

Olaf Kaltmeier (Ed.)

Transnational Americas

Envisioning Inter-American Area Studies in Globalization Processes

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July 2013

Olaf Kaltmeier

Transnational Americas: Envisioning Inter-American Area Studies in Globalization Processes

OLAF KALTMEIER

Envisioning Inter-American Dynamics

Observing the image of the mural on the front cover of this volume, painted in the typical style of the Mexican muralista movement, may suggest that the contents of this book deal with Mexican political culture. And indeed, the mural was painted by Diego Rivera, one of the foremost representatives of the muralista movement. In the cultural-political context of Mexican *indigenismo* in the 1930s and 1940s, this movement sought to rediscover indigenous cultural elements in order to integrate them into the project of post-colonial nation-building. At first glance, such a movement could be understood as something contained within the closed space of the Mexican nation—a phenomenon bounded by to the country’s internal dynamics of cultural and social development. In contrast, here I would like to highlight three points that make clear that the cover image may be better understood in the context of an inter-American space of entanglements that includes cross-cultural dynamics, mutual observation and dynamics of coevolution.

First, the spatial dynamics of the mural are characterized by inter-American entanglements. The title of the mural is “Unión de la Expresión Artística del Norte y Sur de este Continente” (*The Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and South of This Continent*), commonly known as “Pan-American Unity.” Indeed, the spaces and places represented in the image are from South America and from North America. This book’s cover features a detail from the second plate of the wider original which comprises five plates.¹ In the center, we see the head of the feathered serpent Quetzalcoatl—a central deity in Mesoamerican religion—sculpted in stone by the famous indigenous artist Madronio Magano. Beginning in the 1530s, the Franciscans promoted a “Cortés-as-Quetzalcoatl legend” (Restall 2001, 114), arguing that the Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés was seen by the Aztec population as a reincarnation of Quetzalcoatl. In this sense, Quetzalcoatl represents not only a “pure” indigenous cultural element, but also the process of mestizaje of indigenous Mexicans with Spanish colonizers. In the mural, to the right of Quetzalcoatl’s head, the notion of colonization and mestizaje in Latin America is echoed in the depiction of early US pioneers traveling through the transatlantic waterways to arrive in a “new and empty land.” This suggests the transna-

¹ For a detailed description of the mural consult the webpage of the City College of San Francisco: <http://www.ccsf.edu/NEW/en/about-city-college/diego-rivera-mural.html>.

tional origins of the Americas. Above the head of Quetzalcoatl, we see the diver Helen Crlenkovich, a woman of Croatian heritage who was the most famous female diver in the United States at that time. Her body is reflected in the fog typical of San Francisco. Without a doubt, there is a sexual tension between this immigrant athlete and the head of the feathered serpent, which approximates a phallus. The whole scene of cultural encounter is set in San Francisco, depicted by two recognizable modern buildings designed by Rivera's patron and friend Timothy Pflueger, and by the Golden Gate Bridge, built in 1937 and the Bay Bridge, which links the center of San Francisco to Treasure Island. Rivera himself described the scene as follows: "The conquest of time and space was symbolized by a woman diving and the Golden Gate Bridge spanning San Francisco Bay." (http://www.ccsf.edu/NEW/en/about-city-college/diego-rivera-mural/mural_images.html)

In the lower section of the second plate, Rivera depicts the process of cultural production and the struggle for political independence in the Americas. On the left side, we see Mexican artists and artisans, rooted in popular culture. The image culminates in the figure of Rivera himself painting the "great liberators" of the Americas: from left to right, Simón Bolívar, Miguel Hidalgo, José María Morelos, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln, with abolitionist John Brown below Washington and Lincoln. Beneath these political leaders, we see popular and subaltern sectors and especially a woman sculptor from Tehuantepec who represents a matriarchal society in southern Mexico. In this sense, Rivera combines dualisms of femininity/masculinity and elite political figures/popular and subaltern classes in the project of a pan-American unity.

Beyond creating a space of inter-American entanglement and interculturality of interrelated images within the mural, the space of the image itself creates an inter-American entanglement, given that it places a Latin American mural in a metropolis of the U.S. West Coast. The mural was created as an Art-in-Action project for the "Treasure Island Fair: Golden Gate International Exposition" in San Francisco, and it was later displayed in the City College of San Francisco.

The second inter-American dimension is related to the cultural and political project of pan-Americanism, expressed in the mural's very title, "Pan-American Unity." The impressive central image, which Rivera named "The Serpent Fanged Machine," is a synthesis of Coatlique, the Mesoamerican goddess of earth and death, and a machine from the Detroit Ford Automobile plant. With regard to this image's inter-American perspective, Rivera himself states: "My mural will picture the fusion between the great past of the Latin American lands, as it is deeply rooted in the soil, and the high mechanical developments of the United States" (<http://www.ccsf.edu/NEW/en/about-city-college/diego-rivera-mural.html>). Thus, this image can be understood as a synecdoche for the cultural-political project of pan-Americanism in that particular historical moment.

Pan-Americanism has its roots in the postcolonial struggle for independence from Spanish rule by the Latin American creoles, who were also inspired by the Amer-