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Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States



BLURRED BORDERS

*Transnational Migration between the
Hispanic Caribbean and the United States*

JORGE DUANY

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Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States. By Jorge Duany. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011). Pp. 284. Cloth, \$54.27. Paper, \$29.95.

Since the 1990s, the omnipresence of terms such as “border” and “transnational” has forced scholars to rethink their understandings of citizenship, national identity, and the nation-state. Yet, as Jorge Duany points out, many studies of transnational migration remain single-case ethnographies. Meanwhile, comparative studies generally lack a “longitudinal” or long-term perspective, thus making it difficult to assess change over time. In this comparative study, Duany traces the patterns of migration from the Hispanic Caribbean to the United States over the last half-century. This allows him to determine how transnational practices are affected by generational replacement and shifting geopolitics. His thesis holds that “the form, frequency, and intensity of transnationalism largely hinges on the nature of the relationship between sending and receiving countries” (7).

In this reading, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba typify the spectrum of relationships—colonial, neocolonial, and postcolonial, respectively—forged by U.S. domination of the Caribbean in the twentieth century. Duany borrows Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller’s classification scheme in characterizing sending nations as either “strategically selective,” “transnational nation-state,” or “disinterested and denouncing state,” based upon the migrants’ legal relationship with the sending state.^[1] He then expands upon this classification scheme by elaborating what he calls a “transnational colonial state” exemplified by Puerto Rico’s relationship with the U.S. In this case, the sending and receiving nations share the same citizenship, but migrants from the dependant territory to the metropole are treated as “foreigners in the

‘mother country’” (8). The study makes use of extensive fieldwork, survey research, and archival documents to illustrate the ways in which the relationships between sending and receiving nations affect migrants’ transnational lives and practices.

Blurred Borders is extremely accessible for those unfamiliar with the social science literature on transnationalism. Duany’s opening chapters delve into some of the key scholarly debates in the field and provide an historical overview of the patterns of immigration from the Hispanic Caribbean to the United States. In the former, he stresses transnationalism’s potential to “undermine the state’s legal definitions of boundaries by blurring cultural borders” (17). At the same time, he argues that “the counterhegemonic potential of transnationalism should not be overstated.” Though migration has the potential to weaken national identities, “crossing an international boundary does not erase it” (30). Duany also sketches the outlines of current debates concerning the definition and classification of transnationalism, its novelty, and its potential to survive the first generation of immigrants.

Subsequent paired chapters provide individual case studies of the immigration patterns and diasporic experiences of each migrant community. In his first chapter on the Puerto Rican diaspora, Duany uses the holdings of the Centro de Estudios Portorriqueños at Hunter College to make his case that the Puerto Rican diaspora represents a transnational colonial migration. This he accomplishes through a study of the Farm Labor Program which served to control unemployment on the island by recruiting agricultural workers for the mainland after World War II. Although Puerto Ricans were given preference over alien workers, many employers considered them foreign due to their language and cuisine. Puerto Ricans then and now are legally domestic yet viewed as culturally foreign. In this sense, “the Puerto Rican diaspora is both transnational, because it involves crossing cultural borders...and colonial, because it does not entail traveling across the legal boundaries between independent states” (103).

Duany’s fifth chapter provides a contemporary study of the Puerto Rican diaspora is the growing middle-class community of Central Florida. Based on a series of interviews with community leaders, this chapter focuses on the extent to which “Puerto Rican migrants to Orlando have adopted panethnic identities based on the amalgamation of several

national origins” (107). Duany finds that most Puerto Ricans self-identify primarily as such, and only secondarily as Hispanic. Puerto Ricans in Orlando generally resist assimilation into mainstream middle class culture, but also reject what they consider an externally imposed *Latinidad* (130). Also of interest is the persistence of transnational practices among second-generation immigrants. Rather than a generational divide, Duany surmises that his respondents’ sense of Puerto Rican identity was premised upon the extent and strength of kinship and family networks that linked each to the island (120).

While Puerto Rico can be classified as a transnational colonial state, Cuba remains a disinterested and denouncing state “which treats émigrés as if they no longer belonged to their homeland” (7). The island nation’s unique geopolitical position throughout the Cold War has led many to treat the Cuban exodus as unique. Yet Duany argues that it is less exceptional than is often portrayed. Although “the Cuban exodus is peculiar in its deep hostility toward the sending state...family ties between Cubans on and off the island have persevered” (136). In short, Cuban immigrants carry out many of the same transnational practices as their fellow migrants from the Caribbean. Because of the embargo and the Cuban state’s adversarial relationship with its emigrants, Cubans have fewer transnational network ties than do other Caribbean diasporas. Yet with the fall of the Soviet Union, migration and remittances have become commonplace survival strategies (150). Over the course of the last two decades, both formal and informal ties between the island and its émigré community have expanded. Thus, after a review of the trends in Cuban migration since the 1990s, Duany concludes that, should the U.S. embargo be lifted, immigration would likely continue and even expand due to the economic conditions on the island and increased ties with the émigré community (166).

The Dominican Republic, meanwhile, is the classic example of the transnational nation-state. Duany uses observations gleaned from the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City to illustrate the contours of the modern Dominican diasporic community. “Regardless of where they are born or which passport they hold, Dominican migrants and their descendents are officially deemed part of the Dominican nation” (186). Thus, Dominicans retain more extensive ties with their ancestral nation than either Puerto Ricans or Cubans as evidenced by

their low naturalization rates and high remittance transfers. Dominican migrants are qualified for dual citizenship and can vote in absentia, thus they are likely to engage politically with their home country (183).

In the final chapters, Duany treats the Dominican diaspora in Puerto Rico and the remittances that flow from this community. After the fall of the Trujillo regime, Dominican immigration to Puerto Rico expanded exponentially. There they have been racialized as “blacks” which “justifies their social exclusion – from jobs, housing, schooling, and marriage, even in the second generation” (205). Because their primary form of organization is political party membership, they have been unable to present a unified voting bloc. Rather, Dominican associations are fragmented along racial, gender, political and class lines (207). In contrast to Puerto Rican migrants on the mainland, Duany finds that a significant majority of Dominicans remit money to their home country. While Puerto Ricans participate in “broad” transnational practices, such as travel for weddings, Dominican migrants “exemplify a more institutionalized and habitual engagement with their country of origin, a ‘narrow’ or ‘core’ transnationalism” (223).

Duany is successful in demonstrating how “preexistent political and economic ties between sending and receiving nations” affect migrants’ lives and transnational practices (232). In the case of Puerto Rico, direct and continuous control has led to a massive population flow which has generated broad or expanded transnational practices. The indirect hegemony of the U.S. over the Dominican Republic has brought a less significant movement, more closely tied to its country of origin. Finally, the troubled relationship between the U.S. and Cuba has resulted in a chaotic, irregular population transfer, characterized by unofficial transnational practices. Overall, the study is more descriptive than explanatory and some readers may find the author’s arguments self-evident. Nevertheless, Duany should be commended for crafting a volume which is both accessible to students and yet will still engage seasoned scholars.

Micah Wright

Texas A&M University

[1] Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller, “Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society,” *International Migration Review* 38:3 (2004): 1002-39.



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