ABSTRACT

Transnationalism gives Intercultural Communication more than just an idiom for scattered migrant flows or for border crossing between sovereign nations. It also considers the affective domain accompanying re-location and dis-location, as social, economic, technological and political linkages between people continue to grow. Transnationalism has become a turgid term that sheds light on the political-economic-cultural aspects of the study of human and social movements. New transnational frames evaluate the territorial and ideological resilience of nation-states unevenly differentiated by their development policies, economic power, and military might. Theorizing transnationalism is an essential task within the field as it examines extant knowledge production in academia and presents possibilities of change from an economic regime, Neoliberal Globalization that has seen few viable alternatives, other than transnational advocacy networks. With transnationalism comes a deep acknowledgement that the power dynamics in the world have shifted therefore new linkages of ideas and knowledges need new scholarship that defines them.

TRANSNATIONALISM

Transnational Studies have effectively examined “flows of culture, ideas, capital and people” (Glick-Schiller, 2005, Vertovec, 2009). Transnationalism gives Intercultural Communication more than just an idiom for scattered migrant flows or for border crossing between sovereign nations. It also considers the affective domain accompanying re-location and dis-location, as social, economic, technological and political linkages between people continue to grow. Transnationalism has become a turgid term that sheds light on the political-economic-cultural aspects of the study of human and social movements at the (inter)national, global and national levels by questioning the stability, applicability, and politically-wrought past suggested by these terms. New transnational frames evaluate the territorial and ideological resilience of nation-states unevenly differentiated by their development policies, economic power, and military might. All the while Neoliberal Globalization holds sway as the primary economic order, mobilized by the Washington Consensus protocols via Bretton Woods’ organizations: the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Scholte, 2005).

Amidst this mutability, theories of cultural imperialism and political economy would only provide a partial picture. As we pay further attention to possibilities of the transnational in Intercultural Communication, the field will absorb or redefine itself with a kind of self-reflexivity and solidarity as in contiguous fields: Anthropology, Sociology, Literature, Political Science, and Cultural Studies from which there is a creative borrowing of the term.

Early iterations of transnationalism, spurred by the exuberance of globalization, rung the death knell of nation-states. There had been a classical tendency in the social sciences to
understand the nation-state as the arbiter of all mobilizations, also known as *methodological nationalism* which the advent of transnationalism has shaken (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller, 2003). Current theorists perceive a complicated role for nation-states and articulate *transnational* as a theoretical opening, as a possibility for social transformation, and to form unity against oppression (Grewal and Kaplan, 2001). In processes of capital and diaspora, Chin and Smith (2015) too propose a deeper level of engagement of the nation-state at the control, negotiation and intermediary stages. While celebrating roots and routes, we cannot obscure the power--military, economic, and cultural, that some nation-states wield over others. US exceptionalism, for instance, has revived scholarly debates on domination, imperialism and empire via the contemporary language of civil liberties, citizenship, and human rights (Streeby, 2009; Glick Schiller, 2005).

Theorizing transnationalism has become an essential task within the field as it examines extant knowledge production in academia and presents possibilities of change from an economic regime that has seen few viable alternatives, other than the incidence of transnational advocacy networks--TANs. Transnationalism has given meaning to struggles and social movements that bring debates about social justice, war and diasporas into sharper relief providing a vital counterpoint to neoliberal globalization. Scholars identify how transnationalism manifests itself in the North American academy. “First, it circulates widely as a more useful term to describe migration at the present time…In emphasizing labor migration this approach leaves out other factors in the globalization of labor” (Grewal and Kaplan, 2001, 664). Almost as a response, Kay (2005) examines the conditions under which North American trade unions (NAALC) establish stable trans-relations in order to stall the hegemonic practices of global capital (NAFTA) as they impact wage, worker rights and employment. Hegde’s (2011) anthology, Circuits of Visibility serves as ode to making visible the gendered, structural discrepancies of the global economy through labor relations, alternate citizenship, celebrity consumer cultures, migrant dislocations and sexual violence. The nation-state, though ripped through by the pressures of its inability to provide the ‘good life’ by equitably distributing the gains of globalization to its citizens, and of adhering to transplanetary market principles, is able to sustain its coherence in the new world order.

In Campt’s words, “the mobility that marks the hegemony of global capitalism” (2011, e131) or neoliberal globalization is the hallmark of transnationalism. Campt exhorts the reader to change our focus from transnational practice as “an object” or set of identifiable relations to what the transnational “does or might do” increasing its capacity to incorporate situated struggles and resistances marked by intolerance, labor shifts, and governmentalist repression globally. Campt takes the cue from Stuart Hall’s 1996 essay, ‘When was the “post-colonial”’ Thinking at the limit,’ in which Hall interrogates the historical and political applicability of another influential term, the postcolonial, that academics have allowed easy slippage in their theoretical and practical work. This cautionary tale is similarly instructive for scholars who use (or overuse) transnationalism as an easy frame in their study without acknowledging the political and intellectual antecedents of the term.

Inspired by Stuart Hall’s questioning stance, Campt wants scholars mindful of the transnational moment to turn the gaze inward to reflect upon “the social and political implications of our own critical discourse” (2011,130e). Extending the inward gaze, in a study of human rights videos uploaded to social media sites, Moorti (2011) detects a failed moment of digital activism and cosmopolitanism. She calls for a new politics and ethics of seeing that does not impose Western modernist modes of viewing thereby erasing “historical differences and
inequalities” from struggles of brutal governmentality in sites such as Oaxaca, Mexico and Myanmar. For online human rights videos to be emancipatory, they must be rid of Enlightenment epistemologies including Kantian universalism as they do not properly acknowledge the geopolitical and social disparities that dog postcolonial contexts.

Earlier, during Arab Spring, 2011, Facebook or Twitter were given credit for creating revolutions. Hindsight and scholarship has shown how unexamined that claim to digital transnationalism is. The networked citizen enjoys transnetwork access by engaging digital technologies, but more work needs to be accomplished before political repression is quelled and resistances fueled.

Civil society comprises non-government organizations (NGOs) that facilitate transnational North-South partnerships in wide ranging issues from environment to child rights. While the corporate world sees the emergence of the global managerial class, feminist theory has directed closer scrutiny of NGO networks on the propensity to create a unique cadre of celebrity activists who get fêted as singular heroes by the global left press, neglectful that activist work is collective. Nagar and Lock Swarr (2010) assert, that “all activism is collectively constituted…the labor of the activist cannot be abstracted from the community” (p.1). Another connectivity that globalization has facilitated is the segmented consumer of a certain kind of American for whom globally marketed products have become attractive. This kind of consumption has a North to South flow, where the market in the free trade logic becomes the global South’s youthful and burgeoning upwardly-mobile populations. One such circuit of reproduction is embodied in Mattel’s Barbie, which may seem innocuous in the mighty array of transnational market-icons but becomes significant for the consumer fantasies it sets in motion around the world (Grewal, 2005).

Nation-states seemingly come in the way of the advent of human exchange and fluidity, while borders assume a definite meaning—amelioratory for some and constraining for others. The importance accorded to borders is disproportionate to the meanings they hold for human beings. People do not desist from fomenting relationships in the presence of borders. North and South Korea, India and Pakistan, republics of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, are some modern nation-states divided by political, historical, and imperial practices of violence seek family reunions, treaties of economic-political significance, religious exchanges, saber-rattling skirmishes, all despite an effort at insulating peoples and policies in the face of historical commonalities and desires. Yet politicians police borders with regularity, by imposing an exceptionalist legal system that welcomes some sojourners and excludes those without social capital, among them refugees and diaspora of the global South. During the November 2015 Paris attacks French President Hollande in his national address post-tragedy declared that he will secure the borders, laying bare the assumption that the influx of refugees from war-torn Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq into Europe is primarily a national security dilemma above all else.

In the wake of threats of extreme violence around the world, nation-states identify borders—the liminal space of human exchange as the chief location of jurisdictional power. Chicana and lesbian activist Gloria Anzaldua’s term borderlands captures the cultural and affective import of borders, the in-between hybrid space that is neither Mexico nor United States but subsumes both heritages. More importantly, she questions the authority of the Eurocentric state that claims indigenous lands which are not so much a loss of capital as it is a loss of cultural identity for native communities (Anzaldua, 1987). The modernist, security state has tried to maintain its authority over the borders but transnational exchanges and social fields have overtaken that authority although becoming contested and dangerous terrain that transnational
actors have to traverse. Digital spaces have allowed transnational activists to operate with greater safety due to the constraints of cross-border nationalism, violence and surveillance when gender and sexuality intersect (Baer, 2015). Post 9/11, nationalism, security and borders have implicit importance in the Global North.

Scholars have debated the challenges immigration of all kind have placed on the verity of the nation-state (Vertovec, 2009, Sassen, 1998). Almost as a response to prior academic reflection, we are witness to a populist argument during an election year when Republicans and Democrats are debating and laying claim to oppositional positions on sensitive political issues. Current news reports that Governors of 29 states, mostly Republican, have declared that they will forbid the entry of Syrian refugees. This cry, based in emergent religious nationalism, echoes French President Hollande, with an important point of divergence. France will accept 30,000 Syrian refugees this year while the US will allow 10,000, displaying variable commitment to globally shared humanitarian principles. Political establishments of both nations do not address the provenance of the historical conditions that create this mass exodus. The gubernatorial opposition to federal law, as a homegrown response to transnational security imperatives tests the cohesivity of the nation-state in which US states defy decisions that honor shared human rights treaties, allowing safe passage to non-state or refugee populations--an anti-cosmopolitanism of sorts.

Religion has traditionally been a silent dimension of refugee migration and rehabilitation. There is scant public debate on religion and spirituality unless it is connected with terrorism and security. The United Nations recognizes religious persecution as a foremost cause of displacement. However, religion’s role in providing emotional, cognitive support, as a form of political expression, and as a vehicle for community, group identity is largely sidelined (Gozdzia and Shandy, 2002). Drawing from studying Mozambican refugees in Tongogara Refugee Camp in Zimbabwe, Mabe (1994) believes that the spiritual well-being of refugees is a flagrantly ignored aspect of refugee life as they can derive great comfort in maintaining spiritual practices when finally settling into a receiving country. Migrant transnational practice has an impact on religious phenomena and identity (Vertovec, 2009, p.28). Mass human and technological mobility brings with it modern practices of spirituality and variance between organized religion in the home shores and host cultures of migrant communities.

Transnationalism is after all not just a single act of making the invisible visible, but also of taking back, recouping, and vigorously questioning connections of the state and citizenship; of re-conceptualizing identity; understanding technologically mediated relationships; and commodified desires. Neoliberalism must give way in the same way the age of Empire did. Resistances to the World Trade Organization by World Social Forums, for instance, allow us to envisage different rules of engagement. Transnationalism then, is not about an already defined set of relationships but about imagining how power can fashion new subjects and resistances (Campt, 2011, Grewal and Kaplan, 2001). With transnationalism comes a deep acknowledgement that the power dynamics in the world have shifted and are constantly in flux therefore new linkages of ideas and knowledges need new scholarship that define them.
References


Further Reading


Author Biography

Priya Kapoor is Associate Professor in the International and Global Studies Department at Portland State University. She is currently working on a project that explores the intersections of community radio, transnationalism, climate change and crisis. Her recent research is published in Spanish and English, in journal *Revista Mediaciones* (2014) titled, “The Challenge of an Earth Democracy: The relevance of transnational feminism and Vandana Shiva as a transnational actor.” Another recent publication features in an NCA Best Book award-winning volume on the Occupy movement (2013), “A Genealogy of Occupy within Transnational Contexts, and Communication Research.” Dr. Kapoor’s areas of scholarly interest are Intercultural Communication, Critical and Cultural Theory, Media, Discourse Analysis and Ethnography.