, and Philosophy, for example, may accommodate this demanding language requirement more easily than others, but, to be successful in this venture, all will have to confront and resolve it.

Again we see that the role of English is acute. As Spanish increasingly becomes the unofficial “second language” of the United States, we are already seeing an increase in the number of Hispanic surnamed young scholars going into American Studies and American literature (understood once again in its traditional sense, as being synonymous with the United States). To the extent that these scholars are truly bi-lingual, they are able to perform serious textual analysis and cultural commentary in both English and Spanish, and this, of course, is a very positive development. What is troubling to the Inter-Americanist in this scenario, however, is the possibility that, with this steady increase in Hispanics and, possibly, the presence of Spanish language texts in fields like American Studies and “American” literature, scholars in them will begin to conceive of Inter-American studies in rigidly binary terms, in terms of the English and

²⁴ Pratt, “Building a New Public Idea about Language,” 116.

²⁵ Martin, “North of the Border,” 359.

Spanish speaking hemisphere alone. If this were to happen—and, alas, it already is in some quarters—, it would be quite unfortunate, since scholars who took this position would, in effect, be cutting themselves off from the literary richness and cultural diversity of both Portuguese-speaking Brazil, a nation with a historical and cultural development very different from its Spanish-speaking neighbors, and French-speaking Québec. Moreover, to define Inter-American studies as a function of only Spanish and English, as too many scholars are already beginning to do, is to restrict the field in ways that, as we have seen, will actually distort our vision of it and inhibit its development.²⁶ Although areas of specialization will typically depend on one's linguistic abilities, we should never lose sight of the fact that at its best Inter-American Studies involves at least three, if not all, of the cultures of the Americas and not merely two of them. The influence of writers like Whitman, Poe, or Faulkner, for example, should not be imagined only in terms of Spanish America but in terms of Canada (requiring French) and Brazil (requiring Portuguese) as well. Explosive though it is, then, the question of language competency lies, restively, at the heart of the entire Inter-American project, though the precise manner of its resolution may well differ, as we have seen, discipline by discipline.

Finally, there is what might be described as the administrative issue, the question of where and how Inter-American teaching and scholarship fit into the evaluation process employed at our colleges and universities. Given the fact that there is not yet an established job market for Inter-Americanists *per se*, and that those scholars who wish to pursue this kind of teaching and research have to do it as members of more traditional departments and programs (and who may, therefore, have to have their non-traditional research evaluated by colleagues holding very different and perhaps even non-sympathetic evaluation criteria), there is the fear, and the very real possibility, that tenure and promotion may be more difficult, or controversial, for the would-be Inter-Americanist than for a more “traditional” scholar. This entirely reasonable concern will, if not dealt with honestly and openly by programs, departments, and administrators, have a chilling effect on the development of this still amorphous field. As Mary Louise Pratt observes:

Institutional structures have not caught up with the changes in our modes of inquiry and objects of study. Many universities solve the problem through a division of labor between disciplinary departments and interdisciplinary programs. This arrangement becomes less and less satisfactory over time because departments tend to retain the powers of appointment and promotion. A familiar contradiction results. Programs are created to house kinds of inquiry not included

²⁶ We are already seeing references to “Latin America” when the proper term is Spanish America, unless, of course, one means to include Portuguese-speaking Brazil, a nation that, in the opinion of one eminent scholar, can boast of having, along with that of the United States, “the richest national literature in the New World” (Roberto González Echevarría, ed., Preface, *The Oxford Book of Latin American Short Stories* [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], xii).

in department-based disciplines, but scholars pursuing those kinds of inquiry must satisfy the requisites of the department-based disciplines whose parameters their work does not fit insofar as it is of interest to the program.²⁷

On the other hand, my own experience at Vanderbilt University has shown me that the necessary institutional support can indeed be attained, and that those departments and administrators who have had the courage and vision to do so have positioned themselves on the cutting edge of this exciting new field, able to influence the direction it will take in the upcoming decades. In so doing, such traditional academic units as Comparative Literature, French and Italian, German and Slavic, and Spanish and Portuguese, working in consort with the Office of the Dean and the newly established Center for the Americas, have established themselves as leaders in the field.

There are some steps, administratively speaking, that can be taken to ensure that junior Inter-Americanists receive, at both the departmental and decanal levels, the support they need to do the kind of innovative, non-traditional research highlighted by Pratt. First of all, they can be hired, officially, as joint appointments, with a specified teaching and research assignment in (most likely) two programs written into the contract—this to eliminate confusion and doubt as to the number and kind of courses that are to be taught for each unit and over the kind of research that is to be produced. It is easy to understand, I think, how a tenure-track Inter-Americanist might profitably be shared by a program in Comparative Literature and English, French, or Spanish and Portuguese, but, owing to the historical importance of the field German-American literary and cultural relations, it also makes good sense, considering the importance of the German intellectual tradition to the Americas, to think about a joint hire in German and Comparative Literature as well. Once the principle of the joint-appointment is established, administratively speaking, the possibilities for strengthening both units with a single hire are virtually limitless, a point not lost on progressive, forward-looking administrators seeking ways to assist valuable departments hurt, perhaps by falling enrollments or a changing job market.

Second, and with regard to the process of tenure and promotion evaluation, department and program heads should work closely together and with their respective faculties to be sure they recognize and support the importance of Inter-American research and teaching, even though these may depart from strictly traditional approaches to these issues. A sticking point here can be the specific journals and presses in which the Inter-Americanist publishes, and a faculty must, on balance, be able to support both kinds of work published, perhaps in non-traditional journals or forms (electronic publishing, for example), and more traditional work published in traditional places. As long as these venues are refereed and of recognized critical seriousness, and as long as the faculty can endorse the overall quality of the scholarship produced, there should be no reason why the departments and programs involved cannot vote to support a young Inter-Americanist for tenure and promotion. To do so would be to their great advantage, as has already proven to be the

²⁷ Mary Louise Pratt, "The New Humanities," *MLA Newsletter*, 35: 3 (fall 2003): 3-4.

case with Comparative Literature programs which, across the country and throughout the Americas, are actively cultivating Inter-American literature as a field of tremendous potential.

Finally, and, in some ways, most importantly, program and department heads must make certain that they have the full support of the Office of the Dean in seeking to promote Inter-American teaching and research as a basic part of their offerings. At every step of the process of development, the Office of the Dean must be involved. The Dean must be fully apprized of the relative newness of Inter-American scholarship and of the lingering contentiousness, academically political as well as intellectual, that swirls around it, but the Dean must also be made aware of how exciting and new it is and, above all, how profoundly it relates to groundbreaking work being done not only in the humanities and social sciences (cultural exchanges, border issues, and shared economic concerns) but in the hard sciences (engineering and environmental issues, for example), medicine (issues of public health and health care systems), and law (bioterrorism, human rights, and immigration policies) as well. As the creation of Vanderbilt's Center for the Americas clearly demonstrates, the potential dividends to the entire university community, and to the surrounding region, have made this a project one that, from the beginning, was designed as a structure that could benefit everyone involved. In short, the administrative officers of a college or university must always be made aware of the tremendous potential that Inter-American Studies holds for a great many different disciplines and colleges and of the many new possibilities for collaborative work (and outside funding!) that it suddenly makes possible. From the Dean to the Provost, college and university officials must be on board as endorsing Inter-American work and development, for while the potential benefits are there for everyone, no single unit can risk venturing into this new area without this type of committed and unflagging administrative support.

In summation, however, I must stress that the question of academic training remains the key issue, the one that will ultimately determine the future of Inter-American Studies, and this is why the requirements we establish for our students is so important. For faculty members currently in place, on the other hand, there is a clear and sometimes painful awareness that we are what we were trained to be, and our professional situations, to say nothing of our intellectual proclivities and methodologies, do not always make it easy to change. Nor do these conditions make it any easier to recognize change even within our own disciplines, the current state of American Studies being a prime example of this. Yet this is precisely what becoming an Inter-Americanist, or adopting a more Inter-American perspective in our classes and in our research, demands. More than we sometimes like to admit, the work we do as teachers and scholars is rather stringently determined by the kind of training we received and by the requirements of the positions we hold. If we were hired to teach "American" literature (meaning the literature of the United States), for example, we may find it difficult to adopt or even accept the Inter-American orientation even though we might well see its value and potential. On the other hand, if we work in departments of history, economics, Comparative Literature, French, or Spanish and Portuguese, it is far easier for us to either develop new courses emphasizing the Inter-American approach, as we have done in Vanderbilt's Comparative Literature program, or to integrate the Inter-American methodology into existing courses, which Vanderbilt is now doing in many of its French and Latin American literature courses. And while it is certainly true that few of us were ever formally trained as Inter-

Americanists, our task is to find ways to become such, to catapult our thinking beyond the boundaries set by the stale, narrow confines of our traditional disciplines and to begin, discipline by discipline, to examine the Americas, North, Central, and South, in this new and more integrated, but never homogenized, perspective.

As we learn to do this, and above all as we attempt to offer the Inter-American perspective to our students and colleagues, we will also realize why the very real (and, in some cases, still rancorous) differences that have long splintered the Americas and that still sow ill-will, animosity, and mistrust between many of our New World nations must be recognized and understood in their complete historical, political, economic, and cultural contexts. Conceptually speaking, this step is in some ways the most crucial, particularly for the United States, the most powerful American nation and the one whose influence has reached into every other American culture, as Alberto Fuguet's brilliant new novel, *Las películas de mi vida* (*The Movies of My Life*, 2003) vividly demonstrates. The problem, however, is that "Americans" tend to know next to nothing about their New World neighbors. Worse, we in the United States have a history of treating our hemispheric *vecinos/vizinhos/voisins* with disdain and of supporting economic and political policies that encourage the exploitation of the vulnerable by the strong, a policy that everywhere in the Americas has generated enmity and resentment. We must view our neighbors in the Americas, and elsewhere, as equals and partners and not as markets to be exploited or cultures to be derided. Budding Inter-Americanists who intend to work from the perspective of the United States must confront the impact that the policies of their nation have long had on their New World neighbors, many of whom are frustrated with the discrepancy between the wonderful ideals that define the United States as a political structure—equality and justice for all—and its too frequent support for right-wing dictatorships and the economic policies that sustain them. If we wish to regain the respect of other nations, we must stop violating our own highest principles.

That we have done so too often explains another well-known if rancorous aspect of Inter-American Studies as it has so far developed: that Canadianists and Latin Americanists nearly always know much more about the United States, its literature, culture, and history, than students and even faculty in the United States know about either Canada or Latin America. Although this is partly a matter of narrow professional training, it is also partly a matter of cultural bias, and, as such, it constitutes a major obstacle to successful Inter-American study, one that must be overcome. It is sadly ironic that the United States, the American nation that has influenced more than anyone else the lives of people in the other New World nations, knows the least about them, which is why Inter-American Studies is far more problematic for students and scholars in the United States than it is for either Canadianists or Latin Americanists, both of whom have, in effect, been dealing with Inter-American issues for over two hundred years. As an emergent field, then, Inter-American Studies allows the United States a way of confronting its past and of using its greatness to lead by democratically inspired example—think Walt Whitman as opposed to George Bush—and principle rather than by coercion, intimidation, and hypocritical posturing. The issues of economic exploitation and political interference still loom large, and they must be confronted, openly and honestly, by anyone seeking to become an Inter-Americanist, but particularly if one chooses to engage in this type of work from the perspective of the United States, a nation which must assume a position of enlightened leadership in this field. No matter

what field one seeks to involve in this vast project, its students and scholars must face up to the truth of our too often ignoble Inter-American history. Only when we have all done this can we all go forward together, as truly “Good Neighbors,” and, if we are very fortunate, perhaps with a new sense of justice and respect for all concerned. To the extent that, as a developing field, Inter-American Studies can help bring this about, it is an eminently worthy undertaking.