

Bodies and Borders in Latin America

Introduction

This publication is the result of the 8th Workshop for Haina – Nordic Network for Gender Studies in Latin America that took place on the 19-20 of August 2010 in collaboration with the Institute of Latin American Studies, Stockholm University, Sweden. Researchers from different disciplines and academic positions—participated and contributed to the workshop and to the present publication.*

The theme “Bodies and Borders in Latin America” focuses on the interaction of bodies and borders as social and cultural constructions and sites of meaning. The body is approached as a key site at which cultural and social identity are expressed and articulated. Ideas around the body affect how society and culture are structured. Culture and society affect how people make use of their bodies.

Bodily metaphors may be used to symbolize and de-limit groups of people. Gender symbols play significant roles in order to maintain and ideologically reproduce the unity of “imagined communities”. Persons often embody in their “proper” behavior and clothing the boundaries of the collectivity.

The purpose of writing about “Bodies and Borders in Latin America” is to explore how geographical, social, cultural, economic, and political borders are placed and displaced around the body, and how bodies resist, manage and contest borders put up around them.

The texts gathered here approach this topic in a variety of ways: as symbolic and concrete borders that classify bodies and bodily practices; as literary representations of bodies and gendered borders; as borders and processes of identification and mobilization.

Approaching the topic of bodies and borders in terms of social classifications, the article “Cheiro bom, cheiro ruim – On Bodies, Senses and Social Classifications” by Thaís Machado-Borges, discusses how smells and olfactory borders are bound up with social classifications that mark positions in term of gender, class, and skin color. The article takes on the links between cleanliness, good and bad smells, morality, dignity, or even humanity as they are negotiated among middle-class and lower-income women in southeastern Brazil.

Remaining in the Brazilian context, in “The fluidity of sexual preference and identity: A challenge for social movements and AIDS prevention programs in Brazil,” Maj-Lis Follér and Simone Monteiro add

* For the realization of the workshop and the publication we would like to acknowledge the support of the Director of the Institute of Latin American Studies, Professor Mona Rosendahl and the generous contributions from Granholms stiftelse and the Swedish Research Council.

an extra dimension to the discussion on borders and the classifications of bodies and bodily practices as they discuss the importance of taking into account the process of sexual identity formation and variations in sexual preference within programs for HIV/AIDS prevention. Since individuals transgress and challenge established sexual identity labels, it is argued that agencies working with prevention should also consider transgressing cultural, sexual, and economic boundaries in their struggle for sexual and human rights.

The intricate classificatory choreography of dancing bodies in Cuba is discussed in "Shaking that ass. Reggaetón as an embodiment of 'low culture' to mark difference and privilege in contemporary Havana." In this article, Silje Lundgren discusses the popularity of reggaetón music in contemporary Havana, in order to trace hierarchies between different expressions of female eroticism. A key example is the portrayal of the dance style of reggaetón as an embodiment of 'low culture'. The discussion shows how the ascription of 'low culture' to some reggaetón dancing bodies runs parallel to the ascription of 'incorrect' gendered values.

Exploring literary representations of gendered borders, Hólmfriður Garðarsdóttir and Soffía Jóhannessdóttir examine, in "El mundo femenino en la "antipoesía" de Nicanor Parra," the Chilean poet's depiction of women. The authors identify a clear moral divide between representations of women belonging to Parra's family and representations of women outside of the poet's kinship circle.

Deborah Rottenberg's contribution* has the literary work of Washington Cucurto (Santiago Vega's pseudonym) as the basis for a discussion on literary representations of bodies. In "Cuerpos grotescos en la narrativa de Washington Cucurto" Rottenberg reflects on the concept of the grotesque in literary pieces whose narratives put bodies at the center of all attention.

The topic of borders and processes of identification and mobilization is approached in this issue's next three articles.

In "Labor organizing among women workers in maquiladoras: Crossing the border of gender and class in the cases of Matamoros, Mexico, and San Marcos, El Salvador" Edmé Domínguez and Cirila Quintero set out to make a comparison between two experiences of labor organizing among women workers within maquiladora (outsourced assembly-plant) industries. Maquiladoras have traditionally recruited mostly female workers, that is to say, cheap and unskilled labor. With the case-studies they present, they want to illustrate the diversity of experiences in the crossing of borders and to delineate the factors that affect this crossing. In "The Impact of Guerilla Participation on K'iche' Women's Collective Identity

* Not available online.

Formation Process,” Tine Destrooper shows how decisions related to women’s bodily expressions of identity - such as laying down the traditional garb - have affected the dynamic of identity formation in the post-war period in Guatemala. The article discusses obstacles for constructing an empowered gender identity throughout this process, but also the way K’iche’ women’s activists have explored niches to critically reflect on their own emancipation on the basis of Mayan cosmovisión.

Related topics are brought up in Charlotta Widmark’s “Embodied pluri-national identities in the urban highlands of Bolivia” where she discusses how we can understand the gendered embodiment of national identities and borders in the Andean area. In a comparison with the historical ways of gendering nationalism in Bolivia she focuses on the ways pluri-national ideals are embodied by Bolivia’s new leadership; organized women and men of indigenous background.

The second part of this publication comprises contributions to the 2010 Haina workshop presenting the results of the research project “*Women, Indigenous, Poor? The Construction of Gender in Latin America from the Perspective of Intersectionality*” from the University of Helsinki (2008–10). This project explored how the concept of intersectionality can be applied in Latin American gender studies. After a brief introduction of the project, Elina Vuola sets the common theoretical ground for the two other contributions, as she discusses the potential use of intersectionality in Latin American gender studies and especially in the case of religion studies. In their following articles, both Auli Leskinen* and Sarri Vuorisalo-Tiitinen apply this very concept in the study of literature: Leskinen in contemporary Cuban women’s writing produced in the island, and Vuorisalo-Tiitinen in her approach to the work of the Mexican novelist Rosario Castellanos.

Silje Lundgren, Thaïs Machado-Borges and Charlotta Widmark

* Not available online.