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Our Americas Archive Partnership

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Overview:

For many decades, the study of literature and history has been partitioned into national categories. This archive adopts a new paradigm for the study of American cultural and literary history that situates them in the context of the American hemisphere rather than the nation state. The archive takes its name from Cuban nationalist José Martí, whose famous 1893 essay “Our America” has become a touchstone for literary and cultural history scholars who have undertaken to understand “America” not as a synonym for an isolated United States but as a network of cultural filiations that have extended across the hemisphere from the period of colonization to the present. The archive fosters new research that examines American literatures from a hemispheric perspective, develops a collection of texts, curricular models and teaching materials that embody a hemispheric approach to the study of the early Americas, and generates professional and intellectual exchanges among scholars from various fields.

Why a Digital Archive:

From its inception in the fifteenth century, the history of print has been in close relationship with the history of capitalism, and the history of nationalism in Western culture. At least since the eighteenth century, western print culture has therefore traditionally reinforced the importance of the nation-state as the default frame of literary and historical reference. Still today, widely disseminated historical collections and literary anthologies, published for profit under the economic pressures of the highly capital-intensive print business, tend to include those materials that uphold, rather than complicate, national paradigms. The Our Americas Archive Partnership (OAAP), by contrast, offers new opportunities for rethinking the nation-state as the organizing rubric for literary and cultural history of the Americas. Its digital medium offers unique opportunities for a hemispheric approach to historical and literary analysis in two important ways.

First, because the Our Americas Archive Partnership is published not for profit but rather for open access, it is free to bring together materials from throughout the Americas, including but not limited to the US American nation state, as well as rare texts and texts in the original language that offer a new level of access for research and pedagogy. The second key advantage of the digital over the print medium is its potential for international access and scholarly collaboration as well as editorial partnership. Through its dissemination on the World Wide Web, a digital archive can reach an international audience of scholars, researchers, and students who may not otherwise have access to documents housed in US archives. Moreover, no single

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archive has all the materials that scholars might require in their research and teaching. Unlike the print medium, the digital medium makes possible an unprecedented level of editorial collaboration through hyper-textual cross-referencing in cyber space. Because the Our Americas Archive Partnership makes available materials that are dispersed in different geographic locations, it facilitates collaboration and intellectual exchange among an international audience. In short, the digital medium offers rich opportunities for transnational exchange and is therefore uniquely suited for a hemispheric approach to history.

The Archive:

The archive is comprised of electronic texts and links to texts originally written in or about the Americas from 1492 to approximately 1920. Its goal is to represent the full range and complexity of a multilingual “Americas” that includes Canada, the Caribbean, and Latin America. A partnership between the University of Maryland and Rice University, the Our Americas Archive is a long-term and inter-disciplinary project that explores the intersections between traditional humanities research and digital technologies. This partnership between Maryland’s Early Americas digital archive (1492-1820) and Rice’s Americas collection (1811-1920) creates unique new research and teaching opportunities. The point of convergence between the Maryland and Rice archives is the cultural transformation created by the revolutions for independence that took place over a span of fewer than sixty years. The archive, however, spans the five hundred year period that saw the making of modern and colonial cultures in the Americas. Because of its range, the archive promises to reinvigorate the study of American literary and cultural history by creating surprising juxtapositions, emphasizing different models of periodization, and suggesting new avenues of cross-cultural influence.

Archive Impact:

This new, hemispheric approach to the past that the OAAP undertakes necessitates new research tools and requires new methods of historical and literary analysis, and the OAAP is already key to the development of these new methodologies and research practices. It will be the central research tool for the NEH Summer Seminar: Towards a Hemispheric American Literature, a collaboration between Columbia University and Rice University faculty and scheduled for Summer 2007. To enrich participants’ research and to experiment with comparativist research tools, the NEH Seminar will integrate the Our Americas Archive Partnership into its weekly discussions. Recognizing that the OAAP is unique in that it brings together a diverse array of literary, historical and political documents that focus on nation formation across the hemisphere, the Seminar will use the archive as the basis for broader discussions about the research and pedagogical possibilities opened by digitization. Over the course of the seminar, participants will integrate the OAAP into their research and teaching materials with the goal of creating a new tool that they will continue to use in their research after the seminar’s end.

As this application suggests, the OAAP is key to the transition from a national to a hemispheric American literary and historical study. Such study promises to reinvigorate literary and historical scholarship but also poses a serious challenge to received models of intellectual training, research, evaluation, and curricular development. Although many now recognize the importance of this transformation, there is scant institutional support or local intellectual community for scholars working in this new field of hemispheric historical and literary studies. English departments, for example, are dominated by Americanists trained in the study of a national literature. Even those who sincerely wish to take their work in new directions often lack the linguistic, cultural, and historical knowledge to move beyond the conventional boundaries of the field. The OAAP is therefore vital to the efforts of faculty, students, and independent scholars who are reinventing Americanist study without the benefit of already existing comparative research models. The OAAP therefore fills a vital need by providing a research tool for scholars



who may lack institutional and technical support at their home institutions, or those who are looking to take their work in new directions.

Archive Status:

The Our Americas Archive Partnership is in its beginning stages, but early evidence suggests that the OAAP will have broad, multi-institutional impact and will generate new research, new methodologies, and new collaboration for students, faculty, and researchers. The University of Maryland and Rice archives come from different starting points—the Maryland archive being presently focused on literary texts from the colonial Americas and the Rice archive being presently focused on historical documents from the nineteenth century—but the goal is to pool our resources and to grow each collection in ways that maximize the OAAP for a broad audience of students and researchers. The Rice collection seeks to supplement its largely historical holdings with literary and broadly cultural material that will increase its pedagogical utility. The Maryland EADA seeks to make the EADA more useful for researchers by adding historical materials and facsimile texts. Collectively, the two archives gain from collaboration between the institutions' humanities technology tools—Maryland's Institute for Technology in the Humanities and Rice's Digital Press and Connexions Initiative—a Content Commons collection of free scholarly materials and software tools to help authors publish, instructors build custom courses, and students explore the links between concepts, courses, and disciplines.