

INTRODUCTION: RHETORICS OF DEMOCRACY IN THE AMERICAS

Adriana Angel, Michael L. Butterworth, and Nancy R. Gómez

In her review of the book *Rhetoric in South America*, edited by María Alejandra Vitale and Philippe-Joseph Salazar, Christa J. Olson acknowledges the common assumption that the rhetorical tradition is uniquely North American. As she writes, “Over the centuries during which rhetoricians in North and South America have ignored one another—or, rather, in which we in the North have claimed inheritance of *the* tradition—our scholarship has followed that supposedly single Tradition to rather different ends.”¹ Of course, the book to which Olson responds is itself an indication that the borders between “north” and “south” are, and have been, shifting. Beyond the work of Vitale and Salazar, others have foregrounded the rhetorical *intersections* among and between the Americas.² In the words of Olson and René Agustín De los Santos, in their introduction to a special issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, the field should argue “for the richness of ‘Latin’ American rhetorical history on its own terms while also urging a wider notion of *Américan* rhetoric grounded in long histories of hemispheric interaction.”³ We take such interactions seriously, inspired by recent work and the efforts of other theorists to “uncouple the name of the [Latin American] subcontinent from the cartographic image we all have of it.” In other words, this book endeavors to explore rhetorical practices among and between the communities of all the “Americas,”⁴ with less investment in geographic boundaries and more investment in democratic culture.

The interest in expanding territorial and theoretical reach requires more than a simple declaration. We are far from the first set of critics who wish to redefine the boundaries of the field, after all. Indeed, we are stepping into existing conversations, at times overlapping and other times diverging, within

rhetorical studies about related matters of borders, colonialism, and racial identity. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos contends, the very notions of “north” and “south” are themselves metaphors: “The global South is not a geographical concept, even though the great majority of its populations live in countries of the Southern hemisphere. The South is rather a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on the global level, as well as for the resistance to overcoming or minimizing such suffering.”⁵ Writing more specifically about geographical borders, Robert DeChaine submits, “The doxastic, world-making function of the border signals its preeminence as a rhetorical mode of enactment. That is to say, borders are produced, defined, managed, contested, and altered through human symbolic practices.” DeChaine is referring to the conventional borders of the nation-state, in particular the border between the United States and Mexico, and his edited collection evaluates the border’s effect on “popular understandings and experiences of citizenship and identity in the United States today.”⁶

The border between the United States and Mexico warrants critical attention, but it is far from the only location that shapes our understanding of such citizenship and identity. Bernadette Calafell and Fernando Delgado, for example, are invested in the political identities of Latina/o populations and they resist the homogenization of unique groups from distinct areas. As they explain, “Geographically situated Latina/o identities—each with their own sense of community and ethnicity—such as Chicanos in the southwest, Cuban-Americans in south Florida, and Boricuas in the northeast, complicate the pursuit of a singular Latino identity, community, ideology, or aesthetic.”⁷ Meanwhile, in his study of the Young Lords of New York, Darrel Wanzer-Serrano invites critical orientations from outside these geographical boundaries, noting, “I think it is possible and desirable to be guided chiefly by decoloniality and perspectives that emerge from the Global South.”⁸ This sentiment articulates well with de Sousa Santos’s notion of the “epistemology of the South,” in which he emphasizes that the “understanding of the world is much broader than the Western understanding of the world.”⁹

This current and intense Latin American decolonial discourse resonates with our purpose of thinking locally about the rhetorics of democracy in the Americas. In other words, we want to contribute to the epistemic shift suggested by decolonial authors such as de Sousa Santos, Anibal Quijano, and Walter D. Mignolo,¹⁰ and explore democracy through the voices and standpoints of Latin American authors who have themselves experienced the colonial, political, and social realities of the region. However, we cannot and do not want to claim that ours is a “pure” standpoint with no influence of

Eurocentric and hegemonic ideas and traditions. On the contrary, writing and reflecting on the Americas invites us to account for diverse authors, theories, and phenomena, even those from a Eurocentric tradition. We celebrate perspectives such as decoloniality, Afrocentricity, and Asiaticity because of their strong critiques of the Eurocentric hegemonic production of knowledge and their invitation to epistemic decolonization.¹¹ We acknowledge that the transnationalization and globalization of knowledge give us the opportunity to listen to regional and alternative perspectives and to articulate them to hegemonic standpoints that have been more widely circulated.

The work of all of these scholars points specifically to the interests of this book, but we should acknowledge that they are also connected to a larger disciplinary focus on race. Lisa Flores has made the case for what she calls “racial rhetorical criticism, or rhetorical criticism that is reflective about and engages the persistence of racial oppression, logics, voices, and bodies that theorizes the very production of race as rhetorical.”¹² Her project hails a range of scholars, including many who focus specifically on the construction of identities in and between the “Americas.” Although our focus is not explicitly on race as an isolated category, we find inspiration in Flores’s rhetorical attitude. Moreover, we share the sentiments of Michelle Colpean and Rebecca Dingo in their contribution to a forum on racial rhetorical criticism in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*. In support of Flores, they caution against what might be termed academic tourism, or the tendency simply to add a reference or a case study from a “marginal” population and consider the work of inclusion to be done. Against this, they “call for white and Western scholars in particular to be attentive to the tricky politics of capitalizing on the struggles and domination of nonwhite and/or exoticized groups of the ‘Global South’ being used as ‘interesting’ case studies that do not substantially shift or decolonize dominant rhetorical scholarship and that may inadvertently serve to sustain the field’s racist practices.”¹³

We believe these commitments echo Olson’s observation from above, and we contend that scholarship itself constitutes and acts on its own set of borders. Thus, in keeping with Wanzer-Serrano, we agree that “*scholars must first alter the intellectual terrain from which we as critics and theorists speak and listen.*”¹⁴ It is our hope that this collection resists any tendency to “tour” different democratic terrains and that the individual voices of the scholars here may theorize a collective understanding of the “Americas” as inclusive and pluralistic. This theorizing opens pathways to Latin American rhetorical perspectives and democratic phenomena that rarely circulate in North America and that are often excluded when studying democracy. The transnational

approach that this book offers can help scholars understand democracy beyond Eurocentric and US perspectives. The book also shows how rhetoric has been inherited, resignified, and reformulated in Latin America and how Latin American scholars coming from traditions such as linguistics, semiotics, discourse studies, and philosophy of language are doing “rhetorical studies” without using this label to name their work. Thus this book spotlights Latin America as a locus of articulation that also establishes dialogues with other authors and approaches around the world in order to understand the current challenges of democracy across the Americas and the role that rhetoric plays in those contexts.

Before we move forward, we would like to comment on two important matters: the discursive choices we make with respect to terms such as “Latina/o” and “Latinx” and our own scholarly positionality. First, we recognize that “Latinx” has increasingly become the preferred term in the academy in the United States. The virtue of the term is based, at least in part, on its inclusivity. However, as Karriann Soto Vega and Karma Chávez explain, perhaps more important is its status as “an inherently interlocking category, overtly signaling attentiveness to coloniality, ethnicity and gender, and implicitly pointing to race and sexuality.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, Soto and Chávez also note that “Latinx” is not universally accepted, especially for those who prefer the distinction between Latina and Latino as it is gendered in Spanish. As Breny Mendoza suggests, “there is always something that is lost in the translation” in these concepts, and we want to preserve the distinctive meanings between languages as much as is possible.¹⁶ Because this book works across the borders we have thus far described, accounting for territories within which it may not be the preferred term, we will not use “Latinx” to define this project. However, we respect the choices made by individual authors in this volume to use “Latinx” in specific contexts, and so readers will see the term in chapters 3 and 4.

Second, we believe it is important to state our own orientation to the subject matter of this book. Two of us are Latina scholars, from different cities in Colombia, who received their doctoral degrees at Ohio University in the United States. Both are scholars informed by an upbringing in South America and an enculturation to higher education in North America. The third among us is a white scholar from the United States. Although his expertise is in rhetoric and democratic theory, he cannot claim to be a scholar of Latin America in particular. Our overlapping histories at Ohio University have allowed us to establish friendships and a productive academic partnership. In 2014, faculty between the Universidad de Manizales and Ohio University gathered with other scholars from Central and South America for the

symposium “Communication Dialogues Between North and South.” Then, in 2015, Ohio hosted scholars from Colombia for a return symposium, “Communication and Social Change in the Americas.” In between these two events, the three of us organized and presented a panel for the 2015 International Communication Association, called “Dialogues of Communication Between North and South.” As these conversations developed, Ohio also engaged with Universidad Del Norte, leading to collaborations based on interests in health communication, intercultural communication, and political communication. Our original idea for this book emerged out of these scholarly activities and conversations, giving us now several years to have conceptualized its contribution to rhetorical studies. Moreover, our work together has taught us the value and richness of articulating our different identities, traditions, interests, and regions in order to overcome hegemonic interpretations of phenomena. We have taken advantage of our own unique positionalities to offer a dialogue where scholars with different backgrounds, contexts, and races reflect on the role of rhetoric in shaping democracy in the Americas.

Assessing Democracy in the Americas

While the scholarship cited above has contributed much to our understandings of citizenship and identity across the Americas, we aim to complement this work with a specific focus on democracy. Democracy, of course, is among the most vital concepts in rhetorical studies, and recent scholarship has been especially robust with respect to democratic deliberation and citizenship. Writing against the contemporary tendency to overemphasize the importance of voting, Josiah Ober maintains that democracy’s original meaning points toward “the collective capacity of a public to make good things happen in the public realm.”¹⁷ Similarly, Octavio Paz notes that “the foundation of democracy is the belief in the ability of citizens to decide with freedom and responsibility on public matters.”¹⁸ How, then, does a public make good things happen or make decisions on public matters, if not through rhetoric? As David Timmerman and Todd McDorman suggest, “Democracy is impossible without the practice of public discourse and dialogue among citizens.”¹⁹ Rhetoric therefore requires the mutual engagement of citizens because, as Benedetto Fontana maintains, it “emerges, develops, and thrives under conditions of conflict, competition, and strife.”²⁰ This suggests that, as much as references to elections and democratic institutions are instructive, we also must consider other modes of democratic citizenship, what Robert Asen

refers to as “a mode of public engagement.”²¹ With this in mind, our aim is to account for democratic interventions in daily life across the Americas. This might lead us to examining “compensatory division” in the Occupy movement and its critique of Wall Street in New York City; it might focus on the emergence of “networked activism” in the Zapatista resistance in Chiapas, Mexico; or it might direct our attention to mass gatherings in opposition to the costly staging of the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.²² In such cases, we believe the voices of engaged citizens become the means by which we can consider democracy’s promise.

As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, democracy’s promise may appear in doubt. Indeed, although making sense of rhetoric and democracy’s mutual dependence on each other is far from a new enterprise, it is worth taking stock of the contemporary moment. For example, when the Brazilian people elected Jair Bolsonaro as their next president, Western mainstream media reacted with worry and alarm. A *Financial Times* headline declared, “A Bolsonaro Victory Will Put Brazil’s Democracy to the Test.” Meanwhile, *The Atlantic* asked, “Can Brazil’s Democracy Withstand Jair Bolsonaro?” and the *Washington Post* warned, “Democracy Is in Danger All over the World: Brazil Is Just the Latest Example.”²³ What would prompt such reactions to the free election of a new president in the world’s fourth-largest democracy? In short, defenders of democracy saw in Bolsonaro what they saw happening around the world: a resurgence of hyper-nationalism that, at best, could be called “populist” and, at worst, might be considered “fascist.” Across Europe, North America, and South America, the legitimization of right-wing nationalism has increasingly been a cause for concern.²⁴

Many of Brazil’s neighbors, since the mid-2010s, have experienced what some call the “Latin American spring.” Popular demonstrations in Mexico, Chile, Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia, and Colombia have challenged governments with allegations of economic instability, corruption, and social inequality.²⁵ Late in 2019 in Bolivia, President Evo Morales resigned after thirteen years in office, a decision that came after the Organization of American States leveled accusations of electoral fraud. The new interim government has faced daily clashes between supporters of Morales accused of advocating a “socialism of the twenty-first century” and those who sought a political turn to the right.²⁶ Then, in Colombia, citizens organized national strikes (*para nacional*) to demonstrate opposition to President Iván Duque. Specifically, protestors expressed frustration with labor conditions, corruption, and lack of support for the peace agreements signed with the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).²⁷

In the United States, meanwhile, commentators have declared a “crisis of democracy” with growing frequency. In a widely publicized essay, former US senator, secretary of state, and presidential nominee Hillary Rodham Clinton warned, “Our democratic institutions are under siege.” Specifically identifying President Donald Trump as the cause, Clinton pointed to the US government’s failure to provide adequate hurricane relief in Puerto Rico, cruelty in its immigration policy, attacks on a free press, and corrupt relations with Russia.²⁸ Yet as troubling as the Trump administration’s actions have been, we should avoid the temptation to reduce all democratic limitations to him and his associates. Indeed, various factors—from the idiosyncratic mechanism of the electoral college to legacies of racialized capitalism—have fueled growing doubts about the legitimacy of democratic elections and government.²⁹

Beyond the United States, the nations across the western hemisphere face similar doubts, as citizens grow weary of ongoing corruption, gridlock, and instability prompted by global tensions. Of Bolsonaro’s election in Brazil, the *New York Times* acknowledges, “in a country traumatized by violent crime, his iron-fisted approach to law and order has appealed to voters in traditionally left-wing strongholds.”³⁰ Meanwhile, newly elected Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador capitalized on similar sentiments. As former Mexican ambassador to the United States Arturo Sarukhan expressed in the *Washington Post*, “Fed up with politics and politicians as usual and driven by the tone-deafness and hubris of the three mainstream political parties, Mexicans chose someone to kick the legs out from under the table instead of simply resetting the dinnerware.”³¹ In Colombia, before the national strikes revealed dissatisfaction with Iván Duque, voters elected him in part due to outrage over the previous administration’s negotiations with the FARC, which included “guarantees of softer sentencing for rebel leaders and guaranteed seats in congress.”³²

Of the thirty-four countries of North, Central, and South America, Cuba is the only one that currently does not have some version of democratic government. Yet nearly every one of these nations faces some form of the disquiet described above. Even the relative tranquility of Canadian politics has been interrupted by the “dramatic rise in the number of white nationalist and right-wing extremist groups operating in Canada.”³³ In light of such widespread turmoil, it might be easy to lose faith in rhetoric’s democratic potential. However, a longer view of recent decades reminds us that American nations have abolished dictatorships, ended internal armed conflicts, hosted radical left- and right-wing governments, embraced wars against terrorism, and experienced significant mobilization processes on behalf of the

civil society. In other words, the relationship between rhetoric and democracy is both variable and contestable. As much as contemporary events can be discouraging, we believe that the promise of democracy still lies in modes of rhetorical engagement and action. Thus, we ask, how have these actions affected democratic culture? How has rhetoric facilitated or constrained efforts to expand democracy's reach? How can future rhetorical choices enhance the health of democracy?

Contrasting and Converging Histories

The Americas constitute a rich cultural, geographical, and theoretical terrain to study the intersections between rhetoric and democracy, not only because of the several challenges to implement and maintain democracy in the region, but especially because of the diversity found within and between the nations in the region. Democracy manifests differently across the hemisphere and various rhetorics underlie its history, characteristics, and challenges. Moreover, rhetorically, the United States has positioned itself as an advocate and guardian of democracy and has presented itself as the country called upon to implement—through distinct media and discourses—the democratic model across Central and South America.

A brief history and reflection of the current characteristics of democracy in the Americas may help us better understand the role of these intersections between rhetoric and democracy in the context of the different cases, situations, artifacts, and speeches analyzed throughout this book. This summary is necessarily incomplete, but it can contribute as a contextual frame of the rhetorical practices contained herein. The thirty-four nations we cited earlier have adopted democracy not only as a formal political model, but also as a set of micro-practices related to the active participation of their citizens. Even though the United States implemented democracy relatively rapidly, most countries in Latin America have struggled to define a political model and a system of governance. These struggles can be attributed both to European imperialist legacies manifest in colonialism, civil wars, militarism, and dictatorships and to the imperialism and interventionism of the United States.³⁴ Indeed, as we will show in the next brief historical account, the United States has significantly influenced Latin American political and development models over the last decades.

After gaining their independence from England, Spain, and Portugal, the countries of the western hemisphere strove to implement liberal political

systems based on European constructs such as freedom and equality.³⁵ These principles have influenced the politics, economics, and even the daily life of the United States for centuries, but they have not had the same impact in nations to the south. Latin American countries followed, in the 1920s, a positivist wave in which the main goal was to achieve modernity.³⁶ As Paz explains, this goal was compromised from the beginning, as the standards of modernity were imposed by European and North American influences. In particular, the various attempts at social, economic, and political modernization have been burdened by the legacy of colonialism and Spanish heritage, leading many in Latin America to view modernity as “our goddess and our devil.”³⁷ Nevertheless, this ideology was reproduced by intellectuals and politicians from the United States, and it led most of the countries of Central and South America to approach their societies as organic systems guided by scientific laws that, if well applied, would lead the peoples of the South to defeat the ignorance that kept them behind.³⁸

During the 1950s, Latin American nations started looking for new models of development and, therefore, for original political and economic paths. The Cuban Revolution embraced a unique model of development in which socialism could be created through the implementation of guerrilla groups.³⁹ The revolution allowed Fidel Castro to replace the historical legitimacy of democracy with a revolutionary legitimacy and, in turn, constitute a bureaucratic dictatorship.⁴⁰ Other countries in Latin America adopted this kind of revolution in rural areas, through states, and supported by guerrillas in order to implement socialist models of development.⁴¹ In response to this rise in socialism, US president John F. Kennedy created the Alliance for Progress to implement moderate reforms in the region and divert attention from socialism.

The 1960s and 1970s exhausted populism and developmentalism in the region.⁴² These decades also revealed a set of political practices known as patrimonialism or clientelism that, by the hand of democratic and socialist governments (and even dictatorships), had an enormous impact in Latin America.⁴³ This system, inherited and learned during the Spanish and Portuguese colonial period, led politicians to govern the public realm as if it were private property, the bureaucracy to be based on personal relationships, and the state to present itself as the holder of wealth. This also resulted in a symbiotic relationship between entrepreneurs and the state in which the former has a clientelist relationship with the latter in order to obtain economic and political benefits.⁴⁴ This type of relation explains the magnitude of corruption in Latin America, an issue that will be addressed later.

By the 1980s and 1990s, agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund promoted the implementation of neoliberalism in order to overcome the emergence of nationalism across Latin America. Neoliberal policies invited these countries to embrace privatization, liberalization, tax reforms, deregulation, and reduction of the state.⁴⁵ The reduction of the state that resulted from the so-called Washington Consensus considerably weakened Latin American democracies and led to numerous financial crises years after their implementation.⁴⁶ The vocabulary of neoliberalism provides an important anchor for this book, not because we believe it to be the only lens through which we can view democratic conditions but because it has had a disproportionate influence on the relationships between the United States and the other American nations. The origins of neoliberalism emerged as an economic experiment, theorized by Chicago School scholar Milton Friedman and deployed in South America in the early 1970s. That experiment emerged in the aftermath of a coup in Chile, orchestrated by Augusto Pinochet and “backed by US corporations, the CIA, and US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.”⁴⁷

In the decades since, neoliberalism has become the hegemonic discourse among the nations of the democratic West.⁴⁸ As Wendy Brown defines it, neoliberalism is

most commonly understood as enacting an ensemble of economic policies in accord with its root principle of affirming free markets. These include deregulation of industries and capital flows; radical reduction in welfare state provisions and protections for the vulnerable; privatized and outsourced public goods, ranging from education, parks, postal services, roads, and social welfare to prisons and militaries; replacement of progressive with regressive tax and tariff schemes; the end of wealth distribution as an economic or social-political policy; the conversion of every human need or desire into a profitable enterprise . . . ; and, most recently, the financialization of everything and the increasing dominance of finance capital over productive capital in the dynamics of the economy and everyday life.⁴⁹

The influence of neoliberalism is by no means restricted to the Chilean “experiment.” As Mark Goodale and Nancy Postero note in their introduction to the book *Neoliberalism, Interrupted*, studies of Latin America reveal “a spectrum of responses to what can be described as ‘maturing neoliberalism,’ from a Bolivian revolution that is framed as a formal rejection of

neoliberalism to Colombia's deepening recommitment to the full suite of neoliberal social, political, and economic practices."⁵⁰ As neoliberal initiatives have matured, so, too, have organized efforts to resist "colonial heritages and similar postcolonial subjugation to global and economic and political powers."⁵¹ In other words, neoliberalism—as both economic and rhetorical rationality—has fostered resentments and the capacity for social movements to emerge across the globe.

One such response since the 2000s has been a post-neoliberal trend that has emerged in Latin America.⁵² Thus presidents focused on regulating markets and increasing public spending as a way to enlarge the state intervene in the economy and improve citizens' quality of life. Some media and scholars saw in this new turn to the left the emergence of a new socialism, hailed as the "socialism of the twenty-first century."⁵³ As we noted at the outset, despite the fact that most Latin American countries adopted leftist and left-center democracies in the early years of the new century, many of them have reverted to right-wing governments. Two cases stand out in this shift. First is Venezuela, a nation that for almost twenty years has implemented the so-called twenty-first-century socialism approach, and that has now brought about the increase of inflation to levels of more than 800 percent and the deterioration of Venezuelans' quality of life because of the shortage of food, medicine, medical attention, and educational services. Although elected through popular vote, the presidencies of both Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro have weakened democratic practice and limited the promises of a new socialism. The election of a right-wing president in Chile constitutes the second recent case in Latin America that demonstrates the political movement back to the right. Following the presidency of socialist Michelle Bachelet, Chileans returned Sebastián Piñera to the office he had held from 2010 to 2014. Piñera's election signaled that the consolidation of left-wing government in South America that appeared to have taken hold in the early twenty-first century had given way to a right-wing resurgence. In the past few years, "conservatives have come to power in Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, and Venezuela's 'Bolivarian Revolution' has come under severe pressure with anti-government protesters taking to the streets for months. The win by Piñera further consolidates that trend."⁵⁴

Meanwhile, as challenges to neoliberalism ebb and flow in South America, the North—and, in particular, the United States—continues to emphasize neoliberal practices through commitments to privatization, international monetary control, and free trade. In the midst of controversies about border control, detaining immigrants and separating families, and building a

border wall between the United States and Mexico, President Trump facilitated a renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). NAFTA, and other deals like it, has long been a representative target of anti-globalization activists and those who believe neoliberalism has exacerbated economic inequality. This offered the prospect of an unusual alliance between Trump and those on the far left; however, the new deal—called the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement—includes only minimal changes to NAFTA.⁵⁵ Furthermore, despite Trump’s unconventional presidency, US economic policy remains largely unaltered. Meanwhile, it is possible that Trump will affect the United States’ global influence elsewhere, especially with respect to the military. Although still infatuated by military power, he has been unpredictable with defense policy, most dramatically symbolized by his sudden announcement of the United States’ withdrawal of troops from Syria and his gamesmanship with Iran.⁵⁶ Such moves stand in contrast to the prevailing mindset of US leaders in the past four decades. Much more commonplace has been a worldview informed by American exceptionalism, through which military actions are deemed necessary and moral if and when the United States declares them to be so.⁵⁷

The United States’ aggressive and often belligerent approach to foreign policy and military intervention has led to growing criticism in the international community. The election of President Barack Obama ushered in an era of some renewed optimism, but even his more measured approach to global affairs retained US troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, and also increased the use of military drones.⁵⁸ The legacy of the “war on terror,” especially the war in Iraq, has mitigated some of the United States’ influence and even isolated it to a degree from its neighbors. As a result, despite neoliberal governments of their own, Mexico and Canada “have retained some degree of policy autonomy from the U.S. regime.”⁵⁹ Canada is an especially interesting contemporary case, given the international popularity of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. A political progressive in many ways, Trudeau is more nuanced than leaders such as George W. Bush and more diplomatic than Donald Trump. Yet the optimism with which many have greeted Trudeau has waned, in part because many on the political left have been disappointed by his stances on the environment and trade, while those on the political right have viewed him as ineffectual in foreign policy.⁶⁰ His reputation was further marred by the discovery of older photos showing him wearing “blackface,” a controversy that did not prevent him from winning reelection in 2019 but may have contributed to his Liberal Party losing its legislative majority.⁶¹

Trudeau's fortunes aside, it is clear the United States still sets the agenda in North America and beyond. US leaders routinely invoke the nation's presumed exceptionalism, and it maintains enough economic and military leverage to dictate policy to many of its allies. Most centrally, the United States declares itself to be the world's leading example in democratic governance. Yet if the structure of democracy remains in place, what is to be made of democratic engagement among its citizens? The two-party system between Democrats and Republicans remains relatively stable, despite frequent criticisms that they both uphold the same general values.⁶² Meanwhile, many citizens are cynical about politics and voter turnout is relatively unimpressive. In the 2016 presidential election, for example, only 55 percent of the voting-age population cast ballots.⁶³ US citizens tend to view government more favorably at the local level over the national, and they increasingly see issues in partisan terms.⁶⁴

Despite contemporary challenges, citizens in the United States work within a long-established tradition of shared values rooted in classically liberal political principles, such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.⁶⁵ Accordingly, democracy in North America is often linked to an Anglo tradition rooted in the philosophy of John Locke, where reason and the protection of individual liberties is crucial.⁶⁶ While this amounts to a truncated genealogy of democracy in the United States, it is fair to conclude that these underlying values shape interpretations of democratic health in North America. And, although US ideology dictates the terms of engagement across the Americas, we also want to turn our attention to some of the principles shared in the South.

Latin America is not a homogeneous region and democracies in Central and South America have taken shape differently from nation to nation. However, it is possible to identify some common characteristics of Central and South America that, in turn, distinguish them from the United States and Canada. One such difference is a colonial heritage that, unlike the colonization in North America, reproduced the Iberian ethos of the Spanish and Portuguese colonizers. Following the ideas of Ignacio Walker and Jorge Carpizo, we observe that this Iberian ethos is evident in institutions and processes such as (1) the adoption of Catholicism and, along with it, a hierarchical and Thomistic thinking; (2) a clientelist, centralist, and elitist legal and political system inherited from the Spanish and Portuguese traditions; and (3) Spanish as the common official language of most Latin American countries (even though Brazilians speak Portuguese, it is easy for Spanish speakers to understand Portuguese and vice versa).⁶⁷ In addition, the notion of democracy in Latin America owes more to the influences of continental European theory,

made most obvious in the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Whereas the Lockean tradition favors an emphasis on individual liberty, the Rousseauian tradition grants more attention to the collective.⁶⁸

This common colonial heritage has influenced certain attributes of Latin American democracies: First, the fragmentation of weak political parties that coalesce around potential presidential figures and change their ideology in a pendulum movement according to the conveniences of the moment.⁶⁹ Second, the emergence of left-wing populisms that bring paternalistic and messianic leaders to power outside the rules of institutions and the legitimacy of political parties.⁷⁰ Third, the consolidation of electoral democracies—that is, democracies where participation is limited to electoral voting but lack mechanisms for citizen oversight, governance, and institutional strengthening. Fourth, a fragile and weak civil society that rarely organizes itself to pursue long-term social and political projects. Fifth, the increase of corruption as a consequence of patronage practices inherited from the colony and now transnationalized with globalization.⁷¹ Sixth, the crisis of governance, which arises as a result of populist, plebiscite, and personalist democracies in which citizens have little confidence in institutions and accomplish several practices “outside” the frame of those institutions.⁷² Finally, these are democracies defined by levels of poverty that, despite improvements in recent years, contend with problems of hunger, malnutrition, and illiteracy. Likewise, these are societies with significant levels of violence and gangs.⁷³

Many of these features—both the attributes and limitations of democracy—will be featured in the analyses contained in this volume. Before turning to an overview of the chapters, we want to clarify three assumptions we have made as editors. First, we have oriented the book to identify the intersections of rhetoric and democracy as a means to interrogate the material conditions—that is, political, religious, economic, social—that shape the emergence of certain democratic rhetorics as well as the symbolic consequences of these rhetorics on concrete democratic processes. Consequently, we view democracy discursively, understanding it in terms of the rhetorical devices and ideas that both underlie and shape democratic processes across the Americas. Following scholars such as Russell Hanson, Robert Ivie, and Gerard Hauser,⁷⁴ we claim democracy is itself a rhetorical construction: the mere idea of democracy as a superior and ideal model requires rhetorical work and, therefore, the naturalization and incorporation of certain values and ideas associated to this political system throughout both the hemisphere and the world.

Second, we understand rhetoric, on the one hand, as an object to be studied, which means the studies in this book approach speeches, grass roots

movements, and organizations as rhetorical exemplars of democratic practice in the Americas. On the other hand, we view rhetoric as a method/orientation and a theoretical invitation to consider how democracy is constituted rhetorically. In short, this project embraces a more constitutive than instrumental view of rhetoric. We consider rhetoric as a multifaceted phenomenon that works ideologically, mythologically, and ritualistically to constitute cultures and foster the construction of collective identities for social movements and activism in the Americas. At the same time, this standpoint leads us to study how certain rhetorics of democracy work as power devices that naturalize and institutionalize democracy at macropolitical and microsocial/cultural levels. With these ideas in mind, we concur with Lisa Flores, who suggests “that the art of rhetorical criticism is concerned with politics and publics, with cultural discourses and social meanings, with rhetors and audiences. Not merely observers, rhetorical critics are social actors, guided by our theoretical knowledge, our methodological skills, and our critical senses, who seek through our work to bring both insight and judgment.”⁷⁵

Third, the book makes every effort to capture democratic rhetorics across international borders. Ultimately, the examination of these diverse contexts will show and extend the field of rhetoric beyond the North American perspective where rhetoric is often confined. Thus this book is designed to cultivate conversations among and between the hemispheres, with the acknowledgment that limiting any conception of rhetoric to only “North” or “South” is politically problematic. This is why, to the extent possible, we have curated contributions from scholars across the Americas, including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and the United States. In addition, our authors attend to other national contexts, including Cuba, Guatemala, and Venezuela. We cannot claim to be comprehensive, as there are certainly contexts and concerns we have not attended to in these chapters. However, we believe these studies collectively speak to previous calls in rhetorical studies to “offer a view of American rhetoric that acknowledges and attempts to account for the hemispheric complexities of symbolic action.”⁷⁶

Overview of Chapters

The chapters of the book recognize democratic ideals as irreducible to a single Western perspective and reflect the ways social minorities, both in North and South, question unique discourses that disguise the juxtaposition of difference. Thus the authors thoughtfully consider the fluidity and tensions of local,

national, and global forces to deconstruct and construct democratic values, which are always in “becoming.” In doing so, the chapters of the book engage in constructive dialogue to interrogate plural forms of democratic processes in the Americas not simply based on universalist approaches. The authors enter into the conversation that asks for the rhetorical modes of democratic culture and the new foundations to understand the transformations occurring in the region from the perspective of marginalized populations, such as immigrants, ethnic minorities, and victims of homophobia and racism.

The first section of the book, “Questioning Narratives of Democracy Beyond the West,” navigates the possibilities of deconstructing metanarratives of democracy coming from the Western tradition while drawing attention to the multiplicity of voices of excluded groups to interrogate a single democratic framework in the Americas. In chapter 1, Christa Olson argues that democracy’s rhetorical relationship with the material is thoroughly topographical, as appeals to the democratic hemisphere make democracy a state of nature native to the Americas. By sketching a map of democratic topography, Olson shows, through the work of different rhetors from the United States and Latin America, how land and the grounds for democratic rhetoric ultimately cannot be separated, setting up a presumption of natural democracy that was literally grounded in the western hemisphere.

José Cortez proposes in chapter 2, from the perspective of postnational rhetoric, a reevaluation of the concept of *topos* to highlight the complex understandings of democracy. Cortez’s chapter depicts the impossibility of reproducing a single narrative of democracy in the United States and stresses the need to renew our meanings of democracy in the region rooted in the notion of *topos*. For Cortez, we are bearing witness to the emergence of a different regime of political signification in light of the breakdown of the nation-state form, which means democracy cannot be understood strictly from a single framework. In his chapter, Cortez examines how Mexicans appeal to the land with the language of democracy and points out the complexities of conflicting views that are present on the “*topoi*” ground to question a universal democratic framework in the Americas and create new meanings of cultural identity and citizenship in the hemisphere.

Turning to a specific scenario in the way minority groups challenge Western narratives, Alberto González, Amy N. Heuman, and Linsay M. Cramer address in chapter 3 how Donald Trump’s essentializing rhetoric in controversies surrounding “the wall” along the US-Mexico border and NAFTA have made possible the emergence of counternarratives such as “draining the democracy”—a rhetorical play on Trump’s claims to “draining the swamp”

that symbolizes the political establishment in Washington, DC—to illustrate Latin American nations' incredulity toward the metanarrative of the democratic ideals of the United States. Their analysis then suggests several consequences for democratic politics, both within the United States and across the Americas.

René Agustín De los Santos emphasizes in chapter 4 the need to reconsider the significance of democratic values and citizenship in the United States, drawing attention to the case of Latin American migrants in the United States to examine contemporary forms of citizenship and to highlight the complexities of the binational rhetorics and rhetorical capacities of migrants living in the United States. In his chapter, De los Santos reminds us how migrants can often experience contemporary citizenship in conflicting ways that might legitimize the traditional notion of US citizenship or inspire other democratic ideals toward very different ends. His argument emphasizes the potential contradictory nature of contemporary migrant civil societies to resist metanarratives that reinforce the US or mono-national gaze of democracy.

In chapter 5, Michael L. Butterworth turns his attention to the ideological work of “American exceptionalism.” Offering a critique of American exceptionalism as a foundational myth, Butterworth interrogates President Obama’s efforts to normalize relations with Cuba through the idea of “baseball diplomacy,” a rhetorical construct rooted in the notion of “democratic exceptionalism.” By examining media reports about baseball diplomacy and analyzing their portrayals of American exceptionalism, he focuses on the ways that diplomatic efforts in and through baseball present American cultural identity. More critically, the chapter points to the limits of American exceptionalism, especially in light of growing doubts about United States’ status as a democratic exemplar.

The second section of book, “Problematizing and Reconstructing Democracy in Latin America,” moves out of the US context to interrogate how the intersections of rhetoric and democracy help rhetorical scholars examine the material conditions and the symbolic consequences of democratic processes in sociohistorical contexts in Latin America. In doing so, the authors of this group reflect on the material realities and democratic ideals that mobilize civil action toward very different political ends in the region. Each of the chapters of this section reflects on the possibilities of Latin American populations to understand democracy in their own terms and reality rather than allowing Western discourses to speak for them.

In chapter 6, Adriana Angel points to discourses on Guatemalan corruption to identify the vocabularies that different types of actors use to

communicate about this phenomenon. She examines the notions of “fraud,” “democracy,” and “interventionism” as the three main terministic screens to demonstrate how understandings of corruption extend beyond the domain of politicians and include individuals’ perceptions and symbolic action in everyday practices. One of the central contributions of Angel’s chapter is to show the relationship between rhetoric and democracy in the specific context of corruption in Guatemala, a problem faced by all countries in the Americas. Angel’s analysis attentively demonstrates how the central implication of corruption is its threat to democracy rather than other political, economic, social, and cultural consequences.

Clara Eugenia Rojas Blanco draws attention in chapter 7 to a group of political women activists in Ciudad Juárez and their political actions to gain political recognition as speaking subjects. Rojas approaches Mexican women activists by emphasizing their rhetorical agency as it relates to issues of power and its political and democratic implications. Her ethnographic inquiry offers a deep analysis of her conversations with local grassroots women activists in the discursive context of the emergence of civil deliberations to form civil spaces of deliberation underlined by the moral exigency of the femicide in Ciudad Juárez.

In chapter 8, Pamela Flores and Nancy R. Gómez depict the complexities of considering human rights while considering religious beliefs untouchable in the context of the 2016 peace agreement in Colombia between the state and the FARC. In their chapter, the authors primarily focus on the use of gender ideology by opponents of the agreement, arguing that opponents were able to frame the discussion in terms that defined “gender ideology” as a threat to traditional religious norms and values. The chapter accentuates how conflicting views in the public sphere reveal the possibilities, contradictions, and limits of democratic ideals in Colombia. For Gómez and Flores, democracy might not be understood from universalist framework but always in a continuous contestation in which power is disputed between various political, religious, economic, and social forces.

Carlos Piovezani’s analysis in chapter 9 demonstrates practices in Brazilian media that marginalize “popular” speech among the political elite. More specifically, Piovezani shows how depictions of former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as unrefined serve conservative political efforts to define popular discourse as aggressive and foolish. Such portrayals are of particular concern because they are rooted in assumptions about the poor and disempowered populations in Brazil. Despite Lula’s electoral successes, the negative images of him constructed by the media have facilitated the interests of the elite

and delegitimized progressive social programs. Piovezani, therefore, invites readers to consider what becomes of “the people” when elite interests control narratives about democracy.

Presenting a critical analysis of the ways in which Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s ethos is constructed in her farewell address, Alejandra Vitale shows the multiplicity of narratives of democracy from Latin America in chapter 10. Vitale thoughtfully reflects on the implications of Fernández de Kirchner’s farewell address for Argentina’s democracy by legitimizing herself before her audience as a future opponent of Mauricio Macri rather than praising democracy and the popular vote in the tradition of presidential farewells. Vitale argues how Fernández depicts Macri as a potential traitor of Argentinian democracy while presenting herself as the nation’s hope to realize democratic ideals when she returns once the four years of Mauricio Macri’s presidency have run their course.

To conclude the book, Abraham Romney moves our attention in chapter 11 to examine the implication of the narrative of crisis in democracy in Venezuela. Romney navigates the rhetoric of the crisis under Nicolás Maduro, examining the legacy of the failed coup in 2002 that nearly ended Hugo Chávez’s presidency. Romney’s analysis of media representation of the more recent economic crisis under Maduro shows how both Maduro’s government and its opposition reinforce the rhetoric of spectacle to frame events symbolically, connect them to a group’s ideology, and drive community action. In contrast with the rhetoric of spectacle that perpetuates the spectacle’s “real unreality,” Romney explores how Venezuelans might create narratives of “everyday humanity” that can unite the country politically and resist facile representations from outsiders.