

Crossing National, Institutional and Disciplinary Borders: The Many Quests to ‘America’ – and Beyond

This special issue of *AmeriQuests* is the fruit of broad collaboration between Vanderbilt University (the Heard Library, the Curb Center, the Robert Penn Warren Center, and the Program in Québec and Canadian Studies) and McGill University’s Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas (IPLAI). The Government of Québec has also been an active participant throughout, in the promotion of reflections about arts and humanities policy within and beyond its borders. The outcome of this work, a series of crucial reflections on the humanities and the role of arts in the university setting, reflects the workings of this collaboration; and so by way of introduction, I’ll offer a sense of how it all came about, what it all means for each of the units described, and how it represents an example of interdisciplinary work that might indicate new directions for the humanities and the arts. I’ll conclude by describing an ambitious new project to bring *AmeriQuests* to Duke University Press, and promote the creation, at Vanderbilt, of a new *AmeriQuests* Portal that will display our findings, and foster collaborative work in an interactive setting deep into the future. Taken as a whole, this special double issue of *AmeriQuests* provides a sense of how the humanities and the arts can, and do, enter into dialogue on matters within and beyond the university, and how serious inquiry can be inspired to cross traditional or existing boundaries for the advancement of work within and beyond the ivory tower.

Program in Québec and Canadian Studies: A Template for Productive Border-Crossing

I began the Québec and Canadian Studies Program almost ten years ago in order to complement and enhance work undertaken in a comparative Québec/Canada-US perspective. Thanks to broad backing, including Program Enhancement Grants and additional support from the Government of Québec and Canada, the establishment of a Canada-US Fulbright Chair and productive collaborations inspired by Fulbright’s President Michael Hawes, as well as infusions from centers, departments and programs at Vanderbilt University, Québec and Canadian work has been firmly established to promote teaching, conferences, research, publishing and inter-university cooperation between Vanderbilt and Canadian institutions. In order to deepen these connections, it seemed appropriate to focus in particular on a specific partner, and so with Quebec government funding the “Vanderbilt-McGill Initiative” was launched to foster collaborative research between every school, and most departments, in both universities. The Initiative funds research travel, faculty, staff, and students at all levels, in order to seed short and long-term collaborations. Projects to date have already resulted in many tangible research outcomes including joint publications, student publications, joint workshops/symposium, talks, and other collaboratively produced projects in the interest of the following goals:

1. To continue to promote Québec and Canadian content in courses dealing with the Americas and to sensitize students to Canada-Americas issues;
2. To continue to assist in the development of comparative US-Québec-Canadian contributions to *AmeriQuests*;
3. To support Vanderbilt University's student exchange with McGill University that allows students to study in Montréal, for the Summer, one semester, or a full year;
4. To further encourage strong Québec and Canadian representation on campus by the staging of conferences, talks and research on key Québec-Canada-Americas issues; and
5. To pursue efforts at bringing Québec and Canadian scholars to give talks, seminars and input for Vanderbilt University events.

Québec and Canadian Studies at Vanderbilt was built on a different set of principles than most other programs of its kind in the US because it specifically sets out to foster work on Québec/Canada/the Americas, rather than just “American,” “Canadian,” or “Québec Studies.” This comparative perspective is far more powerful, and productive, in a context like Vanderbilt, and in a state like Tennessee which has no border with Canada and few overt affiliations; nonetheless, it has become apparent over the years that considerable interest could in fact be motivated by this comparative perspective, and that many researchers enhance the value and quality of their work by bringing a comparative perspective to bear. Along the way, it also became clear that the Canadian work was largely Québec-related, both on account of my own direct connections to the province, but also because Québec’s specificity and distinctiveness were more compelling in their differences for many of the debates about alternative perspectives to the American approach to, say, issues relating to health care, feminism, linguistic matters, integration, energy policy, or social welfare. As a result, when Vanderbilt officials decided that it would be appropriate to bring a high-level delegation to Canada, we chose Montréal, and there met up with faculty from each of its four universities. Shortly thereafter, through our discussions in Atlanta, the idea of focusing especially upon Québec, and even more especially upon McGill, led to the current program, and I think that the lead-up to this is what in part accounts for our success thus far, but it also accounts for the specific focus of the work we’re doing.

The interest for the US side of the equation is therefore not in Québec Studies per se, that is, this isn’t a program that focuses specifically upon Québec (or Canada) as an autonomous area of study and indeed if it was, there would be very little intrinsic interest amongst faculty or students. Most scholars and students are unaware of the work being done in Québec or Canada, in any field, and to make them aware would require a completely different setting. Instead, the focus has been to bring a Québécois or Canadian perspective to conversations already happening on campus, in virtually every faculty. So at a time when American publicly funded universities are suffering inordinate losses in light of the recession, or when massive health care reform is working to help cover the roughly 40 million people without insurance in the US, or when oil spills are rekindling interest in hydro power in the TVA area or nuclear power beyond it, or when literary departments are floundering in search of a new paradigm to meet the challenges of 21st Century writings, what is valuable is to offer a new perspective that is both significantly different from prevailing work, but also workable within the framework of a North American university.

This brings us the work we have done so far, available at:

http://www.vanderbilt.edu/canadianstudies/new_projects

which spans all faculties and many departments across both the McGill and Vanderbilt campuses. In each case, Québec in particular offers not only a different perspective, but a set of possibilities that in most cases is outside of what would be deemed possible by a discussion limited to the US context. For example, in the realm of literature (cf. the projects of Betty, Stevens, Ridge, Johnson, Higgs), it’s not the literature per se that is studied, but rather the “sociocritique” and “discours social” approaches, in addition to the Bakhtinian work that was pioneered in Québec. This brings students into contact with (for example) Marc Angenot, Régine Robin, Michel Pierssens and the whole array of work that was done by the Centre Inter-Universitaire d’Analyse du Discours et Sociocritique des Textes (CIADEST). It also leads to the specificity of the feminism that grew up around such writers as Madeleine Gagnon, Denise Boucher, Nicole Brossard and others who blurred the distinction between theory and writing praxis. In science, the collaboration between the universities in Québec, through the sharing of resources and faculty, is significant and helps each unit become greater than the sum of its parts. Further, the strong participation of the Québec government, through les Fonds FCAR and other funding agencies, and also through start-up projects, provides a different kind of impetus to possible work. This applies for example to the

astronomy work (Hertel), the Physics work (Dickerson/Brochu) and others described below. In sociology (Rehel), the sociological methods employed in the Québec context, and once again the stronger role played by the government of Québec in amassing data and providing resources for scholarly work, is an alternative approach from which American scholars benefit, while the Vanderbilt model, relying upon heavy internal funding from the university and a more cultural approach to the subject, enhances the Québec comparative work. In Native American studies (Pexa), consultation of Québec archives, and work with both peoples and government organizations provides an entirely different context to study the preservation of autochthones language and culture, both because of the different approaches taken in Québec now, but also because of the divergence between English and French colonial powers as regards the treatment of native Americans. In short, the Québec and Canadian Studies Program, and the Vanderbilt-McGill initiative, are both intrinsically comparative, forward-looking, multi and inter-disciplinary, and they're designed to complement rather than supplant, work presently underway throughout Vanderbilt and McGill and, by extension, throughout Québec, Canada, and Tennessee. The excitement about this program, a rare example of burgeoning work at a time of retraction within and beyond the academy, represents it seems to me the growth and creativity that is the consequence of working in divergent and not-always-complementary frameworks on questions of profound importance.

Over and above research collaborations, the Vanderbilt-McGill Initiative Student Exchange Program offers students the possibility of completing (French) language requirements for PhD exams, and a vibrant bilingual setting within which undergrads can study and live. In exchange, the Vanderbilt French Department offers a Business French certificate that certifies graduates to work in Europe, developed in connection with academic advisers assigned to the (exchange) students at the start of the semester. Additionally, international exchange students receive individual assistance by a graduate student if it is deemed necessary by their supervising professor, and tutors are made available to help exchange students in their studies, as well as in adapting to the environment. This program is further bolstered by other overlaps that Vanderbilt has with Québec, including a Montréal Maymester, and a longstanding tie to Jeunesse Soleil as a site for the Alternative Spring Break, a program that was developed at Vanderbilt University. Once again, from the Vanderbilt perspective, the advantage of working in an institution of McGill's caliber, in Québec, is that virtually all areas of study can be improved upon because the Québec and Canadian perspectives – on arts funding and policy, healthcare, education, security, education policy, drugs, abortion, gun control -- are applicable to the US, despite the often dramatically different approach taken to each. As such, any student in the college gain not only an elite training for a semester, but also a very different take on whatever area they're involved in.

The *AmeriQuests* Portal: A Platform for Cross-Border Inquiry

Some of the results of the work undertaken in the context of these collaborations are published in *AmeriQuests*, a journal focuses on border crossings and quests within the Americas. An in-depth review of *AmeriQuests* undertaken in 2011 highlighted the value of an interdisciplinary, open-access, peer-reviewed, multilingual journal focused on crossing borders in the Americas, or questing towards an "America"; but it also drew attention to a crucial difference between an on-line journal and a journal that has been made available on-line. To date, *AmeriQuests* has been largely the former, and has not used the many features available in this era of touch screens, multimedia, and table navigation. As such, we have decided to build a Portal that will both complement and expand the viability of *AmeriQuests* by providing a network of vetted information related to the general themes of the journal. The portal will also function on PCs and Macs, but we expect that the portal environment will be best suited to the i-pad style, and we also envision that this will be the future for

computing of this sort. It's an exciting project in light of discussion of how to cross national, historical, institutional, disciplinarily and departmental boundaries, and how, as a matter of course, to bring the world to bear upon the Humanities and the Arts, when appropriate, and how to bring more humanistic or artistic insights to discussions within and beyond their own boundaries, be they what they may.

To foster this kind of work, the *AmeriQuests* portal is designed to take full advantage of the on-line environment by both harnessing current technologies, particularly those employed by tablet environments, and developing new ways of providing both topical and in-depth information relating to border crossing in the Americas. At the same time, since *AmeriQuests* aims to serve the needs of the academic community as well as a much larger general readership, including for activist purposes, it is appropriate to continue offering the traditional "peer-reviewed" status for academic articles, which requires a conventional journal setting. As such, *AmeriQuests* will have two distinct but related (and connected) environments that will interact with one another, and readers will be able to portal from the Portal to the Journal, and from the Journal to the Portal, when issues come up that are addressed by the other environment. The portal itself will be a vetted and issue-based tool, amassing and organizing information according to options selected by the user. For users who are interested in simply "browsing" issues relating to border-crossing in the Americas, a lively, vibrant environment of videos, articles, chats, feeds, photos and interviews will be made available that relate to all areas of borders and border-crossing in the Americas.

For the purposes of this portal, "vetted" means that all materials presented will be pre-existing and pulled from partner institutions that already provide what we consider valuable, topical and important information relating to the subjects presented. As such, we will work with a large number of partner institutions, representing (in the early stages) a few research groups in every country of the Americas, limited by our capacity to liaison with them. A key component in these early stages will be on, first, cross-fertilizing humanities and arts efforts throughout the Americas, and, secondly, on human border crossings in the Americas, in areas related to refugees, immigration, undocumented persons, and migrant workers. We will liaison with consultants from these partner institutions who will be responsible for the content, a task that they essentially already have, since the institution to which they are affiliated would only be posting materials deemed appropriate for their site. Nonetheless, they will help smooth the linking of their materials to the portal, and we will work with them to develop new projects, and will confer with them on specific questions relating to their areas of expertise.

Thus described, the *AmeriQuests* portal is at the nexus of pre-existing resources, and offers through its functioning access to useful information relating to border-crossing throughout the Americas, -- in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese -- that is deemed valuable by leading experts in the field. As such, it would be a first-stop for researchers but also practitioners and activists in a range of fields to consult for their work. As regards all types of migration, for example, we envision it being invaluable for lawyers, public defenders, interpreters/translators, activists, academics, social workers and so forth, as well as to people who are concretely concerned about border-crossing, including those who themselves may be considering border crossing for the purpose of, say, working in another country of the Americas. At the same time, however, the existence of a broad array of articles in *AmeriQuests*, a large community of scholars associated with it through the Board and the Editorial contributors, and a substantial readership, also provides the possibility to develop new material specifically suited to the portal environment.

This very issue is an example of portal-friendly work, since it provides, in multimedia and more traditional report and article forms, crucial discussions on the legacies and future(s) of humanities and arts work within and beyond the Americas. The participants in the Québec, Vanderbilt and McGill-funded conference offer a broad spectrum of perspectives that benefits from

the affiliations we have developed in the context of Québec/Canada/McGill/Vanderbilt collaborations, as well as other collaborations that allowed for the participation of Michael Holquist, Yale Emeritus Professor and member of the Columbia Society of Senior Scholars, as well as Peter Hitchcock, Director of Place, Culture and Politics, Graduate Center and Professor of English at CUNY. From McGill, the participants included Will Straw, Director, McGill Institute for the Study of Canada; Paul Yachnin, Chair, Department of English; Leigh Yetter, Associate Director, Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas (IPLAI); Julie Cumming, Associate Dean, Research and Administration, Schulich School of Music; and Michael Jemtrud, Associate Professor, School of Architecture. From Vanderbilt, Robert Barsky, French and English Departments, Founding Director of Québec and Canadian Studies and Founding Editor of *AmeriQuests*; Bill Ivey, former Director of the NEA, former Director of the Curb Center; Mark Schoenfield, Chair, English Department; Cecilia Ticchi, English Department; Martin Rapisarda, Associate Dean; and Ed Friedman, Department of Spanish and Portuguese; Faculty Director of the Robert Penn Warren Center. The gathering was sponsored by an important grant from the Government of Québec, which also permitted the contributions of Joane Boyer, Québec Delegate, and Andrée Tremblay, Governmental and Public Affairs Officer/ Attachée aux affaires institutionnelles et publiques, Délégation du Québec, Atlanta.

The material for this gathering included the text of the conference paper (Hitchcock), reactions from Holquist and Barsky, the text from the Québec Government Office in Atlanta (Tremblay), the IPLAI overview and definition of the Humanities (Yachnin), an overview of challenges in this assemblage (Rapisarda), the written summary of the conference findings (Yachnin), and 13 filmed statements from participants on the ‘state of the humanities’. All of this work has been assembled in this *AmeriQuests* issue, followed by a “chat” area, to invite comments from our readers. The eventual objective is to link this entire area to the portal, as a special *AmeriQuests* contribution to the Americas, relating to humanities and the arts. It will then be one of the special topic contributions that complements other resources relating to this issue that are available from our partner organizations. The next planned *AmeriQuests* and Portal issue will be on the “Continued (?) Pertinence of a Marxist Framework in the Americas”, followed by an issue devoted to the “Reception of Baudelaire in the Americas”, beginning with a special issue on Baudelaire in Québec. These projects will appear as a second portal area for the journal, and will contribute to what we envision will be a large section relating to how specific cultural artifacts, genres, and artistic trends cross national borders and effect local cultural practices.

As is clear from these examples, the Portal is being designed to interact with the existing journal, by offering resources relating to the topic at hand, and, conversely, the portal will bolster the journal by developing new subject areas for investigation, to be undertaken by existing and new readers and contributors. Given that the portal also aims to offer useful information, including scholarly resources, there will also be a facility to link to information about books that are of particular interest, as per the selections of options and themes made by the reader. At some point in the future, it might be interesting to envision offering content from the books themselves to readers, either in a sample or full-text form.

Navigating Across Borders

A sense of how navigation within the portal is planned to operate provides a guide to the border-crossing that is so crucial to our efforts. When researchers arrive at the portal, they will be in the face of a map, of North, Central and South America (and the Caribbean), in the center of the screen. This map will be peopled by a series of dots that represent the centers, providing us with feeds and data bases that are vetted, implicitly (by the Center in question), and explicitly (through the participation of our consultants). A map of this first level accompanies this document, and it

provides in graphic detail a sense of what this first level will look like, in rough form. Once the researcher has made selections to narrow down the topics, or has chosen from a specific issue from those that are running at the bottom of the page, or has simply chosen to browse, s/he will be brought to a second level of the portal that will provide a sense of the geographic choices made, and the list of possible available resources. This will follow (roughly) what one might find in a Netflix search for a movie to view, whereby the top level list offers New Arrivals, Classics or specific genres, whereas in an *AmeriQuests* Portal search, one can choose on the basis of the buttons described above. At the second level, the Netflix viewers are offered a series of choices that correspond to their first level choice (Romantic Comedy with a Strong Female Lead, say) but also some new choices (all films starring Nicole Kidman). The related *AmeriQuests* Portal search might be Border Crossings Between Guatemala and Mexico, with a series of new options such as Illegal, Migrant, Farm Labor, Forced, and so forth, as well as the type of document desired, such as Video, Chat, recent books on the subject. The environment we seek for the portal is similar, therefore, to the tablet environment developed by Apple or Netflix and, again similarly, the materials we provide will also be pre-existing, but now properly sorted and placed within consistent graphics. Like Apple, or Amazon, we will also have some original content, work, like this current issue, that was produced specifically for this environment.

By this point we envision that just as the Netflix viewer is now honing his or her choice of films, the research will have made significant choices en route to being presented with specific choices. So if s/he has now chosen (say) Brazil and Québec, Contemporary Dance, Cross-Border Influence, this will be sufficient for us to offer specific documents, but (hopefully) it will be possible to do a triage from source centers (the Center for Contemporary Dance at UQAM, for example) and show these available documents in a graphic that is consistent with the portal's overall graphic layout, with buttons offering more options always available to help narrow the search, start again, and so forth. It will also offer a list of articles in *AmeriQuests* that treat this specific subject, and, separately, other known resources (say, Duke UP books) that address this area.

The portal will be developed at Vanderbilt University, in collaboration with the Centers chosen for participation, via representatives from each. We also envision that stakeholders will include government representatives, who will find in this project ample opportunities to contribute useful information, and our long-standing partnership with the Government of Québec will be a key model in this regard. Rights to the material will remain with its source, that is, original *AmeriQuests* materials remain as part of the journal, and then other materials to which we are linked remain the responsibility of, and the property of (in whatever capacity this already exists) the source in question. As such, we are simply linking to resources that are already available on-line, so that there are no costs or proprietary issues. There are no specific rights assigned to the participants in the portal, they are offering in a volunteer capacity their expertise to ensure that the portal offers useful information for those seeking to understand border-crossing issues in the Americas. The duties of the stakeholders of the portal would be, again, limited to their responding to our requests for guidance on specific issues, and they as a matter of course will be the face of the institutions offering the on-line materials, and therefore the question of responsibility doesn't fall upon them directly. We will also ask that they help guide us in existing and future projects.

The ambition of this project is prodigious, and as such it will unfold over time, developing at the speed offered by incoming resources, both material and human. We also envision that funds could be provided on a punctual basis by partners who wish to post the results of (say) conferences on the website, and have funds to publicize or diffuse their work. Current limiting factors are all related to this being a project in its early phases, but there is no immediate rush or deadline to meet, beyond our own will to move this project forward. We look forward to progress, and to building a broad readership who'll benefit from our work.

Like all border-crossing initiatives, the conference on the futures of the humanities, and our efforts to build the border-crossing portal, offer the possibility of rich new collaborations, and the kinds of unexpected insights that we see in this issue of *AmeriQuests*, in which the challenges facing the Humanities and the Arts can be seen to open-up huge swathes of new possibilities for those involved, within, and beyond, the Ivory Tower that supports them.