

Josef Raab & Saskia Hertlein (Eds.)

Spaces—Communities—Discourses

Charting Identity and Belonging in the Americas

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Introduction: Spaces, Communities, and Discourses in Inter-American Studies

SASKIA HERTLEIN AND JOSEF RAAB

This volume is centrally concerned with difference as it expresses itself in terms of spaces, communities, and discourses in the contemporary Americas. In these three areas, groups and identities are delineated from within as well as from without. References to self and other, in-group and out-group intersect and are superimposed in the charting of identities and belonging. Agendas, ideologies, movements, and ideas on nation and citizenship interact with individual circumstances, class, ethnicity, gender, heritage, and a myriad of additional markers. The result of these negotiation processes are affiliations (by what Hollinger calls revocable consent) with some groups and a distancing from others. Changing circumstances and contexts will result in changing self-identifications and in changing assessments of the other. In all these areas there is a strife for authority and for the right to define or establish difference. A space like the Brazilian rain forest is the lifeworld of different peoples and the site of divergent interests. A community like the “radical women of color” whose work is collected in the feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) establishes itself on the basis of gender, ethnicity, and political orientation. And a discourse like the talk of “Euro-Americans” in Samuel P. Huntington’s *Who are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (2004) highlights citizenship, the so-called “American Creed,” religion, and rootedness as markers of an in-group.

The examples mentioned above might suggest clear distinctions in identity politics between designations based on either spaces or communities or discourses. However, more often than not, those areas tend to be superimposed or interconnected. This conjunction becomes clear, for example, in the notion of *Abya Yala*. In the Kuna language *Abya Yala* refers to a space, the American continent. The designation has been taken over by other indigenous communities, making it a name behind which various indigenous peoples of the Americas can unite—regardless of the spaces they inhabit. By using *Abya Yala* rather than “America,” these communities as well as activists outside them establish a political discourse that highlights the evils of colonialism and coloniality and that defends indigenous rights. In the notion of *Abya Yala*, therefore, a spatial designation has come to also be used as a community marker and as a political discourse. As such, it charts identities of self and other, and its espousal signals self-declared belonging to a particular community.

The essays collected in this volume present various case studies of charting identity and belonging on the basis of spaces, communities, and discourses. Other fac-

tors—like the nation, gender, or class—certainly impact these processes. In the spaces, communities, and discourses examined here, we encounter more heterogeneity than homogeneity, more dynamism than stasis, more internal strife than unity. A case in point is the U.S.-Mexican border region, which is addressed in six of the essays in this volume (Sawhney, McClennen, Tonn, Dieterich, Schemien, Melgar Pernías). Different communities and discourses intersect and interact in this border space, as do ideologies, cultural practices, and instruments of state power. Other sites of interactions, intersections, and transfers from New York City to Caracas and Rio de Janeiro are explored with a view to competitions, contrasts, and confluences (Portocarrero, López Maya, Neumann, Robertson). These locally specific studies are complemented by essays on translocal issues (Raab, Smith, Hertlein) as well as by essays foregrounding ethnic belonging (Luckmann de Lopez, Horn, Pointner) and political motivations (Martínez Novo, Ostendorf). While this categorization suggests clear boundaries, the essays themselves reveal that in most cases spaces, communities, and discourses impact the charting of identity and belonging all at the same time.

Apart from the common theme, what ties these essays together is their shared inter-American perspective—a perspective that is well aware of specificities and contrasts but that is also open to a consideration of the bigger picture of the Western Hemisphere. While the nation matters in this bigger picture, it does not limit the scope of analysis. As Josef Raab points out in proposing a hemispheric turn, issues, practices, and texts of the Americas ought to be considered “neither same nor separate.” Areas that are of particular interest to the Inter-Americanist, he points out, include (a) comparative hemispheric approaches (as taken here in the essays by Raab, Schemien, Smith, Hertlein), (b) the analysis of transfers and flows (as performed in the essays by Dieterich, Portocarrero, Neumann, Pointner, Robertson), and (c) a recognition of intersections and impacts (as carried out in the essays by Sawhney, McClennen, Tonn, López Maya, Luckmann de Lopez, Horn, Martínez Novo, Melgar Pernías, Ostendorf) (“Neither” 3).¹

The engagement with spaces in this collection is indebted to Henri Lefebvre’s groundbreaking *La Production de l’espace* (1974; *The Production of Space*, 1991) and the idea that spaces are socially constructed. This notion is applied to the Americas in our volume, especially to border spaces. While Lefebvre was not the first scholar to point to the significance of space in our academic practice, his work may be said to have been most influential. In a lecture given in 1967, Michel Foucault had preceded Lefebvre in identifying space, simultaneity, and dispersal as major characteristics of contemporary times (317, 328). In the following decades the notion of space has been reconsidered from various perspectives and in a variety of academic fields, influencing

¹ Focusing on transnational American Studies rather than hemispheric studies, Shelley Fisher Fishkin has proposed three similar categories of transnational scholarship, which she labels “*broadening the frame*,” “*exploring the cross-fertilization of cultures*,” and “*renewed attention to travel and to how texts travel*” (31, emphasis in the original).