

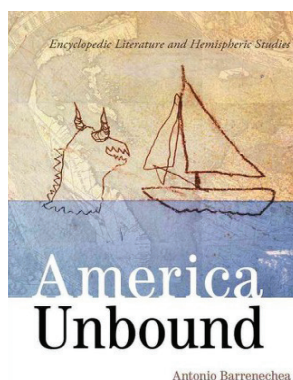


AMERICA UNBOUND

Encyclopedic Literature and Hemispheric Studies

by Antonio Barrenechea

(A Book Review)



In the spring of 2017, I was on research with the pioneering American Studies program at Sapienza University of Rome. The day before I left the city, I took the metro to the *Re di Roma* stop. Walking south towards *Garbatella*, Fiats and motos lurched along in bottleneck following the curves of the *Via Appia*, the oldest of Roman highways. Meanwhile for pedestrians the city here undid itself and became an array of parks and gardens enclosed by the tangerine-

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colored walls of the Republic's southern border. The battered gates seemed to gesture towards the central idea of the volume I lugged in hand, Antonio Barrenechea's *America Unbound*. Both suggested thinking beyond them, beyond the walls and national boundaries that kept neighbors and histories apart, where in reality unities could be found.

Barrenechea's comparatist reading of American literature is literally and figuratively such a boundary-breaking epitome. Through a literary-historicist analytic, he explores the encyclopedic novel of the Americas as a mode for imagining an American shared history. Following Herbert Bolton, whom Barrenechea claims as the founder of comparative American studies, reading different national texts together is a way to rewrite the exclusionary tenets of the imperial documents that established the boundaries

dividing the American continent. If such a claim sounds grandiose and ambitious—it is. However, Barrenechea succeeds at taking to task the politics of the colonial archive by tracing its development alongside the Renaissance encyclopedia. Barrenechea then argues that both genres embody and even project the totalizing trajectory used to legitimate the ‘conquer and divide’ mentality that remains at the cosmographical and epistemological core of American modernity. Barrenechea explicates an unabridged America that, importantly, harkens back as much to Amerindian texts like the as to Melville’s *Moby-Dick* for its legitimation.

In a rich introductory and concluding chapter, Barrenechea mounts his argumentative frame, revealing and debunking the ideology that underpins the current tendency to read American literature through a nationalist lens. Following González Echevarría’s Hispanist argument, Barrenechea calls on the notion of the “New World Archive” to reveal how New World encyclopedism began with the *Conquista* and the Spanish viceroalties’ practice of cataloging the New World—everything from its flora and fauna to *las castas*. This practice provided Spain with the legal premises to divide, conquer, and pillage the Americas. The first of one of Barrenechea’s many remarkable moves is to link Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* with this textual genealogy. Since he reads the classic as an extension of the macroscopic and encyclopedic view of America initiated by the Spanish documentation of the New World, it becomes more a mindful critique of such a worldview than mere literary annex to it. Barrenechea even connects the giant whale with the geographic typology of America—a so-called ‘loose fish’ during colonial times, thereby asserting that Melville’s America is the Western Hemisphere borne via the Spanish expansion into the Caribbean rather than in the founding of New England or the United States.

In the three chapters framed by this boundary breaking argument, Barrenechea performs a clos(er) reading of the three encyclopedic novels that serve as case studies for this approach. Readings of Carlos Fuentes’s *Terra Nostra*, Quebecois writer Jaques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues*, and Indigenous author Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, bring the United States, Mexico, Quebec, and Native America into clearer relational focus. His remarkable reading of *Terra Nostra* realigns the 700-plus page

novel with the neo-baroque tradition of the Americas, relating this to the cataloging tradition of the encyclopedic, and placing the work in a fascinating comparison with Diego Riviera's (neo-baroque) murals. Barrenechea places the novel in a hemispheric as well as transatlantic axis that he calls 'Boltonian' but is perhaps in equal measure 'Barrenechean' to us future readers.

Continuing in comparatist fashion, chapter three analyzes a recently declared Canadian masterpiece, the French-language novel *Volkswagen Blues* as a form of the discovery chronicle recast as a road novel. The Quebecois language is also newly introduced into the fray, enriching Barrenechea's hemispheric agenda by increasing its complexity at the linguistic level. (Generalizing here, Barrenechea makes an important move, as some Inter-Americanists have been critiqued for neglecting their Canadian brethren.) Broadly, Barrenechea's argument is that Poulin's novel retraces the European contact with indigenous America via the Oregon Trail, which this time around rather than leading to US nation building, culminates in the establishment of American hybridity. Since this maneuver is negotiated across a well-known and well-traversed pathway of America, which leads to San Francisco but begins in Gaspé, it arguably renews contemporary understandings of border crossings. They are now transplanted from the age of globalization to the Age of Discovery and vice versa—and this within the confines of a Quebecois novel.

The last of the three New World Encyclopedic fictions that Barrenechea analyzes is Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko's *The Almanac of the Dead*. He argues that the author stays close to the American telluric, the land itself, shedding light on the possibilities for a hemispheric tribalism that could overcome the pitfalls of the nation-based indigenous movements of the Americas, and harken back to the full scope the pre-European lines of contact, including the written texts part and parcel to such a heritage. The notion of the ancestral is as important here as connecting and tapping into the contemporary struggles of indigenous groups against settler capitalism and the corporate destruction of natural life in the Americas. Barrenechea also makes an interesting move here, connecting the novel's formal or textual aspect with

pre-Columbian visual forms, and in general providing an added richness by focusing on visual culture here, as well.

In fact, of the many strengths of *America Unbound* is its unique interface with visual culture, for example in the form it takes early on in the volume: a unique analysis of the neobaroque in the murals of Diego Rivera as a visual metaphor for the encyclopedic. This adds to readers' understanding of Barrenechea's key term. Another strength is Barrenechea's use of the notion of archive, at once literal and theoretical. This is also has the added benefit of enriching his notion of 'the encyclopedic' by comparing it to the conquistadores' documentation and partitioning of America. Finally, the last chapter provides something of great interest to Barrenechea's' colleagues in Inter-American and Hemispheric Studies: three complete syllabi with five to six units each, complete with the literary and historical texts Barrenechea deems appropriate for teaching within a Hemispheric context. The recommended compendium of texts is fashioned together in a common sense way that reveals the unique depth and scope of Barrenechea's comparatist preparation. The syllabi follow a diachronic approach and are organized into "New World Writing in the Colonial Period" which feeds into "Literature and Nation-Building in the Americas," culminating with "Hemispheric Fiction of the Global Age." This chapter provides an important connection between theory and praxis for those interested in establishing hemispheric and Inter-American approaches in the academy and its classrooms. It also has the added benefit of combating one of the possible weaknesses of Barrenechea's volume and ultimately of his approach, (in that) that in an attempt to see the Americas in such a large scale, some of the nuance of more niche-based approaches would be lost. In the end, Barrenechea undertakes a nearly impossible task, after all, to stitch together an American mosaic, an entire hemisphere through a reading of only three novels; thus, including the wide array of texts via the syllabi in the final chapter is a way of combating the doubts Barrenechea's colleagues might have about such a limited and yet large-scale approach.

Not to fall into book review cliché, but *America Unbound* is truly a significant contribution to not only the burgeoning fields of Inter-American and Hemispheric approaches to American

Studies and American Literature but also to World Literature and Comparative Literature more broadly. As a scholar, he has also positioned the volume uniquely as one of the first to be validated by its peers, that sees a legitimate comparative approach in the American literary axis, without the need to establish such a comparison by looking askew at another literary tradition, one from outside of the Americas.

The impetus to observe the Americas from the large-scale historical view afforded by Barrenechea's volume was one of many gifts my time on research at La Sapienza provided. From the heights of the ancient walls of a city like Rome, which feels to have lived and relived the cycles of history, the American project of archival reconstruction looms large, urgent and pressing. *America Unbound* offers one such entryway into such a reconciliation with the past and the present: a mending wall that might lead outside itself and the national boundaries that perpetuate violence among neighbors in academia and beyond.

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