

Josef Raab (Ed.)

## New World Colors

Ethnicity, Belonging, and Difference in the Americas

INTER-AMERICAN STUDIES  
Cultures – Societies – History

ESTUDIOS INTERAMERICANOS  
Culturas – Sociedades – Historia

Volume 9

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# **New World Colors**

Ethnicity, Belonging, and Difference  
in the Americas

 **Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier**

Copublished by



**Bilingual Press / Editorial Bilingüe**

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**Ethnicity, Belonging, and Difference in the Americas** / Josef Raab (Ed.). –  
(Inter-American Studies | Estudios Interamericanos; 9)

Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014

ISBN 978-3-86821-461-1

Tempe, AZ : Bilingual Press / Editorial Bilingüe, 2014

ISBN 978-1-939743-00-8

Cover Image: "New World Colors," © Alexia Schemien & Josef Raab, 2013

Cover Design: Brigitta Disseldorf

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

New world colors : ethnicity, belonging, and difference in the Americas /  
Josef Raab (ed.).

pages cm. -- (Inter-American studies : cultures, societies,  
history = Estudios interamericanos : culturas, sociedades, historia ; volume 9)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-939743-00-8 (alk. paper)

1. Group identity--America. 2. Ethnicity--America. I. Raab, Josef.

HM753.N485 2013

305.80097--dc23

2013011641

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#### Publisher:

WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier  
Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier  
Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier  
Tel. 0049 651 41503, Fax 41504  
<http://www.wvttrier.de>  
[wvt@wvttrier.de](mailto:wvt@wvttrier.de)

#### Copublisher:

Bilingual Press / Editorial Bilingüe  
Hispanic Research Center  
Arizona State University  
PO Box 875303  
Tempe, AZ 85287-5303  
<http://www.asu.edu/brp>  
[brp@asu.edu](mailto:brp@asu.edu)

*For Melissa, Leopold,  
Benjamin, and Maria*



## CONTENTS

JOSEF RAAB	
Introduction: Contested Americas.....	1
<b>I. ETHNIC TYPOLOGIES</b>	
LEO R. CHAVEZ	
Spectacles of Citizenship and the 2006 Immigrant Marches in the United States.....	35
JOSEF RAAB	
From Spic to Spice: Latinas and Latinos on U.S. Television.....	49
MARTIN BUTLER	
Signifying Skins: Chicano Tattoo Art, Ethnic Identities and the (Re-)Distribution of Cultural Capital.....	117
MARTIN LÜTHE	
<i>The Wu Is Comin' Through: The Wu-Tang Clan and Hybrid Ethnic Identities in Hip-Hop</i> .....	129
GÜLRENK HAYIRCIL ORAL	
“Git On to What’s Next”: The Transformation of the Female African American Identity Quest in Sapphire’s <i>Push</i> .....	145
FRANK ERIK POINTNER	
The Comificication of Ethnicity: Gilbert Hernandez’s <i>Heartbreak Soup</i> .....	157
<b>II. QUESTIONS OF BELONGING</b>	
HANS BAK	
Language, Identity, and Politics in Multicultural New York: Chang-Rae Lee’s <i>Native Speaker</i> (1995) .....	171
NATALIA VYSOTSKA	
(Re)Constructing Asian-American Identity: Dialectics of Presence/Absence as a Textual Strategy in Sigrid Nunez’s “Chang” .....	183
WOLFGANG GABBERT	
Ethnicity and Social Change—Miskitu Ethno-Genesis in Eastern Nicaragua .....	193
CARMEN MARTÍNEZ NOVO	
Is the Cultural Project of the Indigenous Movement in Crisis?—Some Ethnographic Remarks on the Ambiguities of Intercultural Bilingual Education in Ecuador .....	209

### III. INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICT

GERALD VIZENOR	
Genocide Tribunals.....	229
ASTRID HAAS	
United on the Playing Field? Ethnic and Race Relations in U.S. American Youth Team Sports Films.....	247
SILVIA RIVERA CUSICANQUI	
Violence and Interculturality: Paradoxes of Ethnicity in Contemporary Bolivia.....	267

### IV. THE NATION

JONATHAN HART	
Colonial and Postcolonial Identities in Canada in the Context of the Americas .....	285
BONNIE M. CRAIG	
Reconciling Being an ‘American’ Within the Americas: Isabel Allende’s Politics of National Belonging in <i>My Invented Country</i> (2003) and <i>The Sum of Our Days</i> (2008).....	301
SANDRA PINARDI	
Reconstructed Identities in Latin America: Spectacle and Fiction.....	313
SALVADOR ANDRÉS MILLALEO HERNÁNDEZ	
The Recreation of Ethnic Identity in Protest: A Social Systems Theory Reading of Ethnicity, Identity Politics, and the Mapuche Movement in Chile and Argentina ..	325

### V. IDENTITY POLITICS

RÜDIGER HEINZE	
<i>E Pluribus Plures</i> : “Second-Generation” “American” “Immigrant” Literature, Nationality, and Cultures.....	347
HEINRICH WILHELM SCHÄFER	
Identity Politics and the Political Field: A Theoretical Approach to Modelling a ‘Field of Identity Politics’ .....	359
JENS MARTIN GURR	
Conceptualizing the Field of Identity Politics in the Americas: Lessons from the Rigoberta Menchú Controversy.....	385
CONTRIBUTORS .....	401



## Acknowledgments

Sixteen out of the twenty essays included in this volume originated in the international conference “*E Pluribus Unum?*—Ethnic Identities in Processes of Transnational Integration in the Americas,” which was held at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research (Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung, ZiF) in Bielefeld, Germany, October 8 – 11, 2008. I would like to thank the ZiF and its staff for their wonderful support in organizing the conference and I am grateful to Sebastian Thies and Olaf Kaltmeier, who moderated with me the international research group inaugurated by that conference. Many thanks are also due to the VolkswagenStiftung for funding the conference.

For their insightful contributions I would like to thank all contributors to this volume. I am grateful for their patience and professionalism as well as for their engagement in the exciting field of Inter-American Studies, which looks beyond national borders in approaching Western Hemisphere research topics.

For their tireless assistance in reviewing the manuscripts, checking sources, suggesting revisions, editing, proofreading, and typesetting I am deeply indebted to Alexander Greiffenstern, Corinna Roth, Alexia Schemien, and Mo Tschache. For her assistance in all administrative matters I am grateful to Ines Fricke-Groenewold. Many thanks also to Dr. Erwin Otto of Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier and Dr. Gary Francisco Keller of Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe for their support of this inter-American book series.

Josef Raab  
Fall 2013



## Introduction: Contested Americas

JOSEF RAAB

Todo lo que divide a los hombres, todo lo que especifica,  
aparta o acorrala es un pecado contra la humanidad.  
—José Martí, “Mi Raza” (1893)

Bruce Norris’s *Clybourne Park*, winner of the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the 2012 Tony Award for Best Play, and numerous other prizes, offers a genealogy of American race relations since 1959, the year when Lorraine Hansberry’s classic civil rights era drama, *A Raisin in the Sun*, leaves off. Hansberry’s vision of an African-American family’s struggle for the American Dream—home ownership and upward mobility—ends moments before the movers take their belongings to their future home in Clybourne Park, a fictional white residential neighborhood in Chicago. In the wake of the news that a “negro” family has made a down payment for a house in their area, the local residents have come together in the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, whose idea of “improvement” is to prevent the black family’s move. The Association’s representative, Karl Lindner, calmly and hesitantly explains to the black family, the Youngers, that hard-working white people like himself have their own American Dream to protect. He therefore proposes that the Youngers should sell the house to the Improvement Association rather than moving to a place where they are not welcome. The Youngers go through with the move nonetheless, and this is where the piece by the African American playwright Lorraine Hansberry ends and the piece by the Anglo-American playwright Bruce Norris starts.

With its first act set in the Clybourne Park home in 1959 and the second act in 2009, Norris’s play interrogates from black and white perspectives the change that has taken place in terms of “race” dynamics in the U.S.A. and it evinces the increasing fluidity of “race” and racism. *Clybourne Park* asks how racialized discourses and modes of behavior were affected by the Civil Rights Movement, multiculturalism, political correctness, and a supposedly “post-race” climate.<sup>1</sup> It thus offers an update of Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, the first play written by a black woman to be produced on Broadway and the first Broadway play with a black director.

Norris’s *Clybourne Park* also makes remarkable inroads into the concern of this volume, which is to take a critical and interdisciplinary look at how issues of “race,”

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note in this respect that when Norris learned in 2012 that the Deutsches Theater in Berlin was planning to cast a white actress from Croatia in the role of the female black character in *Clybourne Park*, he withdrew the production rights.

ethnicity, belonging, and difference have been negotiated in the Western Hemisphere over the past half century. What emerges from the twenty essays in this book is a sense of the multiple contestations that have been under way in processes of self-positioning and othering, in defining or defending a certain notion of self, collective, or nation. The contested Americas that are analyzed in the individual contributions to this collection enlarge the scale of the discursive contests played out in Norris's *Clybourne Park*; they invite us to draw connections between scenarios in different parts of the Americas and to recognize the larger, transnational, inter-American developments under way in terms of ethnicity, belonging, and difference.

The time span of the topics treated in this volume is also the time span covered by *Clybourne Park*. Norris's play opens a few years into the Civil Rights Movement and it closes fifty years later, a year into the U.S.A.'s "Obamamania," in a social setting in which race consciousness still plays a significant role but is much more nuanced and complex. Blatant racism has turned into latent racism, as the characters in the 2009 part of the plot are (at first) all very cautious in terms of the language they use, intent on avoiding anything that might possibly offend members of another group. They also realize that simple distinctions along the lines of only one identity marker (like "race") no longer work because of the multiple belongings (based on "race," ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, citizenship, religion, education etc.) that inform self-positioning, group formation, political correctness, and othering in the 21st century.

Two deaths set in the play's recent past symbolize that when Norris's *Clybourne Park* opens in 1959 the old ways of pre-Civil Rights Movement contestation and discrimination are vanishing: the ageing white couple, Bev and Russ, are grieving the death of their son, a veteran of the Korean War who killed himself in the house two years earlier, while Karl Lindner and his wife have to cope with the birth of a stillborn baby who was strangled by the umbilical cord. By the end of the play, half a century later, the house is to be torn down to make room for a new structure, signaling the beginning of yet another era, namely the gentrification of a formerly black neighborhood. Showing the effects of neglect, decay, hooliganism, and graffiti in a run-down area, the property is again being sold—this time to a young white couple expecting a child. The buyers have to negotiate local construction regulations with a black couple representing the neighborhood Owners Association. We find out that the white couple's lawyer, Kathy, is the daughter of Betsy and Karl Lindner (who, in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, had offered the Youngers money for not moving into the neighborhood) and that the wife in the black couple is the great-niece of Lena Younger, the matriarch who had bought the house in Hansberry's play. In this manner, the setting, plot, and characters of Norris's *Clybourne Park* illustrate that there is both continuity and change. The playwright's decision to have the roles of all *dramatis personae* in Act II played by actors who had appeared in different roles in Act I and to have some characters in Act II repeat the same phrases that other characters had used in Act I further underlines this combination of continuity and change.

In the first act of Norris's *Clybourne Park* the question of who belongs in a neighborhood and to whom the neighborhood belongs is raised for a 1950s scenario.