

# Beyond Economic and Political Borders-Identities in American Homelands

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## Abstract

*Recent years have seen a growing interest in geography as an ideologically loaded discourse about the world and its inhabitants. The purpose of the present paper is to investigate the complex relationship between borders (seen as barriers, bridges, symbols) and the concept of homelands from a cultural perspective, as well as their impact on the larger American homeland.*

*Astute attention has been paid lately to three fundamental concepts 'language', 'culture' and 'identity'. Language is a potent and visible marker of identity, helping the construction of spaces in which a sense of belonging can develop. For individuals as well as for communities, language is a communicative vehicle and it is granted a symbolic value. People stamp the environment with their cultural impress, they give names to geographical locations around them, or attach symbolic significance to them- the area in turn shapes them and their language. From here feelings of attachment and belonging start developing.*

**Key words:** dialogue; homelands; borders; language; identity.

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## 1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing interest in geography as an ideologically loaded discourse about the world and its inhabitants. The purpose of the present paper is to investigate the complex relationship between borders (seen as barriers, bridges, symbols) and the concept of homelands from a cultural and geographical perspective as defined by R. Nostrand and L. Estaville in 2001, as well as their dialogue in the larger American homeland.

The starting point of our discussion is the idea that homelands can be defined as specific places to which ethnic or self-consciously different peoples have bonded emotionally—with the aid of their control of place through time. The development of this concept is based on five general components: a people, place, bonding with place, control of place, and time. Bonding with place, the key element, is strongest among ethnic groups whose folk cultures have been in decline (Nostrand, *et al* (ed.). 2001, pp.10-13).

## 2. The Development of “Homeland” as a Concept

Homelands develop as special kinds of cultural regions, but their development goes beyond the delimitation of the multiple traits of a single cultural group. A group's relation to place, which is the key element in the concept of a homeland, is not central to the concept of a cultural region. Bonding is a process rooted in the human-environment, or man-land, tradition of geography, and because of these features the homeland concept, a special culture area, has a greater impact on cultural ecology than on cultural regions.

In these special culture areas, a group's relation to place is the main component, as homelands should not be considered homogeneous or monolithic areal entities. This happens because a group's relation to place differs in intensity within the region delimited as the homeland. In Nostrand's Highland-Hispano Homeland, Hispanos manifest the strongest attachment to their local patria chica, literally the small fatherland, meaning the village and its surrounding land, and regionally the degree to which Hispanos have a sense of place decreases with declining Hispano percentages from the homeland's core to its periphery. In Jett's Navajo homeland, identity exists at several levels: for the Navajo country as a whole, for community bands and chapters, and for extended families and clans within communities (Nostrand, *et al* (ed.), 2001, pp. 156-158).

In both homelands, the smaller the level, the stronger the identity- the existence of these gradations proves that homelands are not uniform regions, and should not be understood and analyzed accordingly. In a nation of immigrants, with high level of cultural pluralism—two attributes differentiate the United States from many of the world's other nation-states—the existence of these homelands has shaped an American feeling of belonging to a place. The thinking of traditional peoples about place, has

“strengthened national solidarity and has enhanced those feelings of loyalty that underlie that higher level of identity—nationalism. Homelands, then, account for those human values that are rooted in place:

- . a love for one's birthplace and home;
- . an emotional attachment to the land of one's people;
- . a sense of belonging to a special area;
- . a loyalty that is defined by geographical parameters;
- . a strength that comes from territoriality;
- . a feeling of wholeness and restoration when returning to one's homeland” (Nostrand, *et al* (ed.), 2001, p. 15).

And so if free land to some degree shaped the American character, and if dry land to an even greater degree shaped the character of people in the American West, then homelands to some degree shaped the American sense of place. The analysis of these homelands helps to explain the American cultural mosaic. America is a land of many peoples and many complex homelands.

Physical and abstract borders and borderlands limit and define homelands and human territories. Borders provide an infinite variety of facets, they can be changeable, sometimes negotiable and some other times contradictory. They become a powerful ideological symbol for one's identity, a continual source of dialogue. They can also prove to be economic opportunities for border region inhabitants in their legal or illegal activities- “discursive construction of a boundary as an administrative apparatus for demarcating territory, over which states have control and by which their respective integrities are defined, may not involve local people on the ground. However, the notoriety and fascination of borders derive from measures introduced by the state that coexists with local cultures and practices and impact the day-to-day life of individuals” (Anzaldúa, 1999, p.56).

In this complex multicultural context dialogue represents a potent and visible marker of identity, helping the construction of spaces in which a sense of belonging can develop. For individuals as well as for communities, language is a communicative vehicle and it is granted a symbolic value, it is an important part of a homeland definition. People stamp the environment with their cultural imprint, they give names to geographical locations around them, or attach symbolic significance to them- the area in turn shapes them and their language. There is a continual internal (between members of the community) and external dialogue. By giving names, telling stories to their children, people initiate a dialogue with and among themselves, with the universe and with the people around. As we shall see, in some cases this dialogue is a continuous thread, following (but not being seriously altered by the mainstream culture), in some other cases, unfortunately, this dialogue is fragmented and ultimately lost.

The first case, takes into consideration the Hispanos adjustment to their environment- while bonding with place, they stamped the surrounding physical space with their culture. Examples of adjustment and the Hispanos distinctive imprint on the structures are various and multiple. For example, in terms of building structure, hornos, dome-shaped outdoor adobe ovens, are associated with wheat culture. They can be seen in Spain and in New Mexico and Argentina—the relatively cold opposite ends of Spain's New World Empire, where people grew wheat.

The impress of religion is also distinctive and important in this culture. Every homeland village has its Roman Catholic church, centrally positioned with steeple and cross dominating the skyline. In Chimayo the Santuario de Chimayo, which dates from 1816, annually draws thousands of pilgrims who seek to be cured by ingesting the *tierrabendita* or healing mud. Along rural roads and in the countryside are a variety of religious shrines. Also dotting the homeland are scores of religious place names. Many, like San Miguel and San Jose, commemorate village patron saints, while others, like Santa Fe (Holy Faith) and Santa Cruz (Holy Cross), are simply religious terms (Arreola, 2012, p.65). Except for the *moradas* and the Santuario de Chimayo- in a religious sense- what differentiates the homeland from other sections of the borderlands is the impressive quantity of all these manifestations.

Ordinary Hispanos know intimately every bump on the landscape and every turn in the road in their own *patria chica*, meaning their native village and its adjacent area. And like Spaniards in Spain, ordinary Hispanos have an intense love for their community of birth. Pride in their natal place is fierce and loyalty to it is unshakable, as in Spain. "To be Spanish American," wrote Margaret Mead in 1955, in her study of New Mexico, "is to be of a village." In New Mexico, the village of birth as much as the family name identifies an individual (Mead, 1955, p. 62).

A second case under discussion is represented by the *émigrés* from west-central France who crossed the North Atlantic to become Acadians living on the far eastern margins of seventeenth century Nouvelle France. During their tragic journey, known as *le grand dérangement*, many Acadians became Cajuns in the eighteenth century and created a new homeland, Nouvelle Acadie, in South Louisiana. In both places, Acadia and South Louisiana, these French-speaking people created homelands through time by impressing their culture traits onto the landscape and by modifying their ways of living to accommodate foreign physical environments and interaction with other peoples. In both places, these Francophones bonded to one another and to their lands, homelands that they not only came to control but to love, protect, and—ultimately—to lose. In both places a similar cause, invasions of Anglos led to the loss of these Gallic-derived homelands.

In order to adjust to the new environment, generously offered by the South Louisiana, the Acadians, now turning into Cajuns had to readapt their practices and way of living, and not only. The changes operated by Cajuns in order to adapt to the new environmental conditions comprised agricultural practices, types of crops cultivated, new dishes and types of clothes and the adjustment of building structures. The language remained unaltered- but in this continuous dialogue with resident populations and newcomers, it suffered alterations (small ones at the beginning, but in time they became significant): in this continual dialogue *filé gumbo* replaced *soupe de la Toussaint*. French Creole (non-Cajun French born in Louisiana), Indian, and African cooking methods, particularly the red sauces introduced by West African slaves, were adopted by the Cajun cuisine accompanied by their corresponding names (Estaville, 1993, p. 31).

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, geographical relocation into alien physical environments caused the French settlers to make striking cultural adaptations and borrow ways of living from Indians, French Creoles, Spaniards, and African slaves to survive in Acadia and South Louisiana. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although the Cajun homeland would become geographically stable, invasions of Anglo-Saxon Americans by the thousands and new, exciting technologies would profoundly change Cajun life, culture and language. In this case the dialogue with the exterior altered the language. In fact, the most significant change in Cajun culture in the nineteenth century was the tremendous erosion of its language. The loss of French political influence in the inhabited area dramatically altered the essence of the Cajun culture- its language.

The dialogue between ethnic and mainstream culture was temporarily lost in this special case. Today, the more than half million people of Cajun ancestry comprise about 12 percent of Louisiana's population. In time Cajuns have become mainstream urban Americans. Yet recently, because of the efforts of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) to revive the French language and because of a favorable national interest, a pride in their Cajun heritage has seized their South Louisiana homeland. The French festivals reflect this Cajun culture revival—from the simple *boucherie* to the ostentatious Mardi Gras- that seem to have become more effervescent, filled with the *esprit* of *laissez les bonsrouler* (let the good times roll).

### 3. Conclusion

It seems that today America wants to know more about the Cajun homeland- and a form of dialogue about the reminiscences of a culture is initiated. The Cajun renaissance centered in Lafayette, still faces the most difficult test- the test of time.

For all the populations in the American homeland, the “trajectory” of the future is anchored in the past, this mediates the dialogue about the future in the present. The homeland is not simply where indigenes feel most at home, it is the place they alone should control, to be masters of their own land and we can further add, in the spirit of the present study, of their own language and of the dialogues they initiate.

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