Remapping Genre through Performance: From “American” to “Hemispheric” Studies

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I need you to imagine that there is something beyond your frontiers . . . that there is a world across your borders. Can you imagine that?

—Jesúsa Rodríguez

I only gradually came to understand the complexities of what it meant to be a citizen of the Americas and a scholar of hemispheric studies, that undisciplined and ungovernable body of knowledge and relations organized around the oddly shaped landmass misidentified, mislabeled, and misrepresented from the moment of the first European explorations. In grade school in the north of Mexico, I was taught that América was one, conceptually singular. Nuestra América, we shared a continent. After my Canadian parents sent me to boarding school in Toronto at age nine to learn English, I was not sure. No one understood a word I said. And where, my classmates wondered, was Mexico anyway? North America? South America? Latin America? When at age fourteen I returned home, now Mexico City, my Mexican friends could not quite place Canada—a country also elided by a linguistic slip as part of Norte América, which in Spanish refers explicitly to the United States. So now Canada fell off the map. And even before I moved to the United States in 1982, I had learned that here Americas is plural when specifying the hemisphere (north and south) and singular only in reference to “America”—the United States of America. My daughter’s 1993 grade-school edition of the Rand McNally Picture Atlas of the World mapped out three Americas. Mexico and “Central” America apparently belong to “Middle America,” a designation that contains and distances. Now a citizen of the United States, I understand that this America—often depicted visually as a free-floating, deracinated landmass—is also deeply divided: rich and poor, religious and secular,
black and white. Whites are also divided into non-Hispanics and Hispanics, the latter further broken down into the documented and undocumented. The “two Americas” John Edwards pointed to bespeak deep ruptures of all kinds within the fifty states. When the Mexican activist SuperBarrio ran for president of the United States in 1996, he claimed that “we are all Americans” in the Americas and that, because what happens in the United States affects us all, we should all be allowed to vote in United States elections. And run for office. These experiences at trying to align identity with geographic location, cultural practices, naming, and heavily policed ideological borders initiated me into the tangled systems of expression, representation, and economic and power relations that I would eventually come to understand as a shared hemispheric reality. America: it depends how you look at it. What you call it. How you live it.

I begin this essay with a personal anecdote to underline the interrelatedness of my two basic points. America, Americas, and hemispheric are terms not for places or objects but for practices, and there is a relation between how one lives America and the naming and conceptualization of a field of study.

The January 2003 special topic of PMLA was America: The Idea, the Literature. Here, for the Remapping Genre issue, I offer a complementary perspective: America: The Idea, the Performance. Performance as a genre allows for alternative mappings, providing a set of strategies and conventions that allow scholars to see practices that narrative, poetry, or even drama as a scripted genre might occlude. Like other genres, performance encompasses a broad range of modes and categories. It might refer to a set of rehearsed and codified behaviors (dance, theater performance, a music recital, sports events, rituals, and so on) with conventions, beginnings, and ends, taking place in a bracketed space and time separated from daily life. Those acts might become the object of study for a historian, a dance theorist, or a ritual specialist. Scholars can also study daily life as a performance by focusing on a series of practices, conventions, presentations of self, and the aesthetics of everyday life. A performance lens allows one to look at acts, things, and ideas as performance. So if America is not a performance, it can be analyzed as one. In fact, looking at America as a performance might explain why it is so difficult to approach it as a disciplinary field of study. What might the shift in genres—from the scripted genres associated with the archive to the live embodied behaviors that are the repertoire of cultural practices—enable?

I propose that an analysis of the performance of America might allow scholars to rethink not only their object of analysis but also, more important, their scholarly interactions.

Performance, of course, is an expansive genre, composed of multiple overlapping and often competing cultural repertoires and practices. Here I will use two of the many possible manifestations of the repertoire, performatives and what I call animatives, to explore the contested enactment of America. Performatives, in J. L. Austin’s understanding of the term, refers to language that acts, that brings about the very reality that it announces (e.g., the preacher’s declaration “I now pronounce you man and wife” has the force of law). These utterances are verbal performances that take place in highly codified conventions; their power stems from the legitimacy invested in authorized social actors (priests, judges, presidents, etc.) rather than in individuals. Animatives are part movement, as in animation; part identity, being, or soul, as in anima or life. The term captures the fundamental movement that is the life of (that breathes life into) embodied practice. Also pertaining to the repertoire, animatives refer to actions taking place on the ground, as it were, in the messy and often less structured interactions among individuals. Performative, then, might index the referee’s declaration of the winner in a sport, while animative points to the ruckus that breaks out in the stadium.
In this essay, then, I use a performance lens to look at the production of America as a practice as well as an object of analysis to suggest that critical attention to repertoires of lived behavior might illuminate different versions of past events, enable alternative mappings, and generate other models of scholarly interaction. My first point is that embodied behaviors can reveal histories that fail to make it into the archive in the form of books or records. One example: Catholic communities in northern Mexico and the southwestern United States found themselves observing family traditions that they could not explain—lighting candles on Friday for the special evening meal or covering the mirrors when someone died. These performances had outlived memory, preserving what the families had long forgotten—that their ancestors were Jews who migrated north beyond the immediate focus of the Inquisition in Mexico City. These crypto-Jews had cloaked their religious beliefs in accepted expressions of Catholicism for so long that they gradually forgot who they were and became Catholic. Make-believe, as Victor Turner often noted, can make belief (Schechner, *Performance Studies* 42–43). This example illuminates performance’s capacity to forge a new belief through reiterated behaviors (Pascal’s famous “Kneel and you will believe”), even as it retains traces of older practices, forgotten as religion but lived as familial tradition. Scholarly attention to the repertoire of lived practices that hold on to these enactments, forgettings, and reinventions, then, can augment and complicate our understanding of historical trajectories and interconnections that the archive might leave out.

Second, this essay asks what might be at stake—disciplinarily and generically—in rethinking American studies in relation to hemispheric studies, a shift that I discuss in connection with the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, which I cofounded and have directed for the past nine years. Although scholars throughout the Americas may share certain objects of study, they seldom share basic assumptions, a common vocabulary, or theoretical readings. Part of my interest in this topic lies in the consideration of whether a different epistememic lens might animate a different practice.

There are problems, always problems, when scholars discuss America: the topic is huge, much of the terrain is well traveled, and my approach, admittedly, veers all over the map. Worse still, everyone is sick of this discussion. Many agree theoretically that *America* is a misnomer yet continue to use it because there is nothing to be done. *America*, however, is more than a misnomer. To colleagues in the south, it is an act of aggression, an appropriation by people in the United States that excludes other inhabitants of the landmass. This critique necessarily gets cast as repetitive whining rather than a critical intervention—“necessarily” because if scholars took the critique seriously, they would have to change their practice. So *America* not only means no one thing, it actually blocks hemispheric communication because users have profoundly different affective connections to the word. One reason to raise (again) the topic of America is to advocate the development of a vocabulary that enables those of us working in this unwieldy area to communicate across our diverse cultural histories. My walk through this massive territory, hitherto constituted by an archive of maps, narratives, epics, constitutions, and other scripted genres, revisits the often trod path but takes an embodied turn.

Here is my road map. I explore the staging of America through a repertoire of both performatives, declared from a seemingly disembodied and centered position above the fray (the referee), and animatives, the more chaotic and contested movement experienced on the ground (the disruptive fans in the stadium).

**“American” Performatives**

Much as drama as genre offers a set of conventions that cover a broad experiential and epis-
emic range (say, comedy and tragedy as forms not only of emplotment but also of understanding the world), performance as genre covers a broad range of practices that convey different affective and epistemic positions. These practices usually include theater, dance, music, and other arts that involve public presentation, as well as a spectrum of other practices, as I indicated above. Performance as reiterated act, or what Richard Schechner calls “twice-behaved behavior” (Between Theater 36), includes language that acts (Austin’s performatives) as well as animatives—embodied, lived, contradictory, vexed behaviors, experiences, and relationships. The archive offers many literary texts, maps, and legal documents that contributed to the creation of America as both a nationalist construct and an academic field. But the repertoire of performance practices also offers insights into the staging of America that help explain the ruckus in the stadium and the calling into question of the referee.

America is not a stable place or object of analysis but a highly contested practice—physically, politically, artistically, and theoretically. Few have ever agreed on its meaning, its naming, its representation. Migrations, commercial interactions, and cultural exchanges date back over twenty thousand years. Inhabitants knew they shared a vast land: Anahuauc, or “great land,” the Aztecs called it; “turtle island,” as some Native groups thought of it. While the lived experience of pre-Conquest times may be difficult to re-create, early maps reveal profoundly different phenomenological approaches to this territory. For Native peoples, the land was coterminous with embodied human experience. This map, unlike the familiar projection genre, is not about locating oneself physically but about performing a history; footprints indicate the movement of the Aztecs as they walked, carrying their gods with them, from Aztlan (what is now the southwestern United States) to Tenochtitlan in the Valley of Mexico (fig. 1). The space in this map is all about “practiced place,” in Michel de Certeau’s terms, meaningful only in relation to the ceremonies that take place.
as the people travel—an animative (117). As Richard L. Kagen writes of Mesoamerican maps, “space had no independent, abstract existence. It belonged instead to the people who inhabited it” (52). The conceptualization of proximity as represented in this map located people affectively and historically, not just geographically. That is, people were positioned next to families and ancestors, present and past, rather than fixed in terms of oceans and mountains. These maps require a fully embodied form of engagement from viewers. To make sense of them, viewers must project themselves as bodies among bodies, both to make their way physically and to place themselves genealogically or historically. The experience of space, in this way of understanding the world, cannot be removed from lived experience and behaviors.

The European maps of this period were projections seemingly viewed from above. The conceit of the all-powerful eye somehow freed from material, bodily constraints accompanies the expansive physical reach of the colonizers. The maps were about territorial naming as possession. Should this Mundus Novus ‘New World,’ so labeled in 1504 by Amerigo Vespucci, be named after Christopher Columbus, who “discovered” the landmass, or after Vespucci, who seemed to realize that it was new—new to the Europeans at least—and not a part of Asia or the Indies? The German mapmaker and geographer Martin Waldseemüller chose America in 1507 to refer to what is now called South America, a term that caught on even though it was refuted by others, including the Spanish who continued to use terms such as Mundo Nuevo, Indias occidentales, and Nueva España (see Luzzana Caraci; Whitney).

The naming of America at the turn of the sixteenth century proved an “early triumph of modern publicity,” not to mention the wildly popular genre of discovery writing by Vespucci, Columbus, and others (Whitney 197). In 1601 the Spanish cartographer Antonio de Herrera used America to designate the vague, unexplored regions we now call the United States and Canada, and only in 1681 do we have a Spanish image of “America” that includes the entire continent.

The European maps of this period clearly point to a different genre and notion of embodiment. Though unfinished by our current standards, they demonstrate the interest in geographic location, literally seen in and through specific cultural frames. No more true or accurate than the Native maps, they enact a different set of relations in terms of bodies and perspective. The perspectival vision of European maps places the now supposedly disembodied viewer at the center, above, in control or possession, the master of vision rather than a subject among subjects. The eye replaces the foot as the defining body part. The objective yet impressionistic maps point to the future not simply as the territories begin to come into focus but also as an outline for a cultural identity that will try to fit the newly seen into the preexisting cultural scene or scenario. In a way, these maps too “precede the territory” and outlive it, five hundred years before Jean Baudrillard called this “a hyperreal” (2). Colonizers and map-makers imposed their own, very local sense of the new on what they saw before them—not just savage creatures cavorting with Grecian deities but also gendered imaginings of the sensuous, exposed, and penetrable land itself.

America was singular, conceptually whole, and allegorizable; she could be ravaged and possessed. The baptism of the new (Nueva España, later New England) was a way of re-inventing and, at times, superseding the old, which was seen alternately as the model to emulate and the corruption to leave behind. The many parts began to be subsumed and organized under the visual totality (Kagen 99). The original inhabitants were literally and figuratively pushed to the corners, almost off the map. Theodor de Bry’s images of America, viewed as monstrously exotic from the perspective of the incoming European
ship, became “the America of the Europeans in the XVII and XVIII centuries” (Elliott 7; my trans.). Conquered in part through naming and given to be seen through hypervisuality—maps, drawings, and tangible goods such as gold and material specimens (Indians)—America, as the Mexican historian Edmund O’Gorman compellingly argued in 1958, was invented, not discovered (15–54).

One of the problems plaguing scholarly work on America, and indirectly on American projects, then, is that the object of analysis is not a thing or a fact. America is an act of passion or belief, conjured into existence through visual and verbal performatives. I am adding the visual performative to Austin’s linguistic theory of performatives as language that acts, that makes something happen. These maps and proclamations made something happen. They summon up lands and peoples as discovered and already possessed. In tandem with the naming of America, the visual and verbal performatives transfer people and places from one realm of meaning making to another. Performatives, Austin argued, are neither true nor false, because they are not statements of fact. Performatives do; they “do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate anything at all” (5). They are “happy” if efficacious, “unhappy” if not (54). For a performative to be happy, a series of requirements and conventions needs to be in place. The person uttering the performative is empowered to do so; those participating in the event are the legitimately interested parties; those in attendance bear witness to and authorize the procedure. All social actors need to act in good faith, and so on. Judged by these conditions, then, America is a most unhappy performative. Few agree on who is empowered to invoke it, whom it addresses, and what it enacts.

Nonetheless, America is a very powerful performative. For many leaders in the north and south, it has served as a potent cry for unification, a call to a shared purpose, mission, and destiny whose force of enunciation depends on clearly differentiating us from them. There are important similarities in how colonial settlers in the north and south gradually came to define themselves as Americans as opposed to Europeans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I do not discuss these similarities here (see Canny and Pagden; Canup), although it is important to note in passing that the invocations of America in the nineteenth century, while clearly tied to nation building throughout the continent, revealed quite different political agendas. Although the newly independent countries throughout the hemisphere used America to differentiate themselves from their colonial masters, in the recently declared United States of America the parts (or states) appropriated the whole (America), eliding its others. The nationalist project extended outward from the thirteen colonies, first horizontally and later vertically, incorporating assimilable peoples and lands into one—ever-expanding, tent-like—denomination, America. To the south, America signaled a transnational project, rallying countries to create a network of broader, geopolitical alliances. In both the north and south, the invocation of America obliterated the many peoples and communities that were not envisioned as interested parties.4

Why did America, the unhappy performative, succeed in the north and fail in the south? There are many reasons. Some have to do with consolidation of territory into one nation in the United States, some with economics (unfettered capitalism vs. the feudal-style hacendado system), some with political organization and authority—but all add up to one thing: power. The United States has had the economic and military power, coupled with communications technology, to enforce its use of America, a performative that, however unhappy, successfully enacts the practice of exclusion it announces. Countries to the south grumble against the exclusion.

Grumbling can be fun, of course, and Latin American and Canadian writers, artists,
activists, and scholars have long reminded anyone who would listen that America in fact means nothing because it means too much. The Mexican cabaret artist Jesusa Rodríguez informs New Yorkers that NYC means not New York City but Name Your Country:

What does Amerigo Vespucci have to do with this continent? Nothing! . . . But these people came and they named themselves “Americans.” But American American, because the others became Mexican American, Peruvian American, Salvadoran American, Paraguayan American, Canadian American . . . but the whole damn continent shouldn’t be named “America” so what is an American American. Nothing! Absolutely nothing! (Rodríguez and Felipe)

A double negative, the chimerical American cancels itself out.

But fun aside, the sting of nonrecognition achieved by the performative hurts nonetheless. For one thing is clear: the declaration of America to the north never acknowledged the claims from the south. The politics of these performatives include ignoring the very existence of other claimants unless there is some strategic or economic advantage to United States interests in acknowledging a hemispheric unity.

If America performs the power of enunciation and exclusion instead of describing an area or a fact, how can American studies help but reenact this history? What can it claim as its object of analysis? America as a seemingly transparent historical fact? As a contested imperialist pronouncement? As an assertion of passion or belief? George W. Bush’s repeated declarations that he “believes” in America provoked Steven Colbert of The Colbert Report to respond that he believes in America and that it has fifty states (Colbert). I would go further—I believe in the United States and that it has fifty states.

Although I cannot do justice to all the fine work done in this field and to all the ways in which its best scholars have addressed the issues I have raised here, I would venture a broad and no doubt contentious generalization, compounded by tensions and contradictions arising from personal practice. It is my animative against a very powerful performative. I offer a one-paragraph overview that comes from grounded practice in the expelled south. Both the traditionalist, old (post–World War II) version of American studies and the new (post-1980s) variety have followed the trajectories noted above in relation to political self/other definitions. The old model, primarily literary, focused on defining itself and mapping its territory in opposition to English literature. It also, less explicitly, reenacted the hemispheric land-title grab by pronouncing itself American in opposition to other United States ethnic literatures. More recently, a kinder, gentler American studies has extended the tent to incorporate the cultural contribution of women as well as its many hyphenated Americans: Native, African, Latino, Jewish, Asian, and so forth. It has also extended its focus beyond literature in the direction of cultural studies, exploring pressing social and political issues that affect United States racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities. So it is not that American studies as currently carried out does not care about Americans from throughout the Americas; it is that all these others, these hyphenated Americans, are here, within these national and ideological borders—consumers, taxpayers, undocumented workers, and registered voters, fighting for the same piece of the pie. In both versions, American nonequivocally refers to the United States. Granted, the disciplinary borders have expanded to hold all the previously unacknowledged others within them, but American studies has been produced and performed only in the “belly of the monster.” This premise would be unthinkable in any other part of the Americas. Its power of enunciation comes from the very center of power and extends unilaterally outward. Scholars continue the
solo performance practice, working by themselves even as they map out alternative trajectories and modes of exchange. Their findings, written up in English, are available through highly specialized circuits of transmission: university presses, scholarly journals, and specialized conferences. Those authorized to invoke America often ignore the scholarship of others located elsewhere working on related topics. Scholars share neither a critical nor a national language to write about America or Americas, nor do they have access to one another’s bibliographies. Why, for example, does Walter Benn Michael’s *Our America* fail to acknowledge José Martí’s “Nuestra América” (1891) or Waldo Frank’s *Our America* (1919)? After a while, it does not much matter if it is a question of oversight, ignorance, or self-referentiality. What American studies leaves out, of course, are the Americas.  

“Hemispheric” Animatives

What happens when scholars shift the affective and epistemic frame from the performative America to the animative hemispheric? When I and other scholars from different parts of the Americas started the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics in 1998, we saw it as a first step toward developing a vocabulary and set of practices that would allow us to work productively together across the Americas. We chose to explore performance, along with texts and maps and other archival materials, as vital “acts of transfer” that transmit knowledge and collective memory from one group to another (Connerton 39). We focused on various genres of performance (the *is* as well as the *as*), on theories derived from performance practices, and on other methodologies drawn from various disciplines (theater studies, dance, literary studies, anthropology, rhetoric, religious studies, area studies, among others) to expand the range of objects and analytic practices available to us. We also modified the lens, wondering what, if anything, would change by using *hemispheric* instead of *America* or *Americas*. So while the road was well traveled, the path we chose by combining performance, collaborative research, new technologies, and online team-teaching did not feel clear at all. We juggled the complexities of interactive, multi-, and postdisciplinary engagement as we went along.

So let me begin with a caveat. Writing about the Hemispheric Institute pulls me from genre to genre, between the ostensibly objective performative view of the field from above, as if from a disembodied, authoritative position that somehow announces the project into being, and the subjective testimonial of lived experience on the ground where “I” am part of an ongoing collaboration, a “we” that involves thousands of people. I try to hide these tugs by switching between passive construction and forceful agency, between describing what is even as I get drawn back into the origin myths of how it came into being. At times, the account sounds like its own performative, and yet I live it as an animative, as the daily, embodied interactions and collective creations of all the participants that have breathed life into it.

So what does the animative allow that the performative precludes? First, we created a network of scholars, artists, and activists throughout the Americas who worked at the intersections of performance and politics, both broadly defined. Instead of a map, our logo became the Aztec footprint to signal how the project literally developed on the ground through discussions and interactions with others—though these exchanges were often fraught with misunderstandings and tensions that at times led to flaring tempers and blowups. We began to understand and work with and through the affect and agreed to keep talking and collaborating.

We then needed a name to signal who we were, where we came from, and what we did. *Hemispheric* does not mean much to most...
people. If anything, it is an antiperformative, conjuring hazy images. Right lobe versus front lobe? East versus West? Is there an eastern hemisphere as opposed to a western? Like Marcel Duchamp’s artwork the *Rotary Demisphere*, hemisphere produced strange optical effects. I remember thinking that blurri-ness was a good thing, a necessary stumbling block that would force all to stop and question the conceptual framing (fig. 2). Moreover, the term foreclosed identity politics. No one loves it or believes in it. No one desires to be a hemispheric subject; this clumsy and unwel-coming assignation does not seduce anyone into a passionate identification. No one makes assumptions about who might be included in a hemispheric project—certainly few in the United States or in American studies imagine it includes them. All projects bear the mark of their inception, and hemispheric seemed less practiced, less violent and overdetermined, than America or Americas. Americas also seemed perilously close to America, that fragile final sounding more like the afterthought and add-on it usually was than a serious move toward plurality and translocality.

We had other anxieties about hemispheric. We especially did not want to reacti-vate a cold-war model of area studies, which emanates from the heart of power and works outward, gleaning information about possible opponents. We were looking for other ways to conceive of spatiality as we rethought academic disciplines and fields of study. Scholars developed ways to work together in person and online to develop research projects—on performance art, election campaigns as per-formance, and hemispheric religiosities, to name a few. Artists learned about one another’s work and discussed strategies for making a political intervention. As people started interac-ting across the Americas, it became evident that geography and national boundaries were insufficient categories. As the Mexican cultural theorist Rossana Reguillo points out, “[I]t has never been as vital as it is now to break the geographical determinants of thought” (25).

Instead of seeing the Americas as a de-limiting, bounded entity, we approached them as a portal for thinking about shared practice through centuries of migration and diasporic movements to and through the landmass. Identities are far more flexible and relational than formulated in the national frameworks of area studies or ethnic studies. The entire continent could be remapped as Native Americas that preceded European colonization and nation building; Latin/o Americas that reflected centuries of border shiftings and crossings; Afro-Americas that illuminated hundreds of years of forced migration, exploitation, and resistance; or Jewish Americas in which New York and Buenos Aires have more in common with each other than they have with their own surrounding states. Yet none of these Americas exists independently of one another; we are all constantly bumping up against one another in ways that challenge any pre-fixed notion of place or identity. These animatives and
historical trajectories have been obscured by official histories and archives, but they remain evident in repertoires of embodied practices and behaviors that transmit social memory and identity from one generation or community to another.

This reconfiguration of geographic areas and identities as practice rather than as fixed entities was not new. Foundations had started initiatives that produced excellent work, such as the Ford Foundation’s Crossing Borders.\textsuperscript{12} Other scholars were involved in similar projects: Paul Gilroy looked at the traffic of African slaves throughout the black Atlantic (1993); Joseph Roach looked at intertwined cultural practices throughout the “circum-Atlantic” (1996). These projects, like ours, were not comparative; rather than examine slave societies in New Orleans, Portugal, Spain, Mexico, and Brazil, for example, they would analyze the trafficking, the circuits themselves, the economies involved in the transport and exchange of human beings.

What interested us were precisely these hemisphere-wide events and processes that pre-dated nationalism, reframed it, or transcended its limits. Unlike the other projects, however, ours built on this founding premise: the events and behaviors that interested us could not be thought or analyzed from any one place. No one vantage point or theory could account for them. Our project relies on continually reconfigured and collaborative practice, with no privileged point of entry, no clearly recognized authority, no demarcated constituency. It was and is a multisited animative: translocal, multilingual, and interdisciplinary. That does not mean that we ignore the local; many communities see themselves as profoundly local, and their demands to land and other rights might go directly up against the national and the transnational. But the examination of the issues—say, Native land rights defended against multinational corporations not by documentary evidence but through invocations of embodied cultural traditions—may well place local strategies in the network of similar efforts. The tactical use of embodied evidence in Native land claims might be better understood, for example, by placing the 1990 Oka crisis, in which Mohawks fought Quebec’s armed forces over the golf course, in relation to the 1995 Golf War, in which Tepoztecos in Mexico defended their lands by taking on the local and national governments.\textsuperscript{13} Pairs or teams of scholars, activists, and artists throughout the Americas form work groups to develop research and performance projects that they feel have a hemispheric significance.

The initial impetus, then, was not to imagine an umbrella that included an ever-expanding body of knowledge envisioned from above but to lay the foundation for collaborative partnerships on the ground. The network grew into a consortium of twenty universities and an equal number of cultural centers. Practices included team-teaching graduate-level courses, building an online archive of primary materials, getting together in a two-week seminar, conference, and festival every year, and making available work by artists, activists, and scholars who think about how performance makes a political intervention—in the broadest possible terms—through our peer-reviewed journal and digital video library. Our performance genre, then, includes archives and repertoires, performative and animative in an effort to understand not just what we know but also how we know it—that is, to understand the politics of interaction, transmission, and exchange.

The shift to a performance lens and a focus on live practices and movements (part of the repertoire of embodied practice) offer advantages to participating scholars. First, they broaden the materials available for study. Performed behaviors (whether codified as ritual, dance, and music or described more informally as the aesthetics of everyday life) also transmit knowledge and the collective memory of various groups.
animated practice exceed the limits of traditional archives, which are controlled to various degrees by dominant groups and modes of thought. Second, thorny issues that can safely remain points of theoretical concern in solo academic practice—language barriers, economic discrepancies, unequal access to resources such as books and computers, different disciplinary formations, divergent vocabularies—become painfully concrete when students and faculty members try to work together. Many students in Latin American universities use dial-up modem connections in Internet cafés. The books we reference in the United States are seldom available in Latin American libraries. Latin American faculty members might earn as little as three to five hundred dollars a month for full-time labor. The politics of real interaction constantly challenge us all. While these inequalities will not go away, our interaction depends on facing them and finding steps to ameliorate the situation.

The courses we developed are team-taught, multilingual, inter- and transdisciplinary, and held simultaneously at more than one member institution. Together we developed an online archive and a trilingual Web site and e-journal. But online interaction has its limits. It works well if people know and trust one another, not as well if people have never met. Animatives require movement and live contact. So our (now) biannual two-week seminar-festivals in different countries of the hemisphere have become our way of keeping connections live and interactive. During those two weeks, we offer workshops with major artists and practitioners. Additionally, everyone participates in working groups with scholars, artists, and activists to develop an interdisciplinary approach to the instances of performance and politics that interest us (i.e., migrating religiousities, terror politics, the formation of race in the Americas). Sometimes the working groups last the two weeks. Sometimes they last several years.

Throughout we worry about reproducing forms and genres identified with the America projects. Is our three-week workshop in Peru with the famed performance collective Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani really no more than an off-campus program? Are the encuentros only an interesting variation of cultural tourism? Where does the money come from? Who controls it? Do the long, interpersonal working relationships that we have all developed over the years enable us to work together without always conjuring up the ghosts and chains of our American past?

While I am not proposing the Hemispheric Institute as a model to be emulated, this project signals some preliminary work in rethinking the Americas as a complicated, back-and-forth history of migratory, cultural, economic, political, military, linguistic, and religious practices, of which we are all a part.

A hemispheric focus makes explicit the logic of looking at the Americas not only as a series of independent states or as a geographic fact but also as the enacted and contested arena of criss-crossings and encounters. These histories and practices cannot be understood in the confines of the United States or of American studies, as expansive and encompassing as they might be. Nor do existing paradigms account for “other” interlocutors or forms of cultural production. One oft-repeated point bears rerepeating: the American in American studies reenacts the historical and cultural politics of exclusion. Its imperial character can be neither helped nor ignored. Efforts to dismiss that critique instead of engaging and discussing it with others in the Americas only fuel the accusation that scholars from the United States do not listen to their hemispheric colleagues. But it is the genres talking. The problems are transpersonal just as they are translocal, the product of centuries of bad language and powerful invocations. Yet we experience them personally, in the here and now of performance. Scholars in the United States should join the ruckus if only because the United States is the key actor in the Americas—the America, after all—which
too often defines and occludes all else. Some departments, notably New York University’s American Studies, are changing their names as they broaden their focus. The new department at NYU, Social Cultural Analysis, includes an American studies concentration among others—Latino studies, Africana studies, and so on—bowing to the pressures from the institution and from students to acknowledge the field’s institutional purchase. According to Phillip Brian Harper, the chair of the new department, its members wrestled with the problem of balancing institutional interests without replicating historical problems. The NYU solution, tentative though it is, maintains the field but demotes it, as it were, to one concentration among others.

Needless to say, the problems raised here are far from resolved. Some American studies departments try to broaden their focus while maintaining their name, as if they could trouble the terms even as they continue to use them. But it is not clear that changing the name will do much if the scholarly attitude and approach are not changed. There is no simple answer. What I am proposing is an active hemispheric engagement and dialogue, however vexed and complicated, among scholars, artists, and activists. The deep interconnections of populations in the Americas, where the Third World is in the First World and the other way around, defy neat definitions and boundaries. Everything else crosses borders in this hemisphere, from e-mail messages, films, money, weapons, and drugs to corporations, undocumented workers, and tourists. The United States military has long recognized the power of Americas-wide training and cooperation, and it even keeps up with trends in nomenclature, recently renaming its infamous School of the Americas, which trains Latin American military leaders in covert operations and torture techniques, as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (see Gill). Rather than change our name to distance ourselves from this nefarious invocation of hemispheric cooperation, I prefer that we think of our project as the other side of the same network, bringing the power of intellectuals, artists, and activists throughout the continent to bear on our shared histories, structures, and events.

By way of an ending, I turn to the comedic mode and invite readers to participate in a banquet that both closes this paper and initiates new possibilities by rehearsing a different politics of engagement. The performance artist Lois Weaver (cofounder of the Split Britches Company) developed the Long Table as “an experimental public forum that is a hybrid performance–installation–roundtable discussion–dinner party designed to facilitate dialogue between artists, academics, activists and advocates.” The Long Table looks like a banquet table, complete with tablecloth and chairs, although microphones have been added. And there are rules for participation, or a Long Table “etiquette,” in Weaver’s words:

There is no beginning
It is a performance of a breakfast, lunch or dinner
Those seated at the table are the performers
The menu is up to you
Talk is the only course
There is no hostess
It is a democracy
To participate take an empty seat at the table
If the table is full you can request a seat
Once you leave the table you can come back
There can be silence
You can break the silence with a question
You can write your questions on the table
There can be laughter
There is no conclusion

The Long Table stages the animative. It enacts the potentials and difficulties of hemispheric dialogue. Sitting around the table, looking at each other across their linguistic, national, and disciplinary divides, the participants speak from partial understanding and limited expertise. It can be uncomfortable.
Silences can be painful. And yet there is laughter, and dialogue, and an interaction that (whether tentative or heated) is powerful because it is grounded in exchange with other people in the here and now. Reactions have to be taken into account in real time. People need to find words. Miscommunications or misunderstandings become evident immediately and subject to debate. This is not a utopian vision of intelligibility—interactions are incomplete and messy. The performance is durational: “There is no conclusion.” And, of course, behaviors are modified by this performance, which has its own conventions and correctives. Modifying behaviors and finding other words to sustain an interaction might be just the thing in remapping America. But first we need to take a seat at the table.

NOTES

1. The distinction between is and as performance was developed by Richard Schechner (Performance Studies).

2. In Archive I define archive and repertoire as follows: “Archival” memory exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change. . . The repertoire, on the other hand, enacts embodied memory—performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge” (19–20). Instead of being binaries, these systems often work together (as in trials and weddings, which require both performed and documented behaviors).


4. Thomas Jefferson’s “empire for liberty” called for the elimination of “irrational obstacles, preventing the struggling universal human being (the Anglo American male) from freely pursuing his natural happiness”; any “potential enemy [was] an objective obstruction” calling for “liquidation” (qtd. in Stephanson 23). Ensuing policies toward “Indians,” creole French, and Mexicans involved ethnic cleansing and land expropriation. Not only were Africans and African descendants not Americans, their status functioned as a litmus test of Americanism: in the 1830s, opposition to slavery was perceived as un-American. In fact, the annexation of half of Mexico’s territory in 1848 came about in part because Mexico would not allow slavery in Texas. No one seemed empowered to challenge the legitimacy of the political actors uttering the performatives or of those in Congress who bore witness to and authorized the procedures. In the transnational project to the south, the Criollos were also Americans, no longer European, yet each country determined to protect its fledgling sovereignty. In 1813 Mexico’s independence leader José María Morelos declared that “America is free and independent of Spain” and drew up Mexico’s constitution for all “Americanos” (those born or living in Mexico) and abolished slavery and caste discrimination (Herejón 133–35). The eagle became Mexico’s national symbol. In 1815 the independence leader Simón Bolívar wrote, “More than anyone, I would like to see América become the greatest nation on earth, regarded not so much for its size and wealth as for its freedom and glory” (23). America for him consisted of fifteen to seventeen independent states. The map he put forward was one of the future, one that could conjure up the reality he envisioned. But he recognized his was a failed performative. Not only did his America lack legislative and judicial experience, but also, as he stated in 1829, in America “there is no good faith, not even between nations. Our treaties are scraps of paper, our constitutions empty texts.” An unhappy performative, his invocation lacked the power to produce the utopia he called for; the countries were “ungovernable,” and “those who serve revolution plough the sea” (146). Even though the many unruly parts did not add up to a coherent, governable whole, the idea of a united América was increasingly compelling for major Latin American intellectuals toward the end of the nineteenth century. This América, too, was deeply divided, in opposition no longer to Europe but to the United States, now the “other América.” José Martí’s 1891 essay “Nuestra América” (“Our América”), written while he was exiled from Cuba and living in the United States, was a wake-up call. Martí foresaw the danger of United States predatory politics as it picked up the colonies lost by Spain in the war of 1898. He died fighting for the independence of Spain’s remaining colonies (Cuba and Puerto Rico).

5. A 1941 article in Time magazine acknowledged the hemispheric solidarity of all countries in the Americas as they formed a united front against the Axis powers in World War II: “The unanimous Latin American vote of confidence in the U.S. went far beyond a mere diplomatic victory for the Good Neighbor Policy. Rather, it was a fine admixture of farsighted courage and faith in survival of the hemisphere as a single, unified world power” (“Hemisphere”).

6. There is an extensive literature on the tensions between these versions of American studies.

7. Even Charles Altieri’s “Whose America Is Our America” accepts without question the national terms of Walter Benn Michael’s debate.

8. Border studies in the 1980s and 1990s took a major step by calling attention to the particularity of the United States–Mexico border, a low-intensity war zone
that has increasingly become a site of “the war on terror.” As José David Saldívar notes, the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo and other borderland theorists were enacting a shift: Chicanos went from being seen as “people without culture” (a version of what, in Archive, I call absence studies) to “people between cultures” (23). The between was nepantla, that liminal space of the everyday known by the sixteenth-century Nahuatl term for the space between the indigenous and Spanish cultures, now extended to the cracks, the militarized zone, and dangerous crossings of a border that was no longer Mexican, not quite of the United States. In addition to opening up the debate to the Americas, this move was powerful in factoring into the equation hemispheric realities of unequal relations in terms of production, consumption, and circulation. Language and translation became issues. So did the politics of border crossing as tourists went south of the border for recreation and as undocumented laborers risked their lives coming north in the hope of earning a barely living wage. Yet border studies, some claim, did not really challenge the logic of embracing ever more others in the national fold. Paul Giles notes, “To displace a cultural heritage from one side of the border to the other is to shuffle the critical pack without necessarily changing the rules of the game” (63). Another criticism of border studies is that it did not deal face-on with the tensions between United States Latinos and Latin Americans. Although the field developed in universities in the United States, it did not address the hostilities between United States Latinos—who tended to be primarily English speakers and working-class—and Latin American students (and faculty members) who came from upper-middle-class families, were bilingual, and at times swelled the ranks of minorities in university rosters.

9. When I invited Anna Deavere Smith to participate in the Hemispheric Institute’s 2002 encuentro (a ten-day working group, conference, and festival) in Lima, she hesitated, then said, “But I’m so American.” “That’s the point,” I clarified. “We’re all American.” She rose to the challenge and started incorporating translation into her famous monologues (Introduction, “Paulette Jenkins,” and “Pris- oner”). Other responses have been less thoughtful. Only the minority, ethnic presses covered the 2003 encuentro in New York City, although major performers and scholars from the United States participated, and a recent archival project was complicated by the misunderstanding that hemispheric referred exclusively to Latin America.

10. Other hemispheric projects focus mainly on policy issues, such as the Council on Hemispheric Affairs and the Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies.

11. Translocal is the term used by Néstor García Canclini.

12. The research project Reshaping the Americas: Narratives of Place, directed by David Theo Goldberg and Ramón Gutiérrez, was designed as a “dual trajectory of research collaboration (aimed at generating new theories and practices) and curriculum development (with the specific intent of infusing new models of teaching in the histories, literatures, languages, and cultures of the Americas).”

13. My Hemispheric Institute colleague at the University of Manitoba, Kathleen Buddle-Crowe, helped me make this connection.

14. Performance in Latin America usually refers to performance art. For an analysis of the politics of translation in regard to performance, see my “Translating Performance.”

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