Roundtable

Inquietudes: On Location and Diaspora – Evelyn Hu-Dehart, Christopher Lee, C.X. George Wei, Marcela Canizo, Cecilia Onaha, Loz, Paula Hoyos Hattori, and Richard Fung

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For this forum, we asked scholars and artists based throughout the hemispheric Americas to reflect on how the framework of location affects or limits their work on Asian diasporas. Invitations were delivered to practitioners working in diverse parts of the world, as well as in various disciplines and on quite divergent topics. Undeniably, the notion of geography lends itself to an imagined mapamundi of hegemonies, yet individual processes reveal multiple possible positionings within set locations. It became abundantly evident that we would come upon not only peripheral voices in hegemonic centres but also hegemonic voices or practices still afoot in marginal locations. Hence, inquietude seems a key analogy for what has motivated and driven this roundtable.

Inquietudes brings forth the notion of being in movement, of shuffling or shuttling between points of quietude, touching on them by turns and then continuing to others, bouncing here and there, between and among many. This analogy is less about an idealized and intentionally stabilizing discourse, like that of multiculturalism; rather, it is more concerned with new, polycentric praxes that do not idealize the conflation of diverse points in a stable combination.
It prefers the “revolving optics” mode of analysis that engages multiple perspectives simultaneously, each with its turn as fulcrum, giving its particular lay of the land.

The responses have been left in their original languages in order to preserve the multilingual and multi-sited relation of the local to the global. The polyphonic voices in this forum provide multiple perspectives on how one’s location and experience with mobility or diaspora may reveal the layered aspects of memory, globalization, capitalism, and migration.

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Evelyn Hu-Dehart: My interest in the Chinese diaspora started with location, but location as the result of travel. I was a sophomore at Stanford University when I was selected to participate in a summer study program in Brazil. While in Brazil, I had the proverbial life-changing experience. First, Brazil took me to a whole different world than the one I was born in, China, the world that I grew up in, California, and took me to another part of the world, Latin America/South America. What I did not expect to find in Brazil, however, were Asians—Japanese, Chinese, and Arabs. That was a revelation, and caused me to wonder how—and why—they arrived in the Americas. It turns out there are rich narratives about Asian migrations to Latin America and the Caribbean beginning in the Ming dynasty, when Chinese from coastal areas of South China settled in Spanish Manila. I also learned in Brazil that location informs identity, and explains identity formation. When we visited a place in southern Brazil settled by German immigrants, I met an African Brazilian who was raised by German speakers in that community. As I had just returned from study abroad in Germany, my German was better than my Portuguese at the time, so we—a Chinese American and an African Brazilian—conversed in German, our common language. When we parted, he took me by total surprise when he announced: “Wir Deutschen müssen zusammenbleiben [We Germans must stick together]!” Years later, I was finally able to understand his insight—that our identities are in part formed by the context of our experiences, that is, identities are socially constructed and historically contingent, and not simply a reflection of our phenotypical characteristics. This is another reminder that location matters: location in terms of place and time.

Location can be a limiting factor if fixed. In other words, one does not learn about the Chinese diaspora initially from books, but from encounters. Diasporas, by definition, are about movement and mobility, the result of migration, displacement, banishment, expulsion, and exile. In the case of the Chinese