THE HEMISPHERIC MUSE

GIORGIO MARIANI INTERVIEWS ANTONIO BARRENECHEA

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Antonio Barrenechea is an Associate Professor at the University of Mary Washington, in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where he was hired to design a teaching curriculum in the Literatures of the Americas in 2005. He holds a PhD in comparative literature from Yale University and is the author of various essays on both North and South American literature, and, most recently of *America Unbound: Encyclopedic Literature and Hemispheric Studies*, his first book, published last year by the University of New Mexico Press. Professor Barrenechea, who is currently spending the year as a resident fellow at the Institut Américain Universitaire in Aix-en-Provence, France, recently gave a lecture at Sapienza University entitled "Hemispheric Studies Beyond Suspicion". After his talk, we conversed for about an hour about some of the issues he raised in his talk, and especially about his book, which I think is one of the most interesting and effective interventions in the field of hemispheric studies, and in particular in the field of *literary* hemispheric studies. What follows is an edited version of the transcript of the conversation we had in my office on April 28, 2017.

KEYWORDS: HEMISPHERIC STUDIES; AMERICA UNBOUND; ENCYCLOPEDIC LITERATURE; INTERVIEW.

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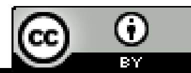


GM: In your talk, you have traced the emergence and consolidation of hemispheric literary studies in the US. I wonder how you would position your study in relation to the work that has preceded yours, and how your project originated. Please feel free to frame your answer in any way you please.

AB: As an undergraduate at Fordham University, I right away declared a major in Comparative Literature. I knew this was more broad-ranging than English and I wanted to learn as much as I could about the literary world out there. Postcolonial studies was prominent in the US in the 1990s, and I completed many courses in that field. At the same time, I was lucky to find a mentor in George W. Shea, a Classics professor who taught me to appreciate the *longue durée* of Western letters. I think that this tension between new and older academic paradigms has stuck with me ever since. After college, I applied to Yale's graduate program in Comparative Literature. I wanted to study postmodernism and poststructuralism, but I was also drawn toward Yale's humanist tradition. I was met with an ethos of learning at Yale that I had never experienced before. After each of my classes, I would say to myself: "this is what I want to specialize in going forward!" From my contact with professors and graduate students, I realized that there were endless possibilities for carving out a life of learning. I grew up in a working-class family in New Jersey and was the first to attend college. By contrast, my peers would return from abroad, where they had spent a year studying Italian literature; they not only knew their Dante, but had read the philosophy of Benedetto Croce and had seen the films of Pasolini. Yet, this was only part of a whole. They also had a working command of at least one other tradition. I see comparative literature as this international field in which one learns to be at home in multiple linguistic and literary traditions. This grounding is what make the "comparative" meaningful.

Then it came time to write my PhD thesis. I had been drawn to big novels since reading *Don Quixote* in college. Encyclopedic books are difficult in that they point the reader in a myriad of geographical and conceptual directions. They resist assimilation yet also insist on a knowledge base. For me, this meant reading deeply in traditions that were

central to US and Latin American cultures. So, I ended up writing a dissertation on encyclopedic novels of the Americas. Although I engaged plenty of criticism, I only later became aware that there was an academic phenomenon called "Hemispheric Studies," and that the novels I had worked on could be seen from this perspective. I managed to get a job at my current university after spending one year at Barnard College, where I had been asked to put together a two-semester survey of New World literatures from the pre-Columbian age to the present. I was lucky that the University of Mary Washington offered me a position to design a Literatures of the Americas curriculum, thus allowing me to continue this work. My scholarship also took shape thanks to several summer institutes, and a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar at Columbia University on "Hemispheric American Studies." This was especially formative for me, as it helped me realize that there were key differences between what many hemispheric studies scholars were doing and what I myself had been pursuing. Most of all, I was struck by a kind of resistance to a hemispheric *dis*orientation. The seminarians—the majority of them Americanists—were interested primarily in texts that they could read *in relation to* the US and with an implicit political aim that—while steeped in a noble self-critical ethics—was not sufficiently learned beyond US culture. Over and over again, a predictable castigation of US imperialism would substitute for the harder act of reading in the literary canons of Spanish American and Brazilian literature. As a result, all Latin American literatures were treated as a minority category of "America." Well, this is rubbish to anyone who has ever sat-in on a single course in a Spanish and Portuguese department. To ignore the work of Mario Vargas Llosa, a greatest Peruvian writer of his generation, and instead focus on a marginal US author because he or she wrote a novel in which a character crosses into Mexico seems shortsighted. It became clear to me that the seminar was invested in a US hemispheric *imaginary*, rather than any comparative "hemispheric" field of study that could start from any point on the Americas map. I am not saying, of course, that we should not study US minority authors. What I am saying is that we should be much more aware of work produced outside the US, which likely influenced the work of those writers in the first place.

My book, *America Unbound*, grew out of a dissatisfaction with this narrow US approach, but also as an attempt to respond by reading hemispheric differences through the lens of comparative literature. The book begins with a first

chapter frame in which I reinterpret *Moby-Dick* as a different type of "great American novel." Melville provides an anchor for an inquiry into America as hemispheric object of study. The next three chapters—on Carlos Fuentes's *Terra Nostra*, Jacques Poulin's *Volkswagen Blues* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*–deal with individual novels within particular regional and local contexts, as well as hemispheric ones. While I wanted these chapters to be useful for scholars researching the individual works, I also realized that I could read the hemisphere, and hemispheric studies, *through* these novels. The book follows multiple trajectories – literarily, historically, and geopolitically—as these issues are themselves brought to the forefront by fiction that reimagines a long span of history. And, of course, the classic question for all scholars of hemispheric cultures looms large in the book: "how do we practice hemispheric studies as US-based academics writing in English without being imperialistic?" This question remains crucial, but I also fear that today our debates have reached the point of over-self-flagellation. My simple answer is this: engage other cultures; if you are serious about interdisciplinary work you can try to read literature from the ground up and engage other traditions. I see no other way. I remember that, while *America Unbound* was under review, an anonymous reader criticized my work to the tune that hemispheric studies had now moved *beyond* literature. I soon realized that this was part of the problem, and that I needed to articulate my vision of literature more forcefully in my book. I am not suggesting one should ignore other archives, but when you leave literature behind, you leave language behind. This is one of the central concerns of the book, beginning with the world "literature" in the title.

GM: In your book, while you focus on literary works, the larger historical/theoretical framework is very much indebted to the work of Herbert Bolton, who was a historian. I wonder whether you could tell us more about why Bolton's work proved to be so important to you, and in what ways, as well as, perhaps, why his figure has been marginalized for quite a while.

AB: Bolton was a history professor from UC Berkeley who rose to prominence during the 1920s and 1930s. He had been among the first of US historians to consult colonial archives in Spain and Latin America at a time when Protestant historians were perpetuating an anti-Spanish bias in print. Bolton even dared to expand Frederick Jackson Turner's famous "frontier thesis" to Spain's Catholic pioneers and to Latin America's forefathers. He championed research into

what he called the "Spanish borderlands" of the US and is today remembered mostly as a precursor of US Border Studies. Yet, it is his 1931 presidential address to the American Historical Association, entitled "The Epic of Greater America," that is his most visionary work. Here, he called for the study of America as a great world civilization that had experienced parallels of European contact, colonization, and nation-building. In other words, Bolton's America was the Western Hemisphere; it included several nations, geographies, and languages, and did not limit itself to the preferred story of European immigration into the United States. Bolton was progressive for the era, but unfortunately he did not have a feel for the humanities. This is why he may have been ignored by literary studies, but I suspect his amplification of America also proved too challenging for academic specializations at the time. Edmundo O'Gorman, the Mexican historian and philosopher, complained that Bolton's thesis was almost inhumane as it dealt with larger historical and economic forces while leaving behind spiritual complexities of culture. He had a point, even if O'Gorman's own critique was largely motivated by an anti-US policy ethos that he directed at Bolton. O'Gorman's invective ensured that Bolton was not taken seriously by Latin American scholars. While Bolton's work was typically Eurocentric for the 1930s (and paid insufficient dues to Native Americans and Africans), he remains the founder of Hemispheric Studies.

GM: One important feature of your book is its concern not with studying the literatures of the Americas, but also with teaching them.

AB: My research and teaching have always gone hand in hand, and perhaps this is another aspect that differentiates *America Unbound* from other works in the field. The final chapter of the book provides a summation—and critique—of the development of Hemispheric American Studies as a field in the US. But I also proposes a fix through a comparative pedagogical map with Bolton as figurehead. While at UC Berkeley, Bolton taught a two-part survey course on the history of the Americas (known as "History 8"). He later published his annotated course syllabi as *History of the Americas: A Syllabus with Maps*. The three syllabi I propose at the end of my book —"New World Writing in the Colonial Period," "Literature and Nation-Building in the Americas," and "Hemispheric Fiction of the Global Age"—is a Bolton-inspired sequence that I designed for undergraduates at the University of Mary Washington, a small public liberal arts institute near Washington, DC. It is a

practical guide to conceiving the Americas as a literary continuum in which texts are placed in two and three way dialogues. Despite the waning popularity of humanities survey courses, my literature of the Americas sequence stresses a breadth of learning from pre-Columbian codices to contemporary fiction. Bolton is not perfect but he provides an opening and I am glad to take my students through it. As a result of reading literature from throughout the Americas, my students gain an appreciation for several substantial traditions. I think this is important so as to avoid nationalistic views. Students interested in contemporary US hemispheric politics cannot afford to dispense with such reading.

GM: In building your book around your scholarly as well as teaching interests, I think you sketch a remapping of the field of American literary studies, both North and South, that is more radical and daring than other "remappings" I am familiar with in the tradition of American studies, even the most innovative American studies I would say. The emphasis in recent US-centered American studies tends to be and has been for a long time, very polemical, but inescapably tied to very US-based preoccupations. I have the impression you have chosen to go down a different path, avoiding what in your lecture this morning you called "the self-flagellating mode." Instead, you focus on the objective, undeniable interconnections of the literary field—you insist on what I would call a hemispheric intertextuality that in a sense precedes our critical debates about cultural imperialism, cultural appropriation, US exceptionalism, and so on. These notions are of course useful and important, but you try to let the texts speak for themselves, and when I say this I don't mean to suggest you cultivate any naïve belief in the "purity" or objectivity of the text. I'm thinking instead of what in your lecture this morning you have referred to as the critical potential of literature.

AB: I think you have described well the approach I try to follow in my book. The practice of reading specific books in order to fit them into a paradigm one wishes to espouse is a methodology-first approach. Mine is a literature-first approach, and this means there will be plenty of false starts and disorientations. I work from the ground up, learning what the different literary traditions of the hemisphere have to teach me even while retaining a critical viewpoint. In this sense, my work is more aligned with the pioneers of hemispheric literary studies, such as Vera Kutzinski, Lois Parkinson Zamora, and Earl Fitz. Back in the 1980s and 1990s, these scholars also regarded the literatures of the Americas as

a *field*—a vast and ungraspable one, but a field nonetheless. One must be dedicated to a lifetime of reading to get anywhere near the whole. The literature I have written on in *America Unbound* precedes the rise of hemispherism in the academy. But, most importantly, it is the encyclopedic works themselves that call out for more reading, more struggle, and more understanding. As a humanist, it is my hope that replacing political invective with literary insight can help us make better hemispheric neighbors, inside and outside the academy. But we must first be willing to return to literature. The truth remains that literature is unique among the arts in its embodiment of linguistic differences. One of the publishers who read a synopsis of *America Unbound* wrote to me: "what you're doing here is not hemispheric studies, it's world literature." Perhaps it's true because I don't practice hemispheric studies as currently defined. I am someone with an unorthodox approach simply because I see "America" as an international disciplinary object. Its literary cultures are interrelated and yet have their own distinctive histories and languages. My adoption of this huge—and admittedly impractical—paradigm is what makes me feel like I'm always playing catch-up with one or another writer from Canada or Argentina. I want to have a conversation with specialists on specific regions and nations, and at the same time draw connections for a broader hemispheric picture. And, for me, all this is only made possible by sticking to a literature-first approach, by using literature itself as a critical tool.

GM: One thing that struck me about the book, and which is not necessarily standard practice, is that whenever you quote passages from Spanish or French, you are careful to quote the original first, and then the translation. I saw it as a gentle way to remind the reader that if one wants to study the literature of the Americas it would be nice to have a working knowledge of at least these languages. And along these lines, even though your critical bibliography is mostly (though by no means exclusively) in English, you do have references to some secondary works not written in English, and this made me wonder if your approach to hemispheric studies is as new to these non-US traditions as it is in the field of US-based hemispheric studies.

AB: As far as the first point is concerned, I would espouse a committed ethic of reading rather than some unrealistic model of accomplishment. Even if one can't become fluent in all of these languages, one should at least try learning them in some rudimentary form. I realize that this undermines academic

expertise as we understand it, and may strike some as downright amateurish. Still, I believe that it would be better if this commitment underpinned the work of all scholars of "trans-national," "post-national," and "inter-American" literatures. With my students, I often use original sentences as part of class lecture. Although the vast majority of these students are reading in translation, the act of dissecting and translating a single unfamiliar line of poetry can be eye-opening for them. They get to feel both the weight of the linguistic strangeness and the empowerment of decoding back into their native language. At the very least, the exercise serves to remind them that reading a translation means missing an integral part of how that author interprets his or her reality. As for the reception of hemispheric studies outside the US, I think it's worth remembering that, before the *boom*, Latin American literature was also divided along national lines. It was only after the 1960s that we get a kind of internationalization, a broadening of identity and of critical horizons that was the direct result of writers traveling abroad and seeing the possibility of a pan-Latin American approach. It was a pathway that was pushed along by several US journals during the Cold War. Unlike Latin America, Canada has been more embracing of the hemispheric paradigm, perhaps because of its own bilingual roots in French and English. Still, Latin American scholars remain wary of hemispheric studies for good reason. Given the present configuration of the field and its US-centered perspective, I don't blame them. It is for this reason that many of the non-English sources in my bibliography deal with single novels and national traditions without crossing to the other Americas. I don't know whether my book will ever be translated into Spanish, but it would be nice to see that happen, and to then register the responses from Latin American scholars. I hope that my grassroots interdisciplinarity can build bridges.

GM: I'd like to go back to the "big books" you discuss in your study. These encyclopedic narratives seem to have provided you with a solid base for your hemispheric approach.

AB: Yes, big books capture the multiple and complex realities of different places and ideas of the Americas. It's a great way to approach a Boltonian subject. The hemispheric novel—the *Summa Americana*, as I call it in my book—juxtaposes epistemologies and intersects timeline through baroque intertwinings. One thing I love about encyclopedic books is that they demand a challenging and long-term relationship with the reader. There is also a physical aspect of the big

book that fascinates me—its magnificent scale almost compels physical contact. It's kind of like the monolith in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*! The process of reading a big book, and the marks the reader leaves on the text over time, complement the many layers that the authors have placed into them. *Moby-Dick* is a whale of a book and the blueprint for the big novel of the Americas (one that went unrivaled for a century). In *Terra Nostra*, I love the way that Fuentes weaves major archival documents documenting the conquest of the New World. Inside this textual whirl is the span of centuries; there's a Homeric grandeur in the end results. *Terra Nostra* is, to me, the great literary monument of Latin America—an astonishing work of art that invokes the sublime in a specific political context without ever losing its universal human dimensions. Furthermore, while Silko's *Ceremony* is more manageable to teach than *Almanac of the Dead*, *Almanac* achieves a materiality that *Ceremony* does not have. *Almanac* wants to be an indigenous codex, and with its fragmentation, its maps, it becomes matter in the reader's hands. As one keeps turning Poulin's pages, *Volkswagen Blues* feels like a scrapbook from a journey through the Americas in search of a dream, a kind of Quebecois updating of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. When you look at these encyclopedic works together, one can imagine the trials and tribulations of human life in the Americas over centuries. These long books are keen on challenging the reader to continue exploring an intertextual chain of texts that provides a view of a bigger and broader hemisphere. I'm not suggesting that fiction can displace "hard" historical knowledge, but novels can help you see how histories have developed. An encyclopedic narrative contains a built-in library with many labyrinths. Some shorter texts work this way, too, but big books just seem to offer more opportunities.

GM: I wonder whether you would agree that your encyclopedic novels are also in part historical novels, or postmodern historical novels, though I'm not sure whether Linda Hutcheon's category of historiographic metafiction would apply.

AB: Well, yes. The novels I analyze in *America Unbound*, are historical novels in that they are largely set in the past. But at the same time they dramatize what it means to reach back to that past, so that they contain multiple timelines and storylines within simultaneous fictional worlds. They are therefore meta-reflexive in ways that traditional historical fiction (the output of James Fenimore Cooper, for instance) is not. In addition, they all vie for the title of "Great Novel of the Americas." What I mean is that

there is a sense of masterful performance inscribed within the text themselves. These "masterworks" challenge us to conceive of them as literary *magna opera* wherein America is the great muse. We might say that Greater America and the Great American Novel intersect here. At the same time, the authors expand categories of artistic prowess to the non-West. Being in Italy for the third time now, I am reminded of the premium placed on beauty here. Simplistic critiques denigrating beauty and art as outdated have yet to account for the awesome feeling I get when I stand before a baroque sculpture by Bernini, or a painting by Caravaggio. Italy is a land full of *capolavori*; here we come face to face with humanity's greatest achievement—its art.

GM: One nice feature of your book is the final section on your experience teaching the literature of the Americas. Your syllabi are very interesting. They also suggest that sometimes one needs to go for shorter works rather than the big books you like. So, for example, in teaching Native America you also ask your students to read a novel like Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus*, which is much shorter than *Almanac of the Dead*, though not necessarily an easy read, at least in my own teaching experience. How do you teach a text that students might find a bit baffling?

AB: I juxtapose *The Heirs of Columbus* with other texts. I might ask students to read some Mayan poetry, or a letter by Columbus. In the case of Vizenor's novel, it's useful to discuss the Columbian quincentenary, as this event produced similar anti-celebratory political works throughout the Americas. When teaching Native American texts, I try to create a constellation that balances the familiar and unfamiliar. I highlight the connections, as well as the reinventions, the retellings of stories. Obviously, *Almanac of the Dead* is a book that one can't include in a survey course, but I have taught it in a senior seminar. Even so, it's not an easy read, and not simply because of its size. It's an angry book with lots of violence and lots of blood. So I make sure to devote plenty of class time to the *Popol Vuh* and the Mesoamerican codices. These are also steeped in blood in support of a cosmic equilibrium that defies US ecological Indian stereotypes. Students come to appreciate Silko's incorporation of these first Native American holy books into her own *Almanac*.

GM: Oh yes, let me just say that I love this part of your Silko chapter. I too, as an admirer of *Ceremony*, on first reading *Almanac* was taken aback a bit. I didn't quite know what to make of all this blood and violence, and your illustration of how Silko was clearly inspired by the

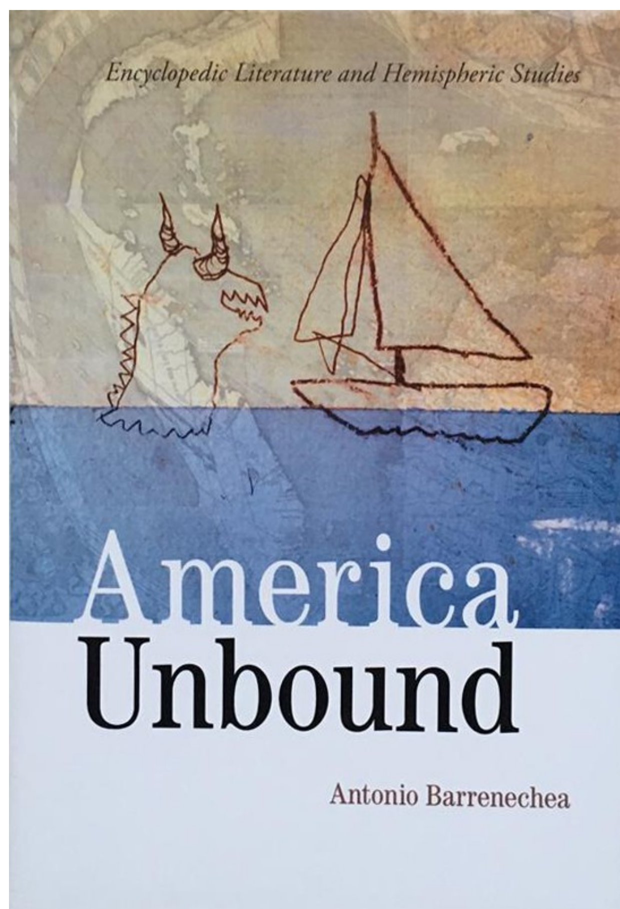
images available in the ancient codices (some of which are reproduced in your book) provides one of the best and most convincing explanations for making sense of this complex text.

AB: I discovered this connection while filling gaps in my knowledge of Native American literatures. The codices were the first books of the Americas, and so I started there, although our collective knowledge of them remains incomplete even today. Still, I wanted to engage indigenous literary cultures in a serious and extended way, and so I sat there trying to make sense of them. I also had an opportunity to analyze copies in museum settings around the world (the highlight was a private viewing of the only existing copy of the *Popol Vuh*, housed at the Newberry Library in Chicago). As I was explaining before, encyclopedic novels keep the reader on guard. They demand an open attitude that is the opposite of the methodology-first approach. We look up to them, not down on them; and perhaps this is what kept me searching for answers without succumbing to the usual complaints about Silko's book. I also think that my willingness to follow Silko's own notions of non-US based indigeneity helped. *Almanac* is truly pan-indigenous literature.

GM: I'd like to end by circling back to some of the things you said at the beginning of our conversation, concerning your formation as a scholar. You were educated at Yale, perhaps the most distinguished place for comparative literature studies, the university where Eric Auerbach taught and where the philological approach was very strong, and it seems to me that you owe something to that illustrious tradition but you have moved into a territory that the old European or Eurocentric comparatists did not cover: you have become a comparatist specializing in the literatures of the Americas. I wonder whether at the beginning of you career you were encouraged to move in that direction or whether there was some skepticism on the part of your mentors.

AB: I remember that there was some skepticism at Yale surrounding the seriousness of inter-American literary studies. This may have had to do with the fact that a new hemispheric approach was coming out of English and American Studies at the time, and comparatists didn't want to move there. You see, Literatures of the Americas had grown out of comparative literature in the 1980s and 1990s, but the hemisphere went national again when the field was overtaken by Americanists in the 2000s. This is the Hemispheric Studies that we know today. The lecture you heard, which just won a best essay prize from the International Association for Inter-American

Studies, traces the development of the field along two directions—an older "literature"-based track, and a newer "studies"-based track that is skeptical of literature. So, I would say I have retained the frame of mind of the comparatists who worked across different cultures and languages, even though they had switched their focus from Europe to the Americas. No need to throw out the baby with the bathwater! I suppose that my affinity for these pioneers is another testament to my intellectual formation. I value postcolonial critiques of culture; I place the highest value on the literatures of the world.



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