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THE PRICE OF CULTURE, OR A HEMISPHERIC OPINION

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As evidenced by its title, the conference “Transnationalism, Translation, Transnation: A Dialogue on the Americas,” held at the University of Notre Dame April 15–17, 2007, sought to enter and contribute to the growing dialogue surrounding hemispheric approaches to study of the peoples and cultures of the Americas. Its exploration of the notion of ‘transnation,’ or the expression of culture which exceeds the bounds of the ‘national,’ and on transnationalism, or the expression and existence of one or more national cultures in a single individual, and the need of translation, linguistic, cultural or otherwise, highlighted the importance of identifying and recognizing the significance of long obscured cultural convergences between disparate peoples, providing the broader, more profound understanding of the meaning of identity and difference necessary to enable a more powerful and responsible movement toward the cultural challenges of the 21st century.

With panels such as ‘Languages of Transnationalism,’ ‘Routes to the Americas/Roots of the Americas,’ ‘The Politics of Art and the Poetics of Politics in the Americas,’ and ‘Locating Transnationalism in the Americas,’ the conference provided a sense of the inter-relatedness across the cultures of the Americas of issues concerning history, language, politics, and identity. Simultaneously, it fostered an exploration of the Americas in terms of the problem of place, the political function of cultural expression in the hemisphere and the hemispheric implications of transnationalism in historical perspective.

In conjunction with the conference, the Institute for Latino Studies and the Program on the Americas and Global Cultures at the University of Notre Dame sponsored an art exhibit, ‘Dialogues of the Americas,’ mounted in the Galería América in McKenna Hall, just outside of the Institute for Latino Studies. The exhibit drew on images by artists from Mission Grafica, the print-making department of the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts (MCCLA), in addition to works by a number of Bay Area artists not associated with this organisation, to explore the rich cultural heritage of the Americas. The exhibit emphasized the interrelated history and experiences of the peoples of the Americas through a visual iconography that both links these disparate cultures, and outlines their complicated and convoluted history by exploring their shared ex-



perience of the New World. Featuring a colorful and varied slate of images, 'Dialogues on the Americas' was intended to suggest multiple possibilities for engagement among the many cultures of the Americas, highlighting the points of convergence between them. In focusing on the importance of dialogue, the exhibit spoke in profound ways to a history of cultural contact and encounter stretching from the 15th century to the present. Bringing forward deep yet often silent (or silenced) cultural realities, it insisted on dialogue to combat the often violent results of cultural difference and its encounters, affirming that understanding, tolerance, faith and love must—and can only—come from the heart.

Through its visual and critical exploration of interrelated difference, however, the conference posed a number of important questions with regard to critical discourse in cultural and hemispheric studies. In its emphasis on trans- and extra-national realities, the conference also intensely interrogated the question of translation—linguistic, to be sure, but also cultural, in terms of the need to create the possibility of understanding between two or more cultures brought into close proximity through migration, racial amalgamation, or other conditions of cultural intermingling. By focusing on these issues, the conference interrogated conventional perspectives with regard to the organization of culture, while also providing various answers to the question of how to manage the effects of radical cultural difference in critical discourse and scholarly investigation.

What was suggested most powerfully by most of the conference participants, which included José David Saldívar, Kirsten Silva-Gruesz, Anna Brickhouse, J. Michael Dash, Sandra Pouchet-Paquet and Aldon Nielson, was that the problem of place and its frequent implications of stable, fixed, rooted and singular ethnic or national identity, grounded in one long chronological history and more often than not one national and/or ethnic language, is central to cultural explorations that rely on hemispheric perspectives. But because the hemispheric approach requires the recognition of cultural multiplicity, rather than insisting on cultural singularity, it also demands the development of critical tools that can form the foundation for serious examination of this very different cultural reality. In other words, the conference questioned whether or not the critical tools used to produce knowledge in conventional academic and intellectual contexts, many of which are based on singular conceptions of culture, place and identity, are adequate to the effort to explore the meaning and significance of cultural multiplicity. In its examination of this issue, the conference pointed to an important problem in contemporary critical discourse, one that, though not clearly evident, yet lies at the heart of many attempts within the academy to address these difficulties. That is, given the necessity of methodological differences between hemispheric and more conventional approaches, how is it possible to keep the examination of difference from spiraling out of control once the linguistic hegemony of singularity is surpassed? Further, how can the significance of this reality be adequately

translated in the critical and intellectual spaces of both the new and the old? It is not that one must replace the other, as thinking along the lines of singularity would require, so that it would seem that for those who espouse hemispheric approaches (and those like them), more conventional viewpoints and contexts must hold no value. It is also not that the many more conventional means of organizing knowledge are simply to be abandoned in the name of newer, more 'trendy' modes of investigation. Rather, conventional approaches emphasizing a singular object of study must exist side-by-side with newer perspectives that may take as their object the study of the interrelationships between multiple cultures or ethnicities, or the study of cultural locations unauthorized within more prevalent and conventional parameters.

In its exploration of these issues, the conference provided a forum for considering the larger significance of hemispheric perspectives, far beyond simply the fact of these perspectives themselves. Thinking about the questions and problems it raised, the most important of which are mentioned here, suggests the pressing need for further discussion regarding the meaning of cultural multiplicity in the shared project of knowledge production. By not taking its full measure, we pay a price: we ignore the complex and culturally changing world we are living in, and condemn ourselves to endless, and perhaps even reckless, scholarly reproduction, without thought of what may be lost and/or gained in the event.

For more information about the conference, please see the conference website, www.nd.edu/~latino/transnationalism.