

Transnationalism

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"Where are you from?" These four words, innocuous and friendly conversation starters when asked by whites of whites, are often experienced by Latinas/os in the United States not as innocent interrogations, but as thinly veiled intimations of foreignness and racial difference. Furthermore, for Latinas/os the answer is quite often far more complicated than a simple "Milwaukee" or "Mexico." What if we are from both Milwaukee and Mexico? What if we are from Milwaukee and Mexico while living in Massachusetts? Then where, indeed, are we from? Where is home now? Who are y/our people? Most important of all, where do y/our allegiances lie?

Latina/o immigrations to, migrations within, and return migrations from the United States are often the manifest or latent consequence of U.S. intervention in Latin America and the Caribbean, or as journalist Juan González (2001) put it, the "harvest of empire." That is, U.S. settler colonialism and imperialism trigger and create conditions in our heritage countries that, inevitably, make it impossible for some segment of our population to live out their lives in the countries of their birth. "We didn't cross the border; the border crossed us!" exclaimed Chicanos organizing against Anglo-American nativist racisms (Acuña 1987). Whether for putatively economic reasons, purportedly political reasons, or more often than not, some combination of geopolitical and economic forces, Latinas/os are driven to establish communities in the United States. "We're here because you were there" is thus a leitmotif of Latina/o migrations. Both

proximity and common—if ironic—patterns of colonial subjects' migrations to the metropole explain why Latinas/os end up in what José Martí called the "belly of the beast" that is the United States empire.

Not long after Martí's aphorism, social critic Randolph S. Bourne coined the term "*trans-nationalism*" in 1916 (my emphasis). Bourne called upon his fellow Americans to abandon the nationalist nativism that fueled the anti-immigrant violence and ideology of his day. As an alternative, he argued for embracing a cosmopolitan internationalism, legalizing dual citizenship, and allowing the "free and mobile passage of the immigrant between America and his native land" without prejudice. Bourne was nonetheless a man of his times; he considered U.S. society culturally superior to sending societies that had presumptively "inferior civilizations" (1916, 88) and reassured his countrymen that most (if not all) of the immigrants' "baser" cultural elements would eventually melt away (1916, 94). Still, he rejected the melting pot, Anglo-conformist model of assimilation. Instead, he argued that "America [was] coming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors." For Bourne, "trans-nationalism" was "a trans-nationality of all the nations," "a wholly international nation" (1916, 95–96). In this formulation, transnationalism required tolerance and respect for diversity, and promised a cultural smorgasbord prepared in Israel Zangwill's (1908) famous "melting pot," which would necessarily expand yet satisfy the American palate. Given that the (im)migrants Bourne was concerned with were predominantly European, the famous huddled masses of Emma Lazarus's (2002) "New Colossus," this was largely a question of ethnic assimilation, rather than one of political, civil, and human rights.

By contrast, when cultural anthropologists Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton (1992) re-coined the term "transnationalism" in the

early 1990s, not only were they seemingly unaware of Bourne's earlier formulation, but they were describing and advocating a critical understanding of the superficially similar yet fundamentally different experiences of late twentieth-century migrants and migrations from what was once the third world. Whereas earlier immigrants came predominantly from Western and Southern Europe because of internal and continental dynamics, late twentieth-century immigrants come predominantly from "the global South"—Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia—from countries that Vijay Prashad (2013) has aptly denominated *The Poorer Nations* produced by colonialism, chattel slavery, and imperialism.

While early and late twentieth-century immigrants alike emigrated largely due to political and economic forces produced by industrial and finance capitalism's intensifying globalization, unlike their European predecessors, the "new immigrants" come increasingly from the United States' colonies, neocolonies, and societies unsettled by U.S. interventionism, particularly during the Cold War period. Moreover, despite the end of the Cold War, U.S. interventionism not only continues but is now amplified by international and extranational organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Emigration continues apace, and chain migration replenishes immigrant communities and families with new members so that first, second, third generation, and beyond interact regularly. Therefore, this new transnationalism is not simply a product of empire, but is an active, creative, and purposeful response to its fallout (Levitt and Khagram 2008).

While European immigrants were subject to nativist discrimination in policy, politics, and practice, they nonetheless were incorporated into white society. That is, although culture shock and nativism fostered transnational behaviors and identities in the first immigrant generation, by the second and third U.S.-born

generation, those communities became increasingly less transnational, less ethnic, and more unhyphenated American. Theirs was a transnationalism fueled on the sending side by heritage ties and on the U.S. side by ethnocentrism, which eventually faded as their children and grandchildren were assimilated into whiteness. By contrast, for Latin American and Caribbean immigrants, ethnocentrism is coupled with racism not only for the first generation, but into the second and third generation as well. Considered both perpetually foreign and non-white, Latinas/os, by implication, are not assimilable as a group, even if "white" Latinas/os can assimilate individually.

If "transnationalism is a process by which migrants, through their daily life activities and social, economic, and political relations, create social fields that cross national boundaries" (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992, 23), then Latinas/os are citizens of those social fields because neither their nations nor their states have fully lived up to their respective promises. One of the earliest contemporary examples of the term "transnational" being used to describe—if not exactly theorize—the lived experiences of and relationships sustained between Latina/o emigrants and those who stayed in place was Eugenia Georges's (1990) book on how Dominican emigrants who migrated from rural to urban communities in their homelands and then from those urban centers to urban centers abroad such as New York City increasingly began to "take actions, make decisions, and develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks of relationships that connect them simultaneously in two or more nation-states" (Basch, Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994, 8). They created and sustained a "single social field" of *dominicanidades*.

A single social field is a deterritorialized "space" between two or more nation-states, where people live in both at once, "speaking two languages, having homes in two countries, and making a living through continuous regular contact across national borders" (Portes,

Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999, 217). At the individual level, "livin' *la vida local*" (Child and Rosa 1999) transnationally requires both the economic resources (money) and the legal-juridical capacity (passport, residency, citizenship) to move freely, which only some have. At the community level, however, the fact that the phenomenon exists and is enacted by more highly resourced community members has effects and implications for the community overall. Only some may be travelers, but the social field as a whole is affected by the wake of their travels.

As "transmigrants," rather than simply "immigrants" or "migrants," Latinas/os living transnationally sustain an ongoing interest in and commitment to both their heritage societies and their current ones, so they make a life that transcends borders and oceans through their interests, affiliations, and actions. The actions include participating in the economies of several countries, whether paying taxes, privately financing public infrastructure development, sending person-to-person money transfers, or formally and informally importing and exporting consumer goods. They engage in sundry political behaviors, from securing dual citizenship where possible and voting in elections, to holding public office, to lobbying public officials and organizing in both countries, to claiming a stake in the foreign affairs of both nations. They trade in "social remittances," such as values and ideas that travel across the immigrant's societies and cultural production, in transformations of existing material culture and practices such as food, music, and dance, or the creation of new cultural products that are "of both places" (Levitt and Khagram 2008). And they communicate regularly and routinely across the geographical spans.

Since immigrants and migrants to the United States did most if not all of these things at the turn of the twentieth century—and indeed recent historiography of that period routinely deploys a transnational theory to frame the narrative—what, beyond the racial formation issue,

is distinctive about the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century transnationalism of Latinas/os? Some scholars have argued that the difference lies in the "time and space compression" afforded by technological innovations of our era, which in turn have allowed for both more extensive and more intensive linking behaviors that create a more generalized transnational Latina/o social field. Low-cost communications technologies facilitate regular and increasingly routine contact with family "back home"; rather than the weekly or monthly phone call or "snail mail" letters, now there's instant dialogic communications. Whether via email, talking or texting, WhatsApp®, Skype®, Facebook®, Instagram® or Twitter®, it is possible instantly and constantly to know the details of daily life *allá* as well as *aquí*. Even the now quaint phone call can happen anywhere and anytime, thanks to the proliferation of cell phones throughout the hemisphere. Likewise, money transfers—quite often the most material form of communicating on-going connections and kinship ties—can happen with a few clicks of a keyboard or taps on an app.

Another distinguishing factor for Latina/o transnationalism and historically emerging transnationalism is proximity to the heritage countries. Simply stated, we are much closer geographically to our parents and grandparents' homelands than earlier immigrants from Europe or contemporary immigrants from Africa and Asia. And for those whose origins lie in Mexico, Central America, or South America, it is possible to rely solely or primarily on overland travel between destination points. But proximity alone does not account for the retention of active ties to the homeland and heritage country for the second and third generations.

I would argue further that the insistence on claiming and sustaining multiple ethno-racial and "national" identities, even when those identities are supposedly contradictory or mutually exclusive, as well as the refusal

to hyphenate or even to choose among the available options, is also a product of twenty-first-century transnationalism. The 1998 plebiscite on the political status question in Puerto Rico yielded "None of the above" as the most preferred option over the Current Territory Status, Free Association, Statehood, and Independence vis-à-vis the United States (Negrón-Muntaner 2007); Latinas/os consistently choose "Other" on the U.S. census race question (Cobas, Duany, and Feagin 2009); and Latina/o spoken word performers such as Elizabeth Acevedo claim to be 100 percent of all their heritages at once.

In essence, transnationalism posits membership and belonging as a multilocal process and possibility. Not only do immigrants get to retain their "places" in their countries of origin while establishing a place in the new country, but their children and grandchildren born elsewhere get to claim a place in their heritage countries as well. As Peter Kivisto indicates, "Transnational migrants forge their sense of identity and their community, not out of a loss or mere replication, but as something that is at once new and familiar—a *bricolage* constructed of cultural elements from both the homeland and the receiving nation" (2001, 568).

Likewise, transnationalism in Latina/o studies implies a *bricolage* of ethnic studies and area studies, incorporating questions of assimilation and incorporation into U.S. civil society and culture, questions of maintenance of ties of heritage homelands as well as questions about U.S. foreign policy in the Americas and domestic politics in the heritage countries. As Silvio Torres-Saillant tells us, "The burden of citizenship usually weighs heavier for members of diasporic communities than for the regular citizenry, since they have more than one society to improve. Among ethnic minorities in the United States, Latinos face this civil overload with distinct acuity" (2005, 281). *Y en fin*, the empire always strikes back, transnationally if not quite yet intergalactically.

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White

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Whiteness in the United States is a social identity category that developed historically as a way of constructing boundaries to exclude certain groups from economic and political rights. Indeed, one had to be white in order to become a citizen, own property, and vote in this country (Haney López 1996). This history of racial exclusion in the United States is often depicted in popular culture as a division between European Americans and African Americans. Indeed, most Americans are quite familiar with pictures of separate drinking fountains and other images of racial segregation involving whites and blacks, but are frequently less aware that Latinas/os have an extensive history of racialization and exclusion in this country. In the Southwest, Mexican Americans faced similar practices of segregation, including being prohibited from living in certain areas and being barred from going to restaurants, schools, or public recreational facilities that were for "whites only" (Montejano 1987; Almaguer 1994). These practices extended beyond the Southwest, as Latinas/os on the East Coast and in the Midwest also faced discrimination in housing and other venues. In Chicago, for example, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans faced restrictive housing covenants that forbade them from living in some white neighborhoods (Betancur 1996).

Yet, while Latinas/os experienced these aspects of segregation that were similar to African Americans, the history of the racial classification of Latinas/os in relation