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Kirsten Silva Gruesz: Ambassadors of Culture

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“Alone with the Terrible Hurricane”

The Occluded History of Transamerican Literature

*La tormenta umbría
En los aires revuelve un océano
Que todo lo sepulta . . .
Al fin, mundo fatal, nos separamos;
El huracán y yo solos estamos.¹*

Near the beginning of the century in which nationalism in the Americas assumed its fateful form, the Cuban-born writer José María Heredia penned these lines from “En una tempestad: Al huracán,” which was first published from his political exile in New York City in 1825. A few years later, the editor and poet William Cullen Bryant translated “The Hurricane” and another poem for publications he edited, from which they were liberally reprinted around the country for the next several decades. A partial inventory of the subsequent appearances of original and translation is both telling and tantalizing. In 1854 *DeBow’s Review*, an adamantly proslavery monthly in New Orleans, cited Heredia as an example of the high accomplishments of Cuban culture in order to support its argument that the rich island was languishing under Spanish rule and would be better served by U.S. governance. Across town, the Spanish-language weekly *La Patria*, which had raised one of the sole protests in New Orleans against the expansionist war on Mexico, used Heredia to stir up the sentiments of Cuban expatriates in favor of the Spanish empire and against such foreign influence. In far-off San Francisco, *El Nuevo Mundo*, an urbane daily paper published for the city’s Mexican and Chilean elites, used an epigraph from “Al huracán” to introduce an

original poem comparing the French intervention in Mexico to Spain's continuing grip on Cuba, thereby making Heredia's struggle a corollary to their own. "Al huracán" was also reprinted in various anthologies and newspapers in Mexico, where Heredia had lived out the rest of his short life; when Bryant visited Mexico City in 1872—perhaps the only yanqui of the period to be received there with genuine popular enthusiasm—his translation of the poem was distributed in broadside. Finally, in the flurry of enthusiasm for pan-Americanism that swept the United States after its acquisition of an empire in the Pacific and the Caribbean, the Bryant-Heredia exchange was resurrected in at least three anthologies as an example of the fraternal ties that allegedly bound the hemisphere. In the U.S.-occupied San Juan of 1903, Francis (Francisco) J. Amy made this pairing one of the centerpieces of his curious textbook, *Musa bilingüe*, which sought to foster "the intellectual Americanization of Porto Rican youths" through parallel readings of English and Spanish poems. One Professor Brau contributed an introductory apostrophe that makes clear the civilizing mission that an education in the English language and its high culture is meant to have for Puerto Rico:

The task of directing our social destiny having devolved onto the great republic of Washington, she has brought us, in the folds of her revered flag, the irradiation of her democratic spirit; but alas! the spirit without the speech can accomplish no redemption. . . . This means that perfect homogeneity does not exist between directors and directed, owing to divergencies in language which must be done away with by both. . . . Take this book; study its cohesion, analyze its component parts, fathom its syncretism that blends together the intellectual genius of two empires to which you are bound.²

Amy's book of facing-page poetic translations is presented as the path toward a desirable cultural "syncretism" that would bow to an inescapable political reality: the exchange of a new "empire" for the old. Despite *Musa bilingüe's* hopeful gesture at the mutual education of English and Spanish speakers, their relationship is as unequal as that of "directors" and "directed." Brau continues, revealingly, "without voice it is impossible to call for help, and we are virtually mute, since we find no one to understand us." Translated language follows, if not precedes, the accomplishment of *traslatio imperii*, the movement of empire. And the voice of that power now speaks in English. Puerto Rico, as Brau senses, is alone

with the hurricane, the naturalizing force of U.S. culture that occludes all things behind its own forceful presence.

What ties together these discrete uses of a poetic text, jointly expressed as “original” and “translation” by two politically engaged writers who despite their former fame today seem antique, relegated to the peripheries of academia? As the early publishing history of “Al huracán” suggests, the ideal of a transamerican culture—of a bridgeable, thinkable communion between the Anglophone and Hispanophone worlds—is rooted in a revolutionary and cosmopolitan Romantic ethos that Bryant and Heredia, whatever their differences, shared. But this ideal was from the beginning beset by the powerful engine of U.S. territorial expansion. By the time of the “neighborly” U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico and Cuba at the turn of the century, it had disintegrated into a strained awareness of the structural imbalances between the former colonies of the hemisphere—imbalances that encouraged the more overt forms of U.S. domination that would be perfected (and tiresomely repeated) throughout the course of the twentieth century. “The spirit without the speech can accomplish no redemption,” Brau writes, reiterating the nineteenth-century commonplace that speech—and heightened literary speech in particular—might do what mere economic forces and political proclamations could not: transform subjects into citizens, and strangers into compatriots. This utopian will of the word is generally recognized as a corollary project to nation-building.³ Yet the relationships of imagined community at this time also extended across porous and contested national boundaries to establish and strengthen other alliances: between slaveholding interests in the U.S. South and their Cuban partners and rivals in the sugar trade; between radical republicans from Mexico and the Caribbean who made New Orleans a convenient locus from which to plot the overthrow of Spanish and European colonial powers; or between liberal procapitalist coalitions across Greater Mexico from northern California to Veracruz’s Caribbean port—to mention just the examples offered by “Al huracán.” Transnational alliances all, and yet they also gesture toward a slowly evolving Latino presence within this national sphere. Nor does “transnational” adequately describe the relationship of disparate groups of Spanish speakers living in the United States to each other. The sense of confraternity, whether deeply felt or merely wished for, might explain how Heredia’s tropical storm came to be offered as entertainment for the relatively conservative californio population of San Francisco.

This longstanding Latino presence, which has grown in both quantity and visibility at the edge of a new millennium, invites us to revisit the history of transamerican cultural contacts. It encourages us to take seriously the possibility that the divergences between English and Spanish that Professor Brau sadly noted might in fact eclipse a common tradition—common without being unitary or imperially reductive; common, perhaps, in the very nodes of their divergence. This tradition is currently accessible to us in two forms, each contained within a particular discipline and its knowledge structure. The first is the archival preservation of the written traces of Hispanophone communities in zones of border contact such as New Mexico, California, and Texas, and in urban spaces of great ethnic diversity such as New York, Chicago, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. This is the record currently being identified and preserved by one of the most ambitious such efforts ever of its kind, the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage project. The assemblage of this vast archive is made meaningful through the lens of an implicit ethnic genealogy; that is, it aims to produce knowledge about the historical contributions of different Latino populations to their particular communal identity (as Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, or under the larger umbrella of “Latino”) and to U.S. culture at large.⁴ The second way in which we might consider the common history of Anglophone and Hispanophone American culture invokes the larger frame of transamerican and transatlantic cultural contact: networks of publication and transmission; relationships of patronage, influence, and translation; and the institutions of pedagogy, canonization, and official sanctification that allow texts to live or die in the public imagination. Such contacts fall within the scope of comparative literature, which has historically been seen—at least within U.S. studies—as a footnote to the more pressing issue of the national imagination.⁵ To the extent that these two frames differ—for at certain points, they do not—both are essential components of a cultural history of the Americas, and need to be simultaneously rendered visible. Such a vision is necessary not only to provide a historical grounding for contemporary Latino identity but to imagine a new form of U.S. cultural history in general: one that would unseat the fiction of American literature’s monolingual and Anglocentric roots and question the imperial conflation of the United States with America.⁶

Although written by a Cuban—more accurately, a discontented Spanish subject with ties of birth and property to Cuba, who cemented these into a Byronic aura of political idealism and longing—“Al huracán” does not signify exclusively in the context of that nation’s tradition.

Nor does it figure solely in the development of an ideally unified Latin American culture, along the lines of José Martí's vision of *Nuestra América*. Rather, each of the poem's appearances in periodicals from rural or urban border spaces contextualizes local issues of autonomy and agency by placing them in broader contexts, and marks lines of affiliation that now might be called "global" or "diasporic," without the postmodern simultaneity that is usually implicit in such terms.⁷ Each iteration of the poem can be understood as a social performance, a summons to discrete groups of readers who impose on it the filters of their own positioning within the transamerican sphere, and create if not a "new" poem, then a distinct transaction of it. The travels of a written work such as this one may seem less historically resonant than the movements of troops, tribes, or tourists across the hemisphere, particularly since the historical record of reception is relatively thin. We can only speculate on the full range of the text's movements; its presence in a publication from San Francisco or from Santiago de Cuba hints at—but never fully documents—the ways in which it was heard, understood, or misunderstood in those places, and passed along to others in the form of an imitation, a few lines lifted or memorized, or a distant echo. In the pages that follow, I want to fill in some of these forgotten transactions and speculate on the missing, invisible ones.

In traditional literary history, the textual transmissions that matter are those that take place between canonical figures: Emerson's letter of blessing to Whitman, or Sarmiento's argument with Bello over American language differences, to cite two emblematic examples. A more historicist approach might single out a scene of transmission that seems to represent some larger cultural pathology, for instance, General Winfield Scott telling William H. Prescott that Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico* had inspired him on the field, and urging him to write a sequel that would glorify the new "conquest" of the country by Scott's forces.⁸ My effort here is to broaden the range of textual movements that we consider vital and meaningful. This process involves, in part, a movement away from canonical scenes of transmission and toward an expanded set of texts that we take to be relevant. More profoundly, however, it involves an amplification of the domain of the term "American" into other languages and other spaces aside from the obvious centers of political and artistic activity. How do we codify the relationship between a famous poet like Heredia and an all-but-anonymous literary citizen like the editor in San Francisco in a way that will illuminate the cultural values distinct to the immediate world of each, as well as the ones they shared?

A striking aspect of early Spanish-language periodicals published in the continental United States, as I hinted earlier, is the prominent place of belles lettres in them. Poetry and criticism, composed by both unknown and well-known writers, appears much more often than does serialized fiction. Far from being isolated records of local sensibilities, such publications consistently referred to other periodicals in distant places, reprinting pieces from them, taking issue with their editorial stances, or simply mentioning them as reassuring proof that their readers were not stranded in a linguistic desert. The global sphere, in other words, was as important to these organs as the local one, and thus the significance of the work they published was inseparable from an overlapping set of larger cultural contexts: the forsaken *patria* with which most of the local readers identified; the Hispanophone world as a whole; and the Anglophone United States that surrounded them. Nicolás Kanellos and Helvetia Martell have usefully divided early Latino print culture into the exile press, the immigrant press, and the “native Hispanic” press, but these categorizations, as Kanellos and Martell acknowledge, are rarely exclusive, and the distinctions are particularly difficult to make in the nineteenth century.⁹ More specifically, the existence of a borderlands literary culture seemed to beg pressing and much understudied questions about the place of a form of heightened or ritualized speech like poetry in the daily lives of a whole range of nineteenth-century readers of English and Spanish—from the barely literate (who might “possess” a text read aloud to them despite this handicap) to the hypereducated (for whom reading certain kinds of poetry represented their mastery of certain prestige discourses: rules of diction, meter and syllabification, intertextual references). Although many studies in both U.S. and Latin American literature have interrogated fiction’s role in the construction of certain forms of identity—gender, citizenship, local and racial affiliations—we know little of the ways in which poetic and belletristic language might have influenced individual lives and community movements. Poetry’s prominence in these readily available media forces us to rethink general assumptions about the pristine aesthetic “removal” of lyric and to consider its potential role in shaping larger ideological formations as well as influencing the ways in which individual readers and writers mapped their lives. That project, in turn, compels us to unloose—at least imaginatively—the geographical and linguistic boundaries traditionally associated with the history of U.S. national culture. The peregrinations of “Al huracán” call for a new geography of American literary history that emphasizes its formation within and around a culture of the Americas.

Geografía Nueva: An Alternate History of the American World System

A historicized rendering of this transnational space must consider, first, the social networks through which literary information is circulated, beginning with the nature and degree of literacy among various social classes and stretching to include the highest forms of cultural consecration: the academy, high-prestige publishing houses, state patronage, and so on. Pierre Bourdieu attempts to sketch this context by establishing a set of economic and cultural factors that determine the relationships between writers or artists (cultural producers) and the dominant class wielding economic and political power. He describes this relationship spatially in terms of the adjacency of the field of cultural production, which creates and circulates symbolic capital, to the field of power, which distributes economic capital. By plotting various coordinates on these overlapping fields—low/high profitability, strong/weak consecration from established arbiters of culture, high/low artistic autonomy—Bourdieu is able to identify provocative connections between the market, the state, and various kinds of art in a nuanced way that demonstrates the increasing alienation of intellectuals from the field of power during the nineteenth century, while also revealing the points at which they colluded and cooperated with it.¹⁰ Literary-historical scholarship that draws from Bourdieu, or from the similarly influential notion of the “public sphere” derived from the work of Jürgen Habermas, generally uses these models to illuminate the development of a national cultural identity, as democratic ideas and definitions of community are traded into familiarity through the currency of words within the public sphere enabled by a strong print culture.¹¹ These claims are grounded in data about the history of book and periodical publishing such as that gathered by Ronald Zboray in his overview of the antebellum period in the United States. Zboray suggests that the mass of low-cost periodicals and books that flowed through newly improved trade routes down the Mississippi, through the Ohio River valley, and along the Erie Canal were just as important in affirming shared values among different parts of the nation as they were in producing the period’s noteworthy economic expansion. Zboray’s metaphorical borrowings from the atlas of trade—his vision of a nation intellectually (if not politically) unified by the traffic in print culture—relies on a model of center and periphery analogous to the federal system. Certain key cities (Boston, New York, Philadelphia) were

sources of printed goods, which worked on their readers to build national cultural affiliations, while a string of far-flung small towns received these goods and their urban ideologies. But such cities never limited their trade relationships to the peripheries of the nation; they exchanged intellectual goods with other national capitals as well. Examples of a transnational traffic in words, such as the peregrinations of “Al huracán” via Heredia, Bryant, and their diverse readers, call for new interpretations of the history of print and the relationship of the field of cultural production to other fields of power and influence.

One model for such a comparison derives from liberal historian Herbert Bolton, who in 1932 famously argued for a common history of the Americas, whereas another arises more recently from the world-systems model of Immanuel Wallerstein. The Bolton thesis relies on a suggestive list of similarities: the fact that following the wars of independence (1808–26 on the southern continent, excluding the Caribbean islands), native-born property-holders in all the American nation-states struggled to escape European colonial domination; most inherited economies based on slave labor and their attendant paradoxes; and all confronted a residual indigenous presence by imposing internal colonial structures based on racial and linguistic divisions. Yet to the eyes of later historians, these similarities pale next to the sheer diversity of national experience in the hemisphere, not least the gaping disparity between their modes of economic development. The United States by 1820 had a coherent political economy built on competitive capital and by 1870 was already making a transition into monopoly capital, whereas Latin American nations largely continued in dependent economic relations with Europe. Thus, such comparative histories seemed destined, at best, to conclude that Latin America was slow or deficient next to the Anglo world in fostering democratic institutions and economic “progress”; at worst, to downplay the increasing role of the United States itself in the relations of external dominance that hampered Latin American self-determination.¹² In contrast, Quijano and Wallerstein’s 1992 essay “Americanness as a Concept” gives the hemispheric thesis an inverted focus by arguing for the common significance of the Americas to the rest of the world: “the creation of this geosocial entity, the Americas, was the constitutive act of the modern world-system . . . there could not have been a capitalist world-economy without the Americas.”¹³ Shifting the focus definitively from global political relations to economic ones, they identify such historical events as the violent territorial expansion of the United States into the rest of the continent, and its imitation of European colo-

nial relations later in the century, as points that require transnational investigation focusing on relations of capital.

Likewise, comparative literary studies that rely on the superficial similarity of historical “themes” suggested by the Bolton thesis, rather than the complex imbrications of power and influence in the Americas, seem to exist in an odd vacuum. The traditional disciplinary model of Goethean *Weltliteratur*, with its emphasis on personal relationships of influence and a shared Greco-Roman tradition, has yielded remarkably little fruit in this context, as attested by Stanley T. Williams’s 1955 *The Spanish Background of American Literature* and Luis Sánchez’s 1973–76 *Historia comparada de las literaturas americanas*, virtually the only efforts in this field for many years.¹⁴ Only when we draw back from their emphasis on national literary traditions and turn toward more global patterns of migration, diaspora, and exile does a transamerican cultural history begin to make a serious argument for its usefulness, and a phenomenon like “Al huracán” can become intelligible through its own geometry of distribution, reception, and influence. Illustrating the possibilities of such a cultural history, Hortense Spillers remarks that “the historic triangular trade [in African slaves] interlarded a third of the known world in a fabric of intimacy so tightly interwoven that the politics of the New World cannot always be so easily disentangled as locally discrete moments.” She goes on to produce an insightful reading of an artifact of culture produced and distributed—like any other form of capital—within that triangle.¹⁵ Hers is just one of numerous recently proposed cultural geographies that challenge the primacy of the nation, like Paul Gilroy’s “Black Atlantic” stretching from London to Georgia and to Santo Domingo and Jamaica; or Joseph Roach’s “circum-Atlantic” performance trajectory dotted by New Orleans, the Antilles, West Africa, and London. The history of print culture and its role in certain forms of acculturation, then, is narratable with reference to maps other than the national: the links between Mexico City and late-century Santa Fe, New Mexico, for instance, are as significant in describing the flow of ideas and expressions that create communities of thought and feeling as is the cultural traffic between Boston and Springfield, Illinois.

In a parallel move away from the national frame, an emphasis on the borderlands, and their incomplete and contested assimilation into the nation-states that claim them, has dominated the “new Western history” for the past two decades. Following Bolton’s rejection of Frederick Jackson Turner’s national-destinarian terminology of the “frontier,” this new history emphasizes local relations of conflict and cooperation among eth-

nic and linguistic communities, and the relative autonomy and heterogeneity of their cultural practices with respect to national centers. Such critical formulations as Gloria Anzaldúa's "borderlands/frontera," José Limón's "Greater Mexico," José David Saldívar's "*transfrontera* contact zone," and Walter Mignolo's episteme of "border gnosis" all echo this fundamental reformulation.¹⁶ Viewed from the destabilizing perspective of the borderlands, both the map and the history of "America" look unarguably different. Yet the critical potential of borderlands theory lies not merely in its insistence on local expressions of difference or resistance, but in the implicit dialogue with the national that it calls forth: the very concept of the border is unintelligible without the nation. Such a theory needs to ask not only how the community of San Antonio may have maintained an identity as part of Greater Mexico long after its incorporation into the United States, but how that identity may have simultaneously altered other forms of U.S. nationalism. It would consider not only New York's central role in shaping a national culture during the nineteenth century, but its simultaneous development (described in vivid detail in Mary P. Ryan's recent *Civic Wars*) as a "border city" with a polyglot, chaotically changing, and ambivalently assimilated society.

Perhaps the most important application of this dual frame of border/nation has to do with issues of canonicity. As I suggest in the closing pages of this book, the challenge posed by the changing demographics of the United States is not so much to accommodate Latinos to an existing national tradition, but to reconfigure that tradition to acknowledge the continuous presence of Latinos within and around it. That presence—like the systematic eradication of indigenous peoples and cultures in the service of continental expansion—acts as a repressed national memory, but one that is well on its way to an uncanny return. Part of what has been repressed in the United States is its location within a hemisphere *also* known as America (or, to inflect it with an appropriate Spanishness, *América*), a name it has appropriated synechdochically unto itself. This imperial conflation of America with the United States operates both spatially—imagine the surgically isolated silhouette of the forty-eight contiguous states, indelibly imprinted into the minds of schoolchildren—and temporally, as certain events are chosen over others to emblemize turning points in a shared national memory. The conventional landmarks of nineteenth-century history offer instructive examples: the rise of Jacksonian individualism as the prominent expression of "national character"; the debates over sectionalism, slavery, and expansion that led to the Civil War; and the triumph of urban industrial cap-

italism toward the end of the century are widely taken as the key interpretive clusters through which political and social life are to be understood. They are crucial not only to historiographic debates about the period, but to broader paradigms of contemporary literary history and American identity as well.¹⁷ We could, however, as readily focus on pivotal moments in the history of the United States as it belongs to the Americas and stage them in ways that are equally suggestive of significant patterns in intellectual and cultural life: the origins of the Caribbean slave-and-sugar trade at the beginning of the century; the Monroe Doctrine of 1823; the eastern demand for land that resulted in Texas's independence and, eventually, the U.S. invasion of Mexico in 1846; the rampant filibustering in Central America and the Caribbean that began in the 1850s, motivated both by the engine of territorial expansion and by U.S. desires to control a transcontinental waterway; the systematic disenfranchisement of formerly Mexican californios and tejanos of their citizenship rights under the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo during the 1870s and 1880s; the uneasy standoff of the first Pan-American Congress in 1889 and the U.S. interventions in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Panama that followed. Thus, the bulk of this study occupies itself with an alternative version of the "American Renaissance" of the late 1840s and 1850s, and sees the subsequent decades not through the lens of the Civil War and Reconstruction but in terms of the development of U.S. expansionism.

This alternate set of emblematic moments in nineteenth-century history both follows on and challenges another recent trend in literary and cultural criticism: the argument that the development of canonical U.S. literature cannot be separated from the climate of its transformation into an imperial state. Modernist culture, according to this thesis, must be read within the context of the push for global influence and colonial counterstruggles unleashed in 1898.¹⁸ However, as William Appleman Williams points out, 1898 might be a convenient watershed for discussions of a U.S. empire—the point at which they spilled into daily discourse—but the history of U.S. interventionism begins with a small military landing in what is now the Dominican Republic a full century earlier.¹⁹ Although "imperial" may be a problematic term, it is useful for describing certain modes of relations, both political and cultural, that developed in an uneven but recognizable way over the course of the century as Manifest Destiny was transformed from slogan into reality and as private and public institutions from the North increasingly sought to constrict Latin American sovereignty. I begin this study in the 1820s,

despite the wealth of texts written in the colonial period in Latin America that might offer interesting comparison to works like Barlow's *Columbiad*, because it happens to coincide with several events of hemispheric significance. During 1823 alone, Iturbide's short-lived Mexican empire came to an end, lifting the crown off the eagle on the national flag and restoring the country to an unstable democratic rule; the reforms to colonial policy in the Caribbean that had been hopefully begun by liberal delegates to the Spanish Cortes were quashed, bringing Cuban hopes for self-government to an end; and Félix Varela, one of the key fashioners of Caribbean revolutionary thought, fled in exile to New York. Andrés Bello, the foundational Bolivarian poet and legislator, published in Caracas his *Gramática de la lengua española destinada al uso de los americanos*, a prescription for cultural and linguistic unity that would prove as influential as the grammar Nebrija published in 1492, the original imperial year. The year 1823 also marked the inception of the Monroe Doctrine. Whatever fraternal rhetoric may have marked Monroe's famous speech decrying European interference in the hemisphere, that protective claim was contorted, slightly more than two decades later, into a justification for President James K. Polk and congressional warmongers, both Whig and Democrat, to occupy Mexican territory on thin pretext. Entrepreneurial plans for a transatlantic passage were first activated during this decade as well: the Colombian government considered a request for a canal concession as early as 1821, while the U.S. Atlantic and Pacific Canal Company began plotting a Nicaraguan route in 1825. Recent studies like that of Fredrick Pike have demonstrated in detail the way judgments about the lack of "civilization" among Spanish Americans, anti-Catholicism, and racial stereotyping about Indians and mestizos migrated freely through nineteenth-century Anglo-American discourse from one hemispheric context to another, even when the places were as vastly different as the Mosquito Coast and Buenos Aires.²⁰ At the same time, however, these events did not unfold without significant protest from within the United States about its evolving tendency toward an imperial politics in the hemisphere, particularly in the early 1850s, when a concern over the sovereignty of other nations and their borders entered the consciousness of many writers, both prominent and obscure. That protest was largely caught up in, and to some extent muffled by, more immediate questions of abolition and separatism, but anti-imperial concerns returned in full force by the end of that century, when Mark Twain, for instance, mustered all his authority to denounce U.S. policy in the Philippines.

Just as these developments profoundly affected the formation of national culture in the United States, so too did they influence Latin

Americans. The key texts advocating cultural autonomy at the turn of the century—Darío’s late political poems, Rodó’s *Ariel*, and Martí’s *Nuestra América*—make the recognition and rejection of this imperial power their core epiphany. For all the ways in which Latin America, as its intellectuals have pointed out for years, has suffered as the local testing ground of U.S. experiments with extranational power, its role in the past and future shaping of U.S. identity narratives remains disturbingly understudied and undertheorized. Given the increasing proportion and significance of Latinos to the nation’s body politic—whether as assimilated citizens, as a largely invisible underclass, or as binational workers—this neglect seems even more irresponsible. The geographies of reception and influence that I pose here seek to stretch the silhouette of U.S. national identity—in both its spatial and temporal dimensions—out of recognizable shape, making way for a transnational historical framework that will accommodate the peculiar subject-position of Latinos from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first. My aim is to retrace the movements of texts, ideas, and politics across the map of an enlarged America and to consider the ways in which what happened outside U.S. borders on that map affected its development as a nation. Veering from the *Weltliteratur* path, I aim to be “comparative” in a way that explicitly respects the different political, social, and economic trajectories of the United States, the numerous nations of Latin America, and the regional bodies whose experiences may have been out of step with any of these national patterns.

Citizen, Ambassador: Stations of Literary Representation

A textual experience, for my purposes here, comes into being within a broadly conceived geography of America and within smaller, discrete social spheres as well: the fields of production and reception, the state’s privileging of literacy, the cultural institutions that assign values to work based on judgments of taste and moral or political utility. What is the role of an individual writer or reader in these spatial matrices—and what does it mean to be an “author” in a distinctly transamerican sense? The transnational exchanges within print culture can, of course, be described through the movements and actions of persons as well as material objects like periodicals, books, or the translation of a particular poem. Sometimes the movement of an individual through America gets recorded as a travel narrative, with all the appropriative dangers that James Clifford,

Mary Louise Pratt, and others have associated with that form. One well-known example is Richard Henry Dana, whose *Two Years before the Mast* and *To Cuba and Back* shaped antebellum biases about the indolence of California Mexicans and Indians, and Cuban Spaniards and mulatto and negro slaves, respectively. But the effects of personal contact with a geographically expanded sense of America can be seen in less obvious genres than the travel narrative. It becomes visible, for instance, in the poetry of former Bostonian Maria Gowen Brooks, who adopted Cuba as her home and renamed herself María del Occidente, a daring self-fashioning that allowed her to figure Cuba both as a precapitalist paradise of sensuality and as a liberatory space in which her erudition—dismissed and suspect in patriarchal New England—could find fuller expression. There are inverse cases of such Anglo-American appropriations too, in which the United States becomes the space that is experienced as exotic and strange. Guillermo Prieto, the prominent Mexican politician and writer, commingles lyric and travelogue in his *Viaje a los Estados Unidos por 'Fidel'*, which gains satiric punch through its deliberate undoings of American norms. In other cases, the individual encounter with an alternate American space occurs in a more mediated fashion—through an interlingual correspondence, a translation, or an imagined vision triggered by other books. Emily Dickinson's "Colors from Vera Cruz," Bret Harte's mock-Spanish *leyenda*, "Yerba Buena," and the Mexican poet Mercedes Salazar's ode to Panama (figured as a woman cinching the canal like a belt around her tiny waist) are only a few examples from the later nineteenth century of the poetic exoticizing of what one has never seen. A third kind of encounter applies to the residents of border regions in the United States: those who underwent involuntary shifts of citizenship after the war with Mexico, or those who consciously chose a new affiliation—like the former *mejicana* María Amparo Ruíz de Burton, an officer's wife in Washington, or the Cuban/Confederate poet José Agustín Quintero—but continued to grapple artistically with their primary identifications with that space of home.

Not surprisingly, the individuals whose acts of reading, writing, and publishing initiated the transamerican encounters that I discuss here resist simple characterization by nationality. Many were exiles, expatriates, im-/emigrants, or determined cosmopolites. Others seem, in a way, hypernational: iconic figures rendered representative of a country, celebrated in patriotic engravings and statues now superannuated, both aesthetically and ideologically. Many of these writers served in diplomatic posts, while others used their outreach beyond the community or region

as its own kind of ambassadorship, mediating between local and global spheres of culture. During this period these two apparently distinct categories of affiliation, the national and the cosmopolitan, readily melt into air: “national” poets who rarely left their native region often indulged in the wish to be an exile, to be from elsewhere (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is a prime example), whereas universalist cosmopolites, in turn, found themselves cast as necessary components of national canons and identities—sometimes apparently in defiance of logic (Andrés Bello, for instance, was virtually deified in Venezuela, although his birth there preceded its existence as a nation and he spent most of his life in England and Chile). Such apparent paradoxes of affiliation attest to a larger problem of Romantic nationalism in all its incarnations. Postrevolutionary writers who consciously worked to establish a national culture distinct from that of the colonial power were forced to acknowledge the inherent limitations of originality—the fact that most of their tools of analysis and expression were extranational rather than indigenous. The writers most aware of this paradox, most creative and conscientious in their responses to it, are often those who resist identification by nationality even though the nation itself may have developed a strong investment in them, as the example of Bello suggests.

Finally, then, writers can appear within the transnational sphere in a wholly imaginary but nonetheless powerful way, as ambassadorial icons of national cultures. The conditions of authorial celebrity created during this period are heavily informed by nationalistic desires, and when writers or works are identified as particularly “national”—a phenomenon that occurs frequently—they are made available as a kind of export product, one in which other young nations may take an intense interest. The cults of Longfellow, Cooper, and Stowe in nineteenth-century Latin America, or the cult of Neruda in the United States in the late twentieth, are examples of such exportation. Put differently, the question of what it means to be a cultural producer in a transnational context ultimately engages questions of political representation. The Romantic-era search for the national author whose writing would best represent “our” essential values and character (a process one also sees at work in the contemporary context of ethnic writers) sought to compress a complex web of meanings into a single icon of cultural mastery. What interests me here is not whether such well-known writers were indeed “representative” but how they performed the ceremonial rituals associated with that popular (and sometimes institutional) expectation. The problem of authorial representation is germane to forgotten, marginal,

and local writers as well. In what ways do self-ordained poets who have achieved some minor fame claim to stand in for their readers, offering their lyric voice as exemplary? How are social, linguistic, or racial differences between author and reader suppressed—or heightened—by such a process of representation? These questions are particularly pressing with regard to the artistic pretensions and achievements of borderlands periodicals, in which the polarities of Spanish and English languages, of European and indigenous traditions, both attract and repel each other. What do we make of a mestizo in frontier Santa Barbara, California, adopting the pseudonym of Dantés (Dante) to publish his parodic yet admiring imitations of Euro-American high culture? Such an act seems to reinscribe existing hierarchies, yet it also poses a challenge to the very process of canonization and consecration.

Dantés, and thousands of virtually unknown writers like him, freely appropriated one of the existing roles of the cultural producer within the social field: the position of the Man of Letters, that legacy of the Enlightenment who claimed the ability to shape notions of taste in the service of collective moral ends. I use this category here in distinction to that of the intellectual, an oppositional figure who claims an autonomy for culture outside the influence of social and political power.²¹ In Latin American literary criticism, Angel Rama has influentially argued that the important positions that the *letrado*, the administrative functionary, occupied during the colonial era left a strong imprint on national print cultures after independence; urban editors, reviewers, and figures who controlled writing continued to reflect a strongly conservative interest in the order of the state, even when their social leanings were liberal.²² If the early United States lacked the same entrenched class of cultural gatekeepers (to the dismay of the aspiring writers in organs like the *North American Review*), the great publishing boom that began in the 1840s brought with it a great demand for a new class of writers and arbiters of writing, creating distinct “cultures of letters” located in the urban publishing centers of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and—with less visibility but equal importance—spread throughout Virginia, Ohio, and Louisiana.²³ Even the editor of a small local newspaper, however, creates a smaller version of this sphere of letters in relation, to which he stands as arbiter and ambassador. The possession of letters, in other words, is a form of capital not held exclusively *in* the capital. The Man of Letters (a position occasionally, but not frequently, occupied by women) validates his own authority through a tradition of taste and prestige understood to be the culturally dominant one, whose designated repre-

sentative he declares himself to be and which he is constantly representing—explaining, interpreting, supporting—to readers who participate in it only partially. Alternately, however, he also stands in for his readership, representing interests, and values, their knowledge before the tribunal of Tradition. The first might be called a “top-down” model of cultural transmission; the second, a “bottom-up” model. Yet they can exist in more or less dialectical relation, as in the case of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, who made skillful use of the Spanish Bourbon court’s fascination with its exotic colonies in order to sell herself as a uniquely Cuban writer—and then parlayed that Spanish stamp of approval into a level of prestige and popularity in Latin America completely unprecedented for a woman. The liberal agenda pursued by most of these cultural ambassadors was never intended to level social hierarchies but rather to redistribute the cultural capital of European-style high art by “Americanizing” it and by promoting institutional programs that would spread both basic and specialized literacies in the dominant national language. A more radical agenda—questioning and destabilizing that system of status and symbolic power itself—surfaces only rarely. The institutional status to which such individuals aspired is legible in the phrase “ministers of culture,” one frequently used to describe influential critics, writers, and editors; the term conveys the same kind of implied didactic-moral responsibilities as a minister or priest would have for his flock. For instance, J. M. Gutiérrez, the first poetic anthologist of Latin America, closes his 1846 introduction to *América poética* with a description of the ideal poet and his audience. The poet is “sacerdote de las musas, cant[a] para las almas inocentes y puras” [priest of the Muses, he sings for pure and innocent souls]. More mundanely, however, he speaks to a specific readership in America consisting of “esa familia escogida de pensadores y de ciudadanos intachables” [that select family of thinkers and of irreproachable citizens]. Rufus Griswold’s 1842 apostrophe to *The Poets and Poetry of America* likewise observes: “It is a gratifying fact that nearly every thing in the poetic manner produced in this country is free from licentiousness, and harmless, if not elevating in its tendencies. Thus far the distinguishing characteristic of American poetry is its moral purity.”²⁴

The collusion—both rhetorical and actual—between nineteenth-century letrados and institutions like church and state located more squarely within the field of power has generally been held against them. (This despite the fact that the presumed political affiliations of “patrons” and “patronized” are often misleading: populist Whitman enthusiastically backed the U.S. war on Mexico, whereas patrician Long-

fellow strongly opposed it.) Violently rejecting “compromised” art and embracing the fiction of the autonomous intellectual, various forms of poetic modernism in particular have gone to great lengths to bury the Man of Letters. Literary histories from the early twentieth century onward reflect this bias, which is often rhetorically cast as a rejection of the “feminized” poet-priest. Hence one of my concerns here is to trace not only the relative access of women to the sphere of literary ambassadorship, but the gendering of the category itself.²⁵ This eventual rejection of the authority of the letrado, which we have inherited, recalls the Protestant refusal of priestly mediation in favor of direct contact with God. To see through and beyond this rejection requires a certain suspension of judgment in favor of an analysis that would simply assess the representational abilities of the letrado in a given geographical and social context, testing the conditions under which his attempted moral mediation works or fails to work. Playing on the double meaning of “minister,” I want to substitute a statist metaphor for a religious one and consider the Man of Letters as an ambassadorial role. An ambassador’s authority comes about secondarily; it resides in the political authority s/he represents rather than being intrinsic to the ambassador’s own self. To be an ambassador of culture involves reporting and representing, but not enforcing, the authority of that idealized realm of prestige knowledge in a place where it does not rule — whether in the hinterlands or in a cosmopolitan space where many value systems come together in chaotic plurality, as they did in American cities. The rhetoric of ambassadorship insists on literature’s place within a public sphere, where definitions of citizenship, identity, and policy are debated. A number of the writers in this study held diplomatic posts, which was a common enough occupation for letrados in newly independent Spanish America. Rafael Pombo, whom I discuss in chapter 5, was a member of the Colombian diplomatic legation in New York and Washington during early negotiations over a transatlantic canal, all the while publishing poems and translations. In other instances, writers acted as distinguished visitors whose presence elicited strong feelings about the national culture they represented, as with Bryant’s visit to Mexico in 1872.

Borrowing this term from the diplomatic sphere suggests the inherently interested, ideological nature of such transamerican exchanges. It is important to recall here that the cult of letters, and the institutions it supports, is strongly implicated in the European conquest of the indigenous Americas, as Walter Mignolo’s *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* demonstrates exhaustively. Turning to the nineteenth century, Mary Pratt’s study of travel literature’s role in imperial conquest lists several

roles associated with European contact with “new” geographies—the navigator, the conquistador, the scientific explorer-collector—and suggests that each was also an instrument in the service of the imperial age’s hunger for raw materials to produce capital.²⁶ Like these vocational types, the American ambassador is inevitably caught up in the tendency to naturalize Euro-American (*criollo*) values, including the expansion of networks of capital (frequently, in Latin America, British or French ones). At the same time, however, the figures in this study were much more attuned to the political and cultural presence of the rest of the hemisphere than most of their compatriots, so to see the work of the cultural ambassador as no more than an ongoing complicity in imperial acts is to oversimplify the case. The very presence of an ambassador implies a prior act of mutual recognition. My opening example from Francis(co) Amy’s bilingual teaching text—“without voice it is impossible to call for help”—indicates that translation and ambassadorship are closely related functions, as both mediate between linguistic and cultural systems. Both are also charged with making the voice of a particular polity (or author) heard when that voice would otherwise be mute before a foreign audience. Pombo’s case poses a particularly convoluted circuit of ambassadorial representation: in “representing” Colombia to the United States, he also refracted that host nation to the audience back home through his translations of Longfellow and Bryant, so that the roles of poet and diplomat became hopelessly entangled. The ambassador’s constant performance—the way he shifts from role to role and takes on different identities, the suggestive connections between public poetry and oratory—gestures at one of the generative contradictions of ambassadorship. The demands of the time put a premium on the hasty building of national identities, and the cultural ambassador obligingly sets out to represent the national body by codifying through metaphor and figurative language its cultural identity, its specificity. Yet the most significant measure of his success at doing so is external: only when audiences outside the national sphere recognize and applaud his construction of the national essence does it become, for him, truly valid. Translation is a measure of this external validation. Most of the *letrados* in this study made at least one attempt to translate poems by Heine, who expressed the German national spirit in a fashion thought to be exemplary and reproducible in other national contexts. The search for national writers in the early nineteenth century is always also a search for a Representative Man to take his place in the world pantheon—one thinks of the figurative plaster busts of “good gray poets” now forgotten—but this gesture is as cosmopolitan as it is national.

The spheres within which the cosmopolitan ambassador of culture moved—nationally distributed periodicals, urban publishing centers, influential universities and salons—might seem very remote from everyday practice on the American borderlands, where cultural expression was less literacy-based. But the structures of literary and moral value advanced by these self-appointed ministers were not monolithic; the farther one went from urban institutions of authority and validation, the more elastic and accessible the role of the “taste-maker” became. Editors on the border, as I suggested earlier, became small-scale ambassadors of culture, speaking to the local community on behalf of world culture at large and representing their readerships before that wider audience, scattering their own newspapers like seeds across the country and the globe. Ultimately, the choice to write poems, translations, or criticism of poems was, for writers situated on the peripheries of political and cultural influence, less an experiment in raw self-expression than a symbolic claim on larger forms of authority. Although the work of Gómez de Avellaneda, Bryant, Heredia, Longfellow, and others was (at least once) widely known whereas the work of local periodical poets remains as stubbornly obscure as it always was, popular memory and the academic canon have largely forgotten both bodies of poetry. By bringing these local ambassadors into dialogue here with the better-known Men of Letters on various national scenes, I hope to erase some of the stigma of derivativeness attached—to different ends and degrees—to both groups. For this is the final paradox of the citizen-ambassador: despite the stature that appears to accompany the ambassador’s position, his is a peculiarly self-abnegating kind of authority, since it derives from a relationship of secondary representation. This may imply a kind of personal impotence or a vicarious relationship to experience—the image of the benevolent but naive poet locked in his study that Whitman and Martí savaged with such delight—or it may signal a kind of creative gift that is secondary, derivative. The taint on such secondariness has much to do with the American fetish of originality—a historically specific literary value and one to which I return in later pages.

The Transamerican Archive: Poetry as Daily Practice

My effort to reconstruct a portrait of these varying empowered ambassadors of culture, and the local and global communities they addressed,

calls forth an archive that is large, eclectic, and by definition incomplete. It relies on material evidence such as records of book and periodical publishing and distribution; personal letters between readers and writers; reviews, editorials, and anthologizing practices to irradiate the lyric poems that are my primary focus. Given that my interest in this body of transamerican writing has to do with its ideological works, this choice of genre might seem odd: poetry on the whole has been largely neglected in recent historicist analyses of nineteenth-century literary culture, presumably because of its apparent removal from the daily life of readers and the political evolution of nations. Scholars are accustomed to think of lyric as at best opaque about, and at worst completely detached from, its informing contexts of collective identity and power.²⁷ Certain forms associated with public performance—such as patriotic odes, heroic elegies, and folkloric epics—more readily invite critique based on their political content, but the lyric “I” seems by definition to reject its access to a communal imaginary in favor of idiosyncratic experience. In the oral tradition, the first-person stance is either effaced or rendered generic and representative in the greater service of articulating a common tradition, as in the folk ballad; printed lyric, in contrast, vacillates between the extremes of complete idiosyncrasy and the myopic assumption that its subject position is universal.²⁸ But if the gestures made within the lyric seem primarily individualistic, the field in which such works are written and disseminated is not. One innovative American comparatist, Roland Greene, speaks out against the post-Romantic assumption that “lyric poetry is personal by nature, and social or political only occasionally, indirectly, or at removes,” arguing that because lyric is a “widely adaptable literary technology,” it registers the events around it in a particularly nimble way.²⁹ Moving out from the colonial period of which Greene writes, I want here to place the genre within a historicized map of developing cultural tensions and affinities in postrevolutionary America without reducing it to the sum of these effects.

It is a commonplace that as late as the beginning of the nineteenth century, poetry reigned both as the prestige genre of high-cultural literary production and as one of the most familiar forms of expression in popular life—especially insofar as it intersected with hymnody and the ballads that were vestiges of an oral culture, “lyric” in its musical sense. It is just as widely agreed that by century’s end, the novel came to supplant poetry in both spheres, the consecrated and the commodified.³⁰ This division of high and low cultures, as one might guess, is excessively schematic; readers during the period could and did make fine gradations

between different kinds of poetry, their functions and aspirations. Given the high degree of mutual borrowings between the two supposedly distinct levels (the vogue of Romantic “balladry” among philologically trained writers, for instance), we could adapt for poetry Lawrence Levine’s observation about Shakespearean drama: that for most of the century it occupied an inchoate place on the cultural hierarchy and was claimed by a whole range of audiences of varying tastes, until the rise of English Literature as a profession at the end of the century resacralized it as the sole possession of an educated elite. The polarization of the poetic field into an arcane “high” and a crassly commercial “low” would be finalized when modernist criticism severed any remaining links with the idea of the popular poet. Although we lack a comprehensive study of the global distribution of poetry along the lines that Franco Moretti provides for the European novel, if we accept Moretti’s claim that market forces drive literary genres to seek symbolic hegemony by dominating a central locus of production and dooming writers on the periphery to underdevelopment and dependence, the lyric poem seems better positioned to resist such centralization.³¹

During the period when poetry occupied multiple locations in the cultural field, its historical connections with both folk and elite traditions were invoked in institutional projects to impose literacy in a dominant language as a condition of full citizenship. Zboray, like many other contemporary scholars of the history of literacy, traces a process through which “the printed word became the primary avenue of national enculturation”: “Orality emphasized the local present. By contrast, type was well suited to the work of constructing a national identity; imprints simply endured unmodified beyond the exigencies of time and space. The same text could go everywhere and encourage (but not decree) a common reading experience. In their eminent transportability, the books, periodicals, and ephemera of the period differed little from other goods produced by the economic upsurge.”³² However, the functional literacy rate in the United States in 1850 was probably less than 60 percent of the population as a whole, despite census claims—much touted abroad—to a 95 percent rate.³³ The spread of literacy was also uneven in Latin American nations, which on the whole began to provide universal public education in the 1870s (earlier in Chile), though there is too much variation to generalize. Mexico’s 1895 census showed a national basic literacy rate in Spanish of 14 percent, but it ranged from a high of 38 percent in Mexico City to lows of 6–7 percent in heavily multilingual, indigenous states like Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Guerrero. Nonetheless, of the six cities in the New

World with populations greater than 100,000 in 1825, four—Mexico City, Havana, Rio de Janeiro, and Bahia—were in Latin America, so the sheer numbers of readers and potential readers there is impressive.³⁴

The concept of “transitional literacy” developed by medieval scholars influenced by Walter Ong provides a more useful way to codify the variable skills and needs of American reading communities of the nineteenth century. It assumes that “the conditions ‘orality’ and ‘literacy’ are the end points on a continuum through which the technology of writing affects and modifies human perception.” When written texts are understood to reflect points along that continuum, rather than proof of writing’s utter dominance, critical attention shifts from the conditions of authorship to “the ability of the reader and the function of the manuscript,” along with “the conditions under which the physical text was received.”³⁵ Joseph Roach’s suggestion that we replace the worn distinction between oral and written expression with a performative notion of “orature” (a term he borrows from the Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o) responds even more directly to the alliance of literacy with power, insisting that orality and literacy “have produced one another interactively over time.” Orature describes constantly shifting ways of performing texts—written, memorized, and spontaneous alike: “in this improvisational behavioral space, memory reveals itself as imagination.”³⁶ The portrait of reading as a direct, one-on-one encounter between a well-educated writer and an equally educated, leisured reader settled on a cozy sofa is merely the most widely mythologized among many possible scenes. Besides this fully equipped reader, we should imagine others who might fail to grasp every nuance of a text and the referential milieu in which it is embedded: native speakers who are still learning the written language through reading; children and nonnative speakers whose command of even the oral language is limited; and people who are being read *to*, for whom the experience of listening to the written word evokes not only daily speech but the connotations of religious ritual or certain occasions of communal celebration in which they are accustomed to forming a listening audience. All these groups form part of the community of a text’s interlocutors, and each brings to the experience a slightly different set of expectations and reading practices. Just as nineteenth-century periodicals passed through a number of hands, with the buyer sharing a single copy with multiple individuals, the words printed inside them passed through a number of minds.³⁷

Conclusions about how a given reading public thought about poetry are usually drawn from contemporary criticism, in the form of

manifestos, reviews, and introductions to anthologies like those of Gutiérrez and Griswold. Yet those works aimed to critique and reshape current practice, not to catalog it, so they give a limited portrait of what was actually thought and said about poetry—particularly since, with book purchasing out of reach to so many readers, much of it was distributed in periodicals ranging from self-consciously literary monthlies, to the middlebrow illustrated newsweeklies, to the thousands of general-circulation newspapers aimed at both national and local audiences. On the pages of a periodical, in particular, a poem is staged among competing articles, editorials, and other pieces, set against the noise of announcements and advertisements. The possibilities for transmitting poems under such a dynamic model are numerous: reading aloud between lovers or confidantes; inscribing and sharing albums of handwritten and printed poetry, a hobby particularly associated with young women; reading to the family circle; reading within the institutional setting of the schoolroom; reading to groups like the *sociedades literarias* in the New Orleans of the 1850s or the New York of the 1880s; and even, as the existence of cigar-factory *lectores* in south Florida at the turn of the century suggests, reading in the workplace.

The notions of transitional literacy, orature, and performance also call into question the commonly assumed division between the static individualism of the printed lyric, on one hand, and the performed collectivity of the oral ballad, on the other. Since not all the published poems that adapted skeletal forms from European high culture were equally “learned”—they called forth different levels of language skills and interpretive dexterity—we can place them not only along a scale of transitional literacies, but within a set of socioliterary practices that likewise ranges from popular to learned and from lightly to densely referential, with a good deal in between. They also flout the Romantic model of lyric poetry as a private, individual experience of communion, which prizes originality and the authentic voice of the individual to such a degree that it renders inaudible a whole chain of listeners and interlocutors. The critically validated way to read poetry may have involved acts of meditative contemplation, careful rereading and parsing, and finally aesthetic judgment, but nineteenth-century audiences could do many other things with a poem: read it once and toss it aside; copy or clip it into a scrapbook, album, or another newspaper; or commit it to memory. Of course most of the record of how people did read, or absorb what was read to them, is virtually invisible, except through reviews and in rare cases diaries.³⁸ However, the task of recovering a sense of poetic performance and interpretation is made somewhat easier by the conventionality of so

much of this verse: the imitation, repetitiveness, and tendency toward cliché that render it uninteresting according to the critical standards prevalent in the academy for the last two centuries, but quite revealing about the shared values and assumptions that were naturalized as universal aesthetic and moral laws.³⁹ Formula, repetitiveness, and mnemonic tools like syllabification and rhyme recall printed lyric's primordial connection to oral traditions. Thus, the conventionality of many popular poems might be understood not as signs of their failure to meet the standards of consecrated artistic practice, but as features that allow a wide range of readers/auditors from different points on the literacy continuum to understand, enjoy, and repeat these verses.

This attunement to the conventional leads me to consider several lyrics that nearly any critic of the time would have dismissed as substandard. The task here is not to separate genuine poetry from doggerel, or the authentic compositional work of genius from "poetizing," but rather to discover what went into the making of those values and judgments, whether in the academy or at a powerful journal, around the family fire-side or on the street. Popular judgments about poetic value were more overtly concerned with a poem's pragmatic effects than were those of the academy or the journal, but even learned observers found moral or political value in a popular vision of poetry as an elevated or ceremonial language by which communal feelings were commemorated, or personal feelings shared. They spoke of the functional quality of that language as well as its simple musicality. The interest in exhuming competing critical visions lies not so much in the details of controversies in poetics like the debate over the trochaic substitution, but in the way such arguments shaped national canons and pantheons. The regulations of form, like a prescriptive grammar, empowered an elite few to establish the conditions of value and the principles of exclusion and inclusion into the guild of poetic technicians. The ever-changing and variably enforced rules of poetic practice served, in other words, to control access to authorship, although in an era of uncontrolled growth in publications, such gate-keeping could never be absolute.

Vernacular Authorship, or the Imitator's Agency

This question of access—both to publication venues themselves and to the possibility of cultural consecration—is key to the consideration of agency for dispossessed writers and their communities. The exclusionary

qualities that lyric poetry seems to have—that is, the rarified, costly form of cultural literacy required to master forms and references of a certain density—is counterbalanced by its democratic and equalizing aspects. Highly portable, readily translated and memorized, poetry was and is the genre through which an aspiring writer can most easily enter the literary field. Although studies of oral and folk tradition prize the nonprofessional, untutored creative spirit, when it comes to published work, the bias against poetic amateurism in print runs deep. Yet given its considerable capacity to attract nonprofessional writers, lyric poetry may be thought of as a vernacular genre. I use “vernacular” here not in the linguistic sense nor in the traditional literary one, in which a writer selectively adopts localisms and dialect speech for novel effect—Whitman’s slangy repetition of “so long!,” a term borrowed from New York street youths, or José Hernández’s renditions of gaucho speech in *Martín Fierro*. Rather, I employ the term to shake off the negative connotations of “amateur” writing, suggesting instead a verbal analogue to vernacular architecture and similar forms of material artisanry.⁴⁰ Like the nonprofessional artisan, the vernacular poet works within conventional patterns in ways that are understood to be blunt and unrefined, for they are primarily created to be used by, and to give pleasure to, the family or community for whom they are made. Their works are not fully describable as “folk” practices, since the traces of ideas and aesthetic contests already in public circulation are readily visible in them (e.g., books of house blueprints inspiring country carpenters). Although rustic forms of language, like Whitman’s or Hernández’s, can be used in vernacular poetry, I mean the category to be broader, for such poems often deploy perfectly “proper” speech that is carefully wrought and even showily built, with features like baroque paraphrasis and elaborate rhymes—the equivalent of gingerbread cornices—boasting of the artist’s dexterity. Vernacular authorship works according to different assumptions about composition and motive: its aim is not to outdo previous achievements or to establish new standards of taste, but to make a new impression from a known template. This view of the authorial vocation lies far from the Romantic/Bloomian notion of composition as the private, titanic struggle of genius with tradition. But it reflects the lived reality of the nonprofessional author: unlike fiction, poems could be written and revised in a matter of moments or hours. Since conventions of form and content are both a shorthand and a shortcut, imitation plays a far more central part in this kind of writing than does the desire to “make it new.”

Insofar as the vernacular writer’s imitative practice presumes a

relationship of substitution, surrogacy, and vicarious claims to authority, it is similar to ambassadorship—and with that comparison, the gaping social divide between the spheres of national versus local influence, of the sanctioned versus the excluded, begins to dissolve. Although the ambassadorial arbiters of culture, steeped as they were in Romantic ideology, hardly thought of imitativeness as a poetic virtue, they were, as I mentioned earlier, profoundly interested in translation: Chapter 3 establishes that the relationships between North and South American letrados were often, owing to distance and the difficulties of travel, limited to exchanges of admiring letters and round-robin translations. In presenting a “foreign” text to their own linguistic community, however, they were engaged in a profoundly political act. Bryant, again, offers a telling example. Having set out for Spain as a representative of his own country, he returned to the United States with a sense of obligation to act as a cultural ambassador on behalf of Spain, informing a suspicious Anglo-American elite that both the culture and the empire were crucial to understand without prejudice. Rather than another translation, he offered a “rendition” of a Spanish poem written in what he took to be the communal lyric voice. He described the poem thus: “It is not ‘from the Spanish’ in the ordinary sense of the phrase [i.e., a translation], but is an attempt to put into poetic form sentiments and hopes, which the author frequently heard, during his visit to Spain, from the lips of the natives.”⁴¹ Bryant needs to insist that the voice is not his own but a borrowed one for which he is merely the mouthpiece; yet his ventriloquy implies an act of translation, since the broadly summarized Spanish “sentiments and hopes” the poem expresses have been quietly rendered into English. Bryant’s “rendition” is at once an act of appropriation—claiming a voice that belongs to another—and a gesture of authorial self-effacement in the service of a hoped-for solidarity between Spain and the United States, to be brought about by the sheer force of his linguistic will. Less directly, the ambassadors of culture also rode the waves of a series of literary vogues in favor of one European poet or another—Byron, Heine, Dante, Hugo—during which translation was a necessary precursor to informed criticism. Translating poetry was widely regarded as a kind of apprenticeship to the vocation: a coming-of-age for younger poets yet to prove themselves, or a ritualized form of homage to an important influence. Struggling with a double burden of originality that stemmed from their intellectual moorings as Romantics and their political engagement as Americans, these writers’ debates about rendition, paraphrase, and translation necessarily invoke deeper issues of originality and influence, imitation and license.

Although the trope of origins and originality is one of the hoariest in American studies both North and South, it offers a way to project the problem of imitation and secondariness onto specific geographies. These tensions of cultural authority with regard to Europe emerge again within the national context as an anxiety about controlling language and culture along its peripheries, in places far from the urban center, as we shall see. In this light, translation practices on the border become newly interesting in the way that they map hierarchies of language onto location. The Argentine critic Nelly Richard has proposed, with regard to the colonization of thought in Latin America, that the spatial nodes of center and periphery represent kinds of cultural authority as geographical locations: “Center and periphery sealed their historic relation of hierarchy and dependence in the dyad original/copy which the dogma of cultural colonization transcribes: the original as first and only meaning deposited in the center (the model); the copy as mimetic reproduction in subordinated language; the model as original whose value lies in the supremacy of the origin according to the foundational hierarchy.”⁴² The peripheral and marginal realm—for the purposes of this study, the vernacular writer lacking the means, language, racial or gender qualifications to gain access to symbolic power on a larger scale—inhabits a subordinated language; yet even the “central” figures who can claim such access as arbiters of culture are trapped within a relationship of secondariness.

Richard follows the lead of other critics of this colonial logic, urging that we undo its hierarchy of original and copy by locating texts from the periphery whose imitativeness cloaks an underlying, subversive act of parody. Certain instances of poetic imitation, then, may represent something more than “mimetic reproduction in subordinated language”: imitation is not a relationship of simple dominance and submission, but rather involves a complex selection process of taking what is useful from the model being copied, and leaving the rest. If we are to take seriously the literary production of the disenfranchised, we must also take seriously their tendency toward imitation as something more than a sign of consenting domination to the forces of cultural hegemony. In listening so intently for a formally innovative and original voice, we deny the disenfranchised author one of the very things she had originally sought out: the kind of cultural authority that arises from similitude, from having effectively (or even ineffectively) identified oneself with language forms that signify power. My emphasis on the dynamics of performance with regard to the transmission of poetry among differently enabled “readers”

is an attempt to show how particular texts and authors—that is, their currency as icons of cultural authority—were highly adaptable to the demands of varied audiences. The learned and the newly literate, the socially well positioned and the marginally working-class alike received poems and imitated, memorized, reread, rejected, rewrote, or otherwise appropriated them. We understand inadequately how the disenfranchised read culturally validated writers and works that did not “represent” them; yet the appropriation of the words of the powerful by the relatively powerless strikes me as an act that has inherent political interest.⁴³