

Nordic Spaces in North America: An Introduction

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What does *space* as an analytical concept add to our understandings of the Nordic experience in North America? This thematic issue of *American Studies in Scandinavia* investigates the possibilities of space-making in its broadest possible sense in order to explore its analytical potential at the intersection of Scandinavia and American Studies. Nordic, or Scandinavian, spaces may be constituted as physical and social, but may also be perceived in a symbolic, sensual, and performative sense. In constantly changing and on-going processes space-making is interlinked with manifestations of Nordicness in real and imagined places. Through being created, preserved, and celebrated these manifestations are subsequently used to express ethnicity, locality, and history. Typically, expressions of this kind tend to be perceived as given, while in fact they are the results of complex negotiations and performances that are strung together. Consequently, the social production of Nordic spaces is an ideological process, sometimes with violent connotations, that has a particular resonance and history transnationally.

In other words, in order to analyze and unlock specific performances of Nordic space an understanding of context and the particular circumstances at play is vital. Nordic spaces throughout history have always been inter-

laced with their virtual, idealistic, and mythological inflections, both regionally and globally. A central question in this thematic issue is: How do Nordic spaces give shape to cultural heritage, delimit identities, and draw boundaries via recognition of difference?

Space may refer to, following Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, the territorial and physical landscapes, as well as the imagined and mediated spaces of representation, abstraction, and symbolism (Lefebvre 1974/1991, de Certeau 1989). It covers the conceived, planned, and materialized landscapes and cityscapes as well as the ritualized, habitual, intuitive, and creative spaces of the everyday and vernacular. Equally important to explore is a “sense of place” (Feld & Basso 1996), that is, the ways places are taken for granted and embedded in social networks. Nordic spaces also cover those strange, unruly and elusive aspects of spatial experience that defy any ultimate definition, such as borderlands and hybrid spaces. Spatial imaginaries in transnational history and culture thus carry multiple and contradictory meanings—meanings that this issue seeks to shed new light on.

Folklore often plays a central part in the process of creating and maintaining ethnic spaces. Rituals, traditions, and folk practices with ethnic references are frequently paramount to regional identity. In his contribution here, and elsewhere, Jim Leary has demonstrated the importance of the Ole and Lena joke-telling tradition for the making of Scandinavian spaces in the Upper Midwest. Originally, this form of joke-telling was a staple of stage performances touring the Midwest. The present-day form of this tradition has not only found new forms of media, such as web sites, book publications, and Compact Discs, but has also become a popular feature of an array of private and public events, such as Lutheran church dinners, school programs, community parades, and ethnic festivals. However, there have been some significant changes in how the Ole and Lena characters are portrayed and in the themes of the stories. In his article, Leary investigates the complex transformations that have maintained the tradition but also examines the wider regionally grounded politics of culture that surrounds the emergence of the tradition.

The church as an especially significant space of ethnic identity is studied in B. Marcus Cederström’s contribution. In his fieldwork on church communities in Michigan and Minnesota, Cederström found that many community members made a conscious decision to display aspects of Swedishness through their church involvement. The church in the studied regions served

as a ritualized space for the everyday culture of Swedish-America that helps to form and interpret present-day Swedish identity in North America.

However, Nordic spaces in North America are not only found in traditional immigrant communities, Lisa Wiklund reminds us in her study of Swedish commercial spaces in New York City. These new commercial spaces present a shift from the traditional immigrant business that has usually been family owned and set in immigrant communities. Characteristic for the commercial spaces in this study are that they consciously draw upon Swedish culture and are often operated by young entrepreneurs who have started this special context by choice.

The final contribution to this special issue is a joint article in which the authors illustrate the many different levels on which Nordic spaces may be found in North America. Drawing upon case studies from their respective PhD-dissertations, Hanne Pico Larsen, Lizette Gradén, and Susanne Österlund-Pötzsch investigate and give examples of physical, geographical, temporary, virtual, and ephemeral aspects of Nordic space-making in a North American context.

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