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Transnational Knowledge Projects and Failing Racial Etiquette

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2008 NACCS Conference Presentation

Transnational Knowledge Projects and Failing Racial Etiquette

What does the current injunction to produce "transnational" scholarship mean for Chicana/o Studies scholars? The transnational turn is upheld by many progressive scholars as the corrective to all sorts of epistemological problems having to do with both geopolitical power differentials and the study of power, from American exceptionalism to an overinvestment in studying "cultural production" (which—according to some social scientists—distracts us from the more pressing and serious study of institutions and political economy). For scholars working in Chicana/o Studies—as for those working in other ethnic studies areas such as African American Studies and American Indian Studies—the transnational imperative is complicated, if not vexed, not least of all because the study of U.S. racial formations has been accused of being parochial.¹ The comments that follow are organized polemically around some overlapping challenges that complicate the ambitious, but important, project of thinking transnationally about Chicanos/as. Although these challenges are ones that are meaningful to me precisely because I have had to negotiate them in my own reading, writing, and teaching, I do not see them as idiosyncratic, and I am going to try to frame them in an accessible and open-ended way in order to encourage collective thinking and dialogue.

I want to start with the most naturalized—presumably because most commonsensical—aspect of the definition of transnational scholarship as it circulates in much of the literature. Precisely because it is so unremarked and taken for granted, this aspect of the transnational deserves interrogation. The quintessential criterion of transnational scholarship seems to be that the scholar physically cross national borders. That is, in much contemporary scholarship that purports to be "transnational," one can quickly ascertain that the scholar has traveled *outside of the U.S.* in order to carry out some research, whether that means working in the archives of a foreign library or interviewing subjects in another language. But the notion that in order to think, write, and investigate transnationally one simply needs a passport and a hefty travel account seems to me to border on cosmopolitanism. This flatfooted understanding of the transnational takes the term "transnational" far too literally, taking it to mean *only* the crossing of borders (regardless of theoretical commitments, interest in understanding the workings of transnational capitalism, interdisciplinarity, etc.).

But also, that literal conception of transnational scholarship can ironically open onto a newer form of American exceptionalism. If the critique of American exceptionalism—launched largely from critical American Studies—has taught us to frame the U.S. as an imperialist, nationalist and colonial power, then it should also remind us that those of us working on racial formations in the U.S. need to think about how *transnational capitalism* inscribes those formations. That is, when we insist that producing transnational scholarship means *leaving the U.S.*, then does that mean that knowledge projects that focus on U.S. formations should not ask transnational questions about those formations? Why should people, culture, racializations, literatures, produced within the U.S. not be studied within the larger context of transnational capitalism? In response to recent critiques that Chicana/o and Puerto Rican studies "have lost most of their explanatory power" because they are inherently unequipped to step up to the injunction to work *transnationally*, Juan Poblete has persuasively argued that "These perspectives forget a number of key facts, such as the historically colonial and still existing neocolonial relationship of the United States with Mexico and Puerto Rico as well as the extent to which these two national populations combined account for a significant part of the ever-increasing Latin American immigration to the United States" (xxvvi).

If we are too literal in our conception of "transnational"—taking that term to mean merely the crossing of borders—we might also be too optimistic, if not celebratory about what can be found under the rubric of the transnational. That is, the injunction toward transnational inclusiveness could

¹ See my essay "Where in the Transnational World are U.S. Women of Color?" in which I discuss the transnational turn in feminist studies.

transmogrify into the liberal projects of *inclusiveness, diversity, a new form of multiculturalism*, one keyed toward rendering the global South merely (and problematically) *visible* to a U.S. audience.² We can think here of Jennifer Abod's 2002 film *The Edge of Each Other's Battles: The Vision of Audre Lorde*, which documents the 1990 transnational conference on and tribute to Audre Lorde, held just two years before her death. The name of this conference was, significantly, *I am your Sister* and it drew to Boston from 23 countries 1200 activists including Lorde herself. Abod's brilliant film displays the conference organizers' incredible commitment to *not* using "the master's tools," as they worked tirelessly and innovatively to create a transnational space that would *not* lead to the kind of objectification, tokenization, marginalization, and essentialisms that Lorde devoted her lifework to critiquing. However, the film's footage of the conference and its inclusion of post-conference interviews with organizers and participants also makes clear that the conference threatened to implode precisely around national difference. Asian women, Asian-American Women, Latin-American Women, Arab women—all of these different groups can be seen in the film angrily speaking into a microphone from the floor (not the stage) and demanding recognition as they questioned their relegation to the audience and their absence from the podium. In one of the film's post-conference interviews, the Puerto Rican anthropologist and conference attendee Ana Ortiz explained quite passionately that transnational tensions were especially acute between U.S. Latinas and Latin American women, and that these tensions largely revolved around class differences and presuppositions about language. She described, for instance, how because the Latin American attendees were unaware of the U.S.'s violent history of disciplining subjects for speaking Spanish in workplaces and schools, they could only read non-bilingual Chicanas and Latinas as *pochas*.

That is, while the conference organizers meant for "transnationalism" to feature as immediately and naturally politically enabling and transformative, the conference ended up coming undone precisely around geopolitical seams. This is an insightful example of the difficulty of practicing transnational feminist politics for at least two reasons. First, it reminds us that *visibility* and *inclusion* of difference are never in themselves adequate to the task of, to cite Lorde, using difference as "a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" (107). There is nothing inherent in the literal conception of transnational feminism that is in itself transformative or even necessarily enabling. Second, the implosion of the conference, and especially Ortiz's suggestive analysis of it, helps remind us of one of the most crucial points in a strand of transnational feminist scholarship running from Gayatri Spivak through Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal. And that is that especially for those of us who work on gendered and racialized forms of oppression and subjectification, we have to be acutely cognizant of our different institutional locations of knowledge production, and that part and parcel of this awareness is the charge of thinking seriously about our own locations within the international division of labor.

We have to be especially cognizant of the ease with which the transnational turn can slip into a desire for multicultural/multinational difference. When Audre Lorde wrote her groundbreaking piece "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in 1979, it made sense for her to say that "we have been taught to either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change" (107). I would now update that assessment in order to account for the multicultural display of difference, especially by moving it across national borders, on the one hand, and the postmodern celebration of difference, on the other.³ Referring to the proliferation of this kind of celebration as "the difference revolution," Rey Chow insightfully captures its insidiousness.

What is significant in this modulation [writes Chow] is that culture itself has taken on an emancipatory function as opposed to various forms of oppression. In terms of topography, then, what is given (that is, what is oppressive) tends to be imagined in

² See George Yúdice's "Rethinking Area and Ethnic Studies" for a critique of multiculturalism as "legitimation discourse."

³ There are a number of excellent critiques of multiculturalism. See especially: Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield, eds. *Mapping Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Mino Moallem and Iain A. Boal, "Multicultural Nationalism and the Poetics of Inauguration," in *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 243-263. See also Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, which argues that "'Multiculturalism' supplements abstract political citizenship where the unrealizability of the political claims to equality become apparent: it is the national cultural form that seeks to unify the diversity of the United States through the integration of differences as *cultural* equivalents abstracted from the histories of racial inequality unresolved in the economic and political domains" (30).

terms of the stagnant, immobile, firmly-in-place, and unchanging, whereas the opposite tends to be viewed (by hybridity theorists) as inherently liberating.

The inherently liberating subjectivity within Chow's topography can be easily recognized by the cultural cache of several seductive key terms: heterogeneity, fluidity, hybridity, contradiction, mobility, abjection, and especially *intersectionality*. And if the bodies of racialized subjects are often referenced through these terms, the *minds* of racialized subjects often feature as uniquely primed for revolutionary subjectivity, a new form of standpoint epistemology. A good example of thinking a one to one correspondence between, for instance, quotidian life in the borderlands and transgressive standpoint epistemology can be seen in Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*. What the key terms used to mark transnational and borderlands difference as inherently transgressive have in common is their indelible dependence on what can only be a fantasy of a normative center inhabited by homogenous, static, racially pure, stagnant, uninteresting, and simple *sovereign* subjects. And so not only does the celebration of transnational complexity help reify the fantasy of a sovereign subject, it also threatens to transmute *itself* into a form of authenticity only here rendered by the notion of "Pure Impurities," to borrow a term from the independent scholar Dana Maya.

That notion of *pure impurities* also negatively affects the relationship between Chicana/o studies and Latina/o studies. We have to think innovatively and queerly about the (sometimes vexed) relations between specific Latino groups while simultaneously recognizing and respecting specific historical, economic, political, and cultural differences. In addition to the individual histories of Latin American and Caribbean countries of origin, there is also the matter of the specific ways in which different Latino groups characterize their presence in the U.S.—whether this characterization involves frameworks of internal colonialism, exile, diaspora, immigration, or indigenism. While scholars in pan-ethnic Latino Studies note the "shared legacies of colonialism, racism, displacement, and dispersion" (Acosta-Belén and Santiago 29) among Latinos, other scholars remain wary, if not skeptical, about this pan-ethnic approach to a politically fragmented and heterogeneous array of Latino groups. The favored cautionary example cited by skeptics has always been the case of Cuban Americans, a community thought of in terms of "in exile" and viewed as upwardly mobile, politically conservative, and clannish. And yet, the myth of a monolithic Cuban exile community homogenizes all Cuban Americans in a way that overlooks the specific waves of immigration patterns from Cuba and the ideological differences between different generations of Cuban Americans, while simultaneously ignoring the significant presence of Afro-Cubans for whom social mobility is more limited. It also forecloses a consideration of how *émigrés* and Cuban Americans such as Reynaldo Arenas, Achy Obejas, and Carmelita Tropicana have impacted and diversified the exile community's own sexual and gendered traditions. And this leads back to the original question about recognizing and respecting the historical, social, economic, and ideological differences between different U.S. Latino groups. The desire to foreground differences between Latino groups can itself lead to a homogenization of each Latino group as well as an over-reliance on national borders as fundamental markers of identity and ideology.

It seems to me that one way we can negotiate the transnational challenges I have outlined above is to use the best of the tools that queer theory has to offer. My qualification in that sentence (*the best of the tools*) is meant to acknowledge that queer theory itself presents its own set of challenges. For queer theory has been slow to learn from the important work of people like Jose Quiroga, Juana María Rodríguez, Jose Esteban Muñoz, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano—to name a few of the people who have over the past dozen or so years staged imaginative interventions against the heteronormativity of Latina/o studies *and* the racialized blind spots of queer theory. Too often queer theory continues to render race, ethnicity, and nation *niches* within a broader, and un-remarked white erotics. Elsewhere I have called this rendering "the-see-for-instance" footnote. From Eve Sedgwick to Judith Butler, queer theorist's engagement with queers of color, or with racial formation more broadly, is still too often contained in the tiny-fonted endnotes at the backs of books. And usually these footnotes are meant to reference this strange *thing* we call "*intersectionality*." You know what I'm talking about, you'll be reading one of the greatest hits in queer theory—something published in Duke's Series Q, no doubt—and you'll finally come upon some attention to racialization, but it comes in the form of a sentence that sounds something like, "thanks to women of color we now know that we have to address the *intersectionality* of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation." And that obligatory utterance will take you to an endnote that reads something like, "see, for instance, the groundbreaking works *This Bridge Called My Back*, The Combahee River Collective, and *Borderlands/La Frontera*."

I want to think at once harder and more flexibly about racialized subjectivity than the commonly-used shorthand approach known as “intersectionality” allows. Why this devotion to the rather lethargic and unimaginative trope of “intersectionality” when we know that we are capable of so much more, when we know that queer theory is quite adept and energetic when it comes to marshalling transgressive and imaginative theoretical apparatuses for queering dimensions like space or time, for queering people like Henry James. It seems to me that race, sexuality, and gender—to name the usual categories—are *much* too complex, unsettled, porous, mutually constitutive, unpredictable (and I *do* mean to be wordy here), incommensurable and dynamic, certainly too spatially and temporally contingent, to *ever* (even if only for an *instant*) travel independently of one another as they would *have to do* in order to be conceived of as intersecting, as eventually meeting one another here and there, crossing, colliding, passing, yielding, merging. “Intersectionality” is too spatially rigid and exacting a metaphor to employ when considering the ever dynamic and un-ending processes of subject formation. I don’t want to offer a better metaphor as an answer to this problem. What I want to suggest is that we be *wordy* and contingent, that we not look for a shorthand for naming or understanding or endnoting the confounding manifold ways that our bodies, our work, our desires are relentlessly interpellated by unequivalent social processes.

To point out the racialized limitations of queer theory, however, is not to suggest we abandon it. In fact, queer theory can help us navigate the transnational turn in ways that take us beyond the literalness with which the “transnational” is often understood. Queer theory’s healthy poststructuralist skepticism of empiricism and positivism—together with its commitment to social justice and keen awareness of the power differentials within knowledge production—makes it poised to help us out of the temptation to simply shine a light on the global south.

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