

Lukas Rehm, Jochen Kemner,  
Olaf Kaltmeier (Eds.)

## Politics of Entanglement in the Americas

Connecting Transnational Flows and Local Perspectives

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# **Politics of Entanglement in the Americas**

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and Local Perspectives

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## **Introduction: Politics of Entanglement in the Americas— Connecting Transnational Flows and Local Perspectives**

LUKAS REHM, JOCHEN KEMNER, OLAF KALTMEIER

During the 2016 US presidential election campaign, the US American-Mexican border and the proposed construction of a wall barring Latin American migrants served as a *pars pro toto* for international relations policies current President Donald J. Trump has proposed to establish. Nevertheless, beyond contemporary politics, the border at the Rio Grande symbolizes different approaches in general Humanities and particularly in Area Studies. As the border between the United States and Mexico stands for clear-cut boundaries, rupture of mobility, and the impossibility of striding, already established Area Studies considered regions as well-defined spaces that could be easily distinguished from other areas by assuming presupposed essential characteristics of different spaces: North of the Rio Grande is supposed to be English speaking, white, Protestant, and rational, whereas the South is said to be culturally mestizo, Spanish speaking, Catholic, or syncretistic in religious terms, and passionate.

The example par excellence of this conceptualization of areas—which by no means is confined to the United States and Mexico—is the nation-state in an occidental tradition. Nation-states are thought to be characterized by unique cultural, social, economic and/or political characteristics that allude to a homogenous order. The nation-state like a container is supposedly “filled” with traits, characteristics and features that make the nation and state unique as the political expression of cultural discrepancy. Against the background of such a different and separate conceptualization of spaces, interaction, transfer, and interdependence between those is reduced to spontaneity, sporadic, and often undesirable contact.

This container model of spaces and areas is reflected in academic disciplines, as well. Area Studies on the Americas have usually been segregated along the Rio Grande borderline in North-American and Latin-American Studies. This academic spatial segregation is repeated also on a lower scale, separating US-American from Canadian Studies and differentiating the Caribbean from Central America, the Andes, and the Cono Sur, etc.

Nevertheless, the idea of clear cut boundaries that accurately separate areas is thwarted by real and concrete developments in the Americas, where the latinoization of the US has changed not only demographics and cultural politics in the US, but also academia. The establishment of Chicano Studies departments highlights the fact that Latin-American Studies are not a remote object, but an urgent perspective in the core of the US.

Therefore, the border between Mexico and the United States also emblemizes processes of transnationalization and the closing ranks of the Global South and the Global North. Several thousand people cross the US American-Mexican border every day, commodities amounting to several million US Dollars are produced in Mexican *maquilas* for the US market, and a plethora of goods—legal and illegal goods, such as drugs and weapons—are transported across the border from North to South and vice versa. The border between the United States and Mexico is therefore not only an alleged space of segregation, but is also one of notorious contact zones and a space of mobility, characterized by strong inequalities regarding power, economics, and human conditions (Alvarez 451). Considering the border between *the* North and *the* South less as a non-spatial, well-defined line of demarcation, but as a borderland characterized by fluidity, exchange, flexibility, and mobilization hints at recent reconceptualizations of space and region within the field of Area Studies (Schendel).

Inter-American approaches emerged in order to confront the geopolitical imagination of a mosaic of spatially segregated academic islands drawn by pre-established Area Studies in the Americas and to accommodate the conceptualization of areas that highlight their fluidity and relationality. The younger generation of scholars in Area Studies considers its object of investigation—areas, spaces, and regions—from a post-territorial point of view. Areas are no longer conceived as exclusively bounded spatial and material units, but are defined as culturally created fields of interaction and exchange that are intrinsically tied to actors and their socio-political agency. These human exchanges might lead to the entanglements of social sectors and groups, material and economic systems, and ideas and concepts such as geopolitical imaginaries considered to be interlockings of different discourses of spatial imaginations and spatial constructions (cf. Mielke and Hornidge). Geopolitical imaginaries—imaginings of areas, amongst others—circulate within regions and by doing so, create the spaces they imagine and propagate. The entanglements characteristic of areas and spaces that are produced by exchanges, flows, and interdependences, such as migration, diasporic cultures, media flows, and other forms of cultural production, not only shape (consumer) cultures, but interconnect areas, i.e. relate alleged centers to supposed peripheries and remote areas and vice versa (Raussert).

If areas are not defined exclusively in spatial terms, but result from human activity, interaction and politics of (dis-)entanglements, analysis of itineraries of people, itineraries of ideas and imaginaries, as well as itineraries of things gains prime importance in Area Studies. Against the backdrop of the post-territorial definition of space, itineraries have become the manifestation and the “materialization” of the post-territorial character of spaces and areas (Kaltmeier 178).

In the context of these theoretical reconsiderations, entanglements must be understood as a relation or reciprocal interaction between at least two entities (individual actors, social groups, discourses, structures, or ideas) which are transformed or result in a new entity. As in the case of the US American-Mexican Border, these entities are frequently juxtaposed in asymmetrical power relations, which are not broken due to