

# Positioning Latinos/as Between Exclusion and Transnational Spaces

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This thematic issue of *American Studies in Scandinavia* brings together four articles that examine processes of belonging and membership in the Latino/a population, i.e., the population of Latin American descent, living in the United States. From different theoretical angles, and with diverse empirical foci, the articles attempt to go beyond a traditional emphasis on processes of integration and assimilation by addressing the shifting and often conflicting notions and narratives of cross- and transnational membership that emerge as part of the movement of the Latino/a population into the mainstream of society. Transnational identities of this kind characterize U.S. society, questioning the idea that immigrants gradually become part of the dominant culture in the receiving country while distancing themselves from their original culture and values. Many immigrants continually move across national and cultural borders, maintaining strong ties to their home country or town while at the same time becoming part of new, often non-dominant, communities in the U.S. Despite the large body of literature dealing with the Latino/a experiences in the U.S., published in recent years, there is a need to improve an understanding of the cultural, political, and economic impacts of these processes. It is the hope that the present issue of *American Studies in Scandinavia* will contribute to a better understanding of Latino/a trans-

national identities in their economic, social, political, and cultural contexts within the United States.

The Latino/a population is today the largest and fastest growing ethno-racial minority group in the United States. They consist of 50-55 million people, including a high, but unknown number of undocumented immigrants, and although increased border enforcement and fewer job opportunities have resulted in a declining number of people leaving Latin America for the U.S., the Latino growth continues to be higher than that of the population in general. For this and many other reasons their social, political, and demographic influence has for many years been on the rise. At a time when (illegal) immigration has become an intense focus of attention and debate, Latinos/as are looming as a potential 'swing vote' in presidential races, especially in states where they make up a sizable share of the electorate. Beyond their numeric and political influence, Latinos/as are also responsible for a greater share of the economy, particularly in the traditional "gateway cities" where their purchasing power is growing twice the rate of the general public's (Taylor and Fry 2007). In these metropolitan areas, where many immigrants often choose to settle because they prefer to live near friends and relatives, the cultural and political significance of the Latinos/as has been a central feature for many decades. More recently, though, the settlement patterns have begun to change, and immigrants and their descendants diffuse and settle outside the traditional gateway areas, thus contributing to the transformation of these new destinations and to changing "the face" of most parts of contemporary United States.

These demographic facts alone make Latinos/as an important object of study. Their cultural, political, and economic significance is absolutely central throughout the United States. Many Latinos/as lead their lives within a distinctly transnational context where people, resources, ideas, and values constantly move across and within national borders. These movements, and the multiple and shifting interactions of people with different experiences, give rise to new dynamics in the construction of communities and feelings of belonging. Traditional identities based on national and ethnic boundaries are challenged by the creation of new transnational communities and practices (Baía 1999; Rosewarne 2004). These new dynamics constitute a challenge for research and analyses of migration and identities.

In recent years, a number of different approaches have contributed to new insights into Latino/a experiences in contemporary United States. One perspective has emphasized the discourses of exclusion and the ways in which

dominant categorizations have contributed to the production of marginalized Latino/a identities (Chávez 2008; Henriksen 2007 and 2010). Through the analysis of fiction, media texts, ordinary speech, exhibitions, websites and other sources of textual and visual representation these studies have shown how contemporary discourses portray Latinos/as as law breakers, as a burden to society and a threat to national identity. It has also been argued that the terrorist attack on September 11 of 2001 has split time into a "before" and an "after" (Mattingly et al 2002). For Latino/a immigrants, in particular, life has been harder, law enforcement has been tightened, more undocumented have been arrested and deported, and hostile sentiments are now more often expressed in public. Immigration and border crossings have thus been subsumed under larger issues of war, terrorism and national security (see also Vasquez's and Johnson's articles in this issue). This does not necessarily mean that people of Latin American background are confused with potential terrorists, but their membership of society and their life experiences in general are increasingly marked by this spirit of national alertness and hostility.

Although only the Secure Fence Act was signed into law, the HR 4437 bill of 2006 was one clear indication of this unprecedented political environment. This bill, titled "The Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Act" would make felons of immigrants staying in the United States without documents. But with the absence of a comprehensive federal immigration reform, much immigration policy has gone regional or local. Some cities and counties market themselves as sanctuary places with immigration friendly policies. Other places reproduce the hostile public discourses with tough enforcement around policing, healthcare provision, housing, and employment. Dubbed the strictest anti-illegal immigration measure in recent U.S history, the Law Enforcement and Safety Neighborhoods Act of the state of Arizona (SB 1070) was signed into law in April 2010. Referring to doubts over its constitutionality, however, the Federal Department of Justice has blocked this law's most controversial provisions. If Arizona succeeds in reversing that decision, local law enforcement officers will be mandated and obligated to check immigration status of individuals if they have a "reasonable suspicion" that they are aliens. It will also be considered a misdemeanor crime for an alien not to carry legal registration documents.

The rise in the number of city ordinances and other types of politics to control immigration at local and regional levels suggests that immigra-



tion is no longer considered an issue to be handled exclusively by federal institutions. In addition, not all immigration politics are sanctioned by legislative decrees and ordinances. The devolution of responsibility to the lower levels of the political hierarchy has been followed by more informal initiatives at the level of civil society (Versanyi 2008). The mobilization of people of mainly Anglo-American background around ventures such as the Tea Party movement, The English-only Campaign, and the Minutemen Project adds another tangible dimension to the general image of the dangerous and deportable alien. It is well-known that the Tea Party movement officially supports the state of Arizona in the legal case against the Federal Department of Justice. The goal of the Minutemen Project was originally to monitor the border with Mexico in the hope of detecting border crossers. But in recent years, volunteers have begun to harass Latinos/as on day labor sites and other places believed to be frequented by illegal immigrants.

The combined devolution and decentralization of immigration policy has therefore given rise to new forms of exclusion and segregation that target both documented and undocumented residents, polarizing different social groups and generating further hostility, inequality and vulnerability (Henriksen 2010).

Lack of formal status thus becomes a key factor in the framing of membership and non-membership, and for this reason undocumented members of the Latino population are disproportionately affected by this hostile political environment. Because of fear of violence and, ultimately, deportation, many undocumented Latinos/as prefer to stay invisible (Versanyi 2008: 38). Social detachment, by which they conceal their identity and stay out of sight of the authorities, seems to be a common strategy for many undocumented immigrants (Flores 2003). But also "legal residents" and other members of the Latino community must daily negotiate the lines of difference established in the mainstream of society. On many occasions, therefore, Latinos/as have staged protests against the draconian law enforcement measures or otherwise expressed frustration over the hostile and often inflammatory language used in public debates.

Much of recent research has thrown light over the diverse modes of political, cultural, and social engagements that emerge *within* Latino/a communities. Focusing on social movements and formal and informal networks/organizations, these approaches have called attention to a more complex understanding of social spaces and transnational communities (Vélez-Ibañez

and Sampaio 2002; Geron 2005). These approaches question the validity of an approach that views migrant life experiences as determined solely by external forces. If we want to capture the complexity and dynamics of migrant experience, we must also document the ways in which migrants as "social subjects experience migration, and how they become acquainted with and place themselves in the new setting especially with their sense of belonging and identity" (Rosewarne 2004: 37). One important research agenda has elaborated the notion of transnationalism either to study how migrants position themselves as transnational subjects by building on their social relations and networks that exist across various locations, or to study how such practices help constructing transnational spaces that defy the attempts of the state to control and regulate their activities.

At issue here is the importance of stressing that identity, power, and space/place are closely interconnected. Identities are shaped simultaneously by local and non-local social relations, creating relational spaces of belonging by way of transnational communities. Transnational spatial processes are thus situated in cultural practices that help producing new modes of identity, flows of people, culture, goods, and knowledge (Vélez-Ibáñez and Sampaio 2002; Geron 2005).

The four articles included in this thematic issue of *American Studies in Scandinavia* all address the complexity of Latino/a life experiences in the U.S. Two of the contributions, the articles written by Kevin A. Johnson and Antonio Vasquez, study the discursive and rhetorical constructions of Latinos as undesired Others, and reflect upon the implications of such categorizations. Based on the reading of a recent novel written by the Peruvian-American writer Eduardo González Viaña, Fredrik Olsson discusses how this novel can help understanding the life of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. The last contribution, written by Jan Gustafsson, discusses how recent changes in the Cuban society facilitate the emergence of a transnational space that goes beyond the polarized division between the Cuban nationalist-socialist ideology and the anti-Castro discourse dominant among the conservative Cuban community in Miami.

Kevin A. Johnson studies the rhetorical constructions of anti-illegal immigration language that persist in popular and political discourse in the U.S. He argues that contemporary rhetorical constructions of illegal immigrants are the product of a history of opposition and concern about immigration, and he emphasizes that the unprecedented rise in the number of



immigration-related bills that have been passed at state level would not have been possible without the rhetorical constructions of illegal immigrants as a danger to American society.

The point of departure is found in the notion of "hegemonic ideological coordinates," by which he refers to the rhetorical framing of American thought in opposition to illegal immigration. Such a framing thus provides individuals with coordinates for their private view on illegal immigration. Through the analysis of 500 "texts" that represent a plethora of different genres Johnson shows how the "illegal immigrant" appears in the hegemonic ideological coordinates as a suspicious alien, an invader, a terrorist, a criminal, an epidemic, a drain on social services, and as people who take away American agency and endanger U.S. technological superiority, just to mention some of the most salient coordinates. In many cases, Johnson argues, the rhetorical conflation of the image of the "illegal immigrant" with any of these coordinates is so tight that the slippage between them seems almost natural.

In the concluding remarks Johnson points out that the social field will continue to produce new hegemonic ideological coordinates, and he emphasizes that we need to know more about each of the coordinates studied in his article.

Utilizing Charlotte, North Carolina, as a case study, Antonio Vasquez throws light over what he calls the politics of immigration enforcement. He pays particular attention to the role of government officials' representations of Mexicans in the implementation of local immigration enforcement policies. In the reading of the data collected he discerns three different but interrelated types of negative portrayals of Latinos/as. They are depicted as law breakers, as burdens to society, or as threats to homeland security.

In the last part of the article he discerns real and potential human costs of local immigration enforcement. Vasquez argues that contemporary anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican discourses are part of an ongoing and larger story of real and symbolic violence. It is therefore important to situate the analysis of present issues in the deeper historical context. Historically, he argues, the term "illegal alien" has been discursively married with the idea of "the Mexican problem." Since the beginning of the twentieth century, at least, the border with Mexico has thus been imagined as a racial and cultural boundary that has created illegal immigration. Present anti-Mexican discourses in North Carolina represent a continuation of this trend, he adds, and for this reason a common sense discourse has been established, which serves to justify and legitimate the tough enforcement policies.

Focusing on the representation of contemporary Latin American migrant experiences in *El Corrido de Dante* by the Peruvian writer Eduardo González Viaña, Fredrik Olsson demonstrates the emergence of new migrant subjects and related issues of identity, dislocation, home, and belonging. Building on a combination of narratology, Bakhtin's dialogic poetics, and theories of identity and subjectivity, he argues that practices of (self)-representation imply being positioned. What we say or write is always positioned, and the migrant subject speaks from the different spaces that coexist in his/her memory and experiences.

With this point of departure he shows that *El Corrido de Dante* can help us understand the absurdities of the everyday struggle of the undocumented migrants in the U.S. The complex narrative structure with uncertainties and ambiguities underscores the hardships of everyday life, and the fact that the voice of the protagonist, the undocumented migrant "Dante," is mediated by a more authoritative reporter reminds us about immigrants' silence and their inability to speak for themselves. In addition, the presence of aesthetics known from magic realism, where the boundaries between the real and the imaginary are blurred, and where migrants accept miracles as if they were ordinary, and where the metamorphosis of bodies turns out to be easier than obtaining a Green Card, helps us further understand these absurdities, Olsson argues. He also emphasizes that González Viaña is a successful academic working in the U.S. who aspires to give voice to a weak and voiceless social group, even though he does not narrate his own experiences. But, as Olsson puts it, "he speaks for the Other, from the Other's subject position," as if he were the Other, (re)creating a cultural universe that permits the reader to "live" with the migrants and know their inner thoughts and feelings.

Taking the point of departure in the claim that social processes in Cuba and in the Cuban community of Miami are interrelated, Jan Gustafsson argues that the current reform process in Cuba must be analyzed from a transnational perspective, and one which not only highlights the visible human and economic movements across the Florida Strait, but also the less tangible discourses and the mental and imagined dimensions of this transnational space. He introduces the reader to the notion of "third space," by which he calls our attention to the often hidden or forgotten political alternatives or identities that emerge outside of or in-between the "two Cubas." The concept of the "two Cubas" refers to the sharp division between those who are for and those who are against the national-revolution-



ary project. Historically, the existence of two antagonistic and incompatible discourses has blocked the emergence of a solid and viable "third space." However, with new types of Cuban migrants, especially from the 1980s and onwards, whose racial and social background differs from the conservative, white upper- and middle-class constituting the dominant part of the Cuban diaspora in Florida, the transnational connections have developed. These new migrants maintain stronger ties with friends and relatives in Cuba, and, for this reason, their attitudes and values do not always fit within the political dichotomy. Instead they have developed a stronger transnational imaginary and more transnational practices, contributing in this way to weakening the idea of the "two Cubas." Economic and political changes in Cuba have also played a role in opening a transnational space. Gustafsson therefore proposes that the relatively radical social changes in the political and economic life that Cuba is undergoing these years will contribute to further developing a transnational "third space."

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