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## Book Review: Transnational Immigrant Children & Youth in New York City

### **Cover Page Footnote**

**Marcela Ossa-Parra, PhD**, is an Assistant Professor of bilingual education in the Elementary and Early Childhood Education Department at CUNY Queens College. Her research focuses on bilingual instructional approaches, and literacy education for bilingual students. She is Colombian and has three children who are growing up transnational.

## Book Review

# Transnational Immigrant Children & Youth in New York City

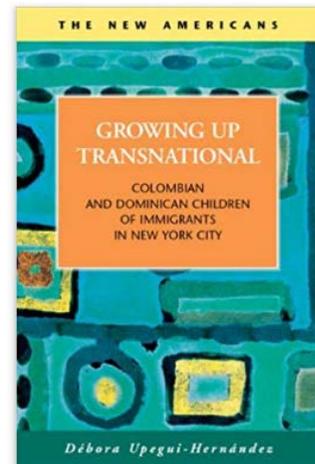
**Marcela Ossa-Parra**

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### Book Reviewed:

Upegui-Hernández, Débora. (2014). *Growing Up Transnational: Colombian and Dominican Children of Immigrants in New York City*. El Paso, TX: LFB Scholarly Publishing, LLC. ISBN-13: 978-1593326173; ISBN-10: 1593326173 270 pages

*Growing Up Transnational* (Upegui-Hernández, 2014) is situated in a broader sociological study of the sons and daughters of immigrants who arrived in New York City after 1965 (Waters, Mollenkopf, & Kasinitz, 1999). In 1965 new immigration laws were passed, and quotas that limited the admission of immigrants from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds were removed. This opened the doors to racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse immigrants from Asia and the Global South. There has been interest in understanding the complex dynamics between these new generations of immigrants and the layered racial, economic, social, and political structures in the United States. Simple assimilationist views conveyed in the melting pot metaphor that characterized immigration sentiments in the early 20th century do not capture the complex negotiation process or the structural barriers that immigrants and their children are facing today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



The outlook on the future for these new immigrant-origin generations has been viewed as less optimistic and straightforward, than it was for European immigrants who arrived before 1965. Issues of race, as well as changes in the global economy, have been theorized to impact second generation of immigrants by placing them in diverse trajectories depending on their backgrounds and resources (Zhou, 1997). There is concern about the barriers that these new immigrant-origin generations will face due to their parents' lack of influence in the host country: "Kids growing up in immigrant families have parents with less English facility, less education, less political clout, and less income than those growing up in native families" (Mollenkopf, 2005, p. 107).

As these descendants of immigrants came of age in the 1990's questions regarding their incorporation into the U.S. society were raised. *Growing Up Transnational* is based on data from the Immigrant Second Generation in Metropolitan New York (ISGMNY) study which sought to address these questions in the context of a gateway city such as New York City (Waters, Mollenkopf, & Kasinitz, 1999). The ISGMNY study was aimed at characterizing the experiences of this new generation of sons and daughters of immigrants. It included young people between 18 and 32 years old born in families belonging to the following ethnic groups: Colombian, Ecuadorean, Peruvian, Anglophone Afro-Caribbean, Chinese, and Russian. Additionally, three native-born groups (African-American, Puerto Rican, and White) were included in the study for comparison purposes. Waters, Mollenkopf, and Kasinitz collected survey and interview data to characterize participants' school experiences, labor market outcomes, and social incorporation. The research done by these scholars contributed to historical, political, and cultural scholarly discussions on how the trajectories of these immigrant-origin youth were shaped by racial and social class structures.

### **The Transnational Experiences of Children of Immigrants**

Although the ISGMNY collected data from various immigrant groups, Débora Upegui-Hernández only used the data of two sub-groups (Colombian and Dominican immigrant-origin young adults in an age range between 18 and 32). The main purpose was to conduct a secondary analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative data collected on these two groups. In this secondary analysis Upegui-Hernández added a new perspective to the data by adopting a transnational lens to understand the experiences of these youth. Three research questions guided her study:

- What implications does their parents' home country have on the negotiation of social identities among Colombian and Dominican children of immigrants?
- To what extent do Colombian and Dominican children of immigrants maintain emotional, social, political, and economic ties to their parents' home country? What affects their willingness and ability to maintain transnational ties with their family, friends, community, and other members of their transnational social field?
- How do gender, race, and social class shape the life experiences of Colombian and Dominican children of immigrants in the United States?

Upegui-Hernández adopted a mixed-methods approach that included the secondary analysis of the ISGMNY study's quantitative data from phone interviews with Dominican (393) and Colombian (169) sons and daughters of immigrants, as well as in-depth qualitative interviews with a sub-sample of 25 Dominican and 18 Colombian respondents. The survey data provided information about how prevalent the different trends identified in the interviews were among Dominican and Colombian respondents, while the interview data provided a nuanced understanding of the participants' lived experiences. By analyzing these different data sources from the ISGMNY study, the author was able to check her assumptions and avoid making overgeneralizations.

Through a transnational perspective, Upegui-Hernández challenged the establishment of rigid boundaries between the country of origin and the host country.

This lens enabled her to consider the interplay between different cultures and value systems in identity formation among immigrant-origin youth. Furthermore, by focusing on these youth experiences, the author brought their voices into the conversation, and contributed a more nuanced perspective on their strengths and struggles.

The book starts with a literature review in which Upegui-Hernández explores the research on migration and psychology in relation to the incorporation of immigrants into host communities and their identity formation. The author adopts a transnational lens that problematizes psychological definitions of ethnic and national identities, and provides a more complex and fluid understanding of immigrants' identity formation. The second chapter presents the research methods and analytical framework. This is followed by three chapters each focusing on a research question. Chapter 3, *Negotiating Self and Identity*, discusses transnational identity negotiation processes as experienced by participants. Chapter 4, *Maintaining Transnational Relationships*, focuses on how immigrant families keep ties with extended families in their countries of origin, and explores the factors involved in second generation immigrants' continuing these ties after they grow up. Chapter 5, *Encountering Social Structures*, focuses on different moments of transition in the lives of these immigrant-origin youth (e.g., finishing high school, choosing who to marry), and how they navigated diverse social, economic, and racial structures. The book concludes with a discussion chapter where the author analyzes theoretical implications of proposing a transnational approach to understanding the identity formation and social incorporation experiences of second generation immigrants.

### **Growing Up Between Worlds**

Colombian and Dominican participants had similar experiences regarding the ways they negotiated their transnational identities and ties with their parents' countries of origin. Identity construction for these young people involved a fluid movement between different *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1994 as cited by Upegui-Hernández). *Habitus* refers to the "dispositions and practices that shape one's behavior and are based on past experience" (p. 205). Participants in this study conveyed their critical awareness of different and sometimes conflicting norms, values, and expectations in their homes and greater social context. For example, they rejected their parents' racial attitudes and racism but valued their family values. They valued civil liberties and diversity in the United States but disliked its individualism and focus on the nuclear family rather than on the extended family. Instead of being confused or alienated by these different value systems, participants embraced them as part of their transnational identities. They were able to tolerate ambiguity and understand different value and normative systems in a more contextualized manner.

The opportunity to fluidly move between *habitus* gave participants a more complex understanding of themselves and the contexts they inhabited. Participants' socio-cultural and psychological space spanned their parents' places of origin and New York City. Upegui-Hernández adopted Anzaldúa's (2002) idea of *Nepantla*, which is a Nahuatl word connoting *in between* or *a space in the middle*, to characterize her participants' experiences. Upegui-Hernández characterizes *Nepantla*, as a space that enables transnational youth to develop a bifocal perspective in which they view reality

from the point of view of their parents' home country culture, as well as from the cultural perspectives in which they have been socialized in the United States. According to her analysis *Nepantla* is a space where the transnational person realizes that she is not from here or there but is rather *in-between*. This may be painful and confusing, but is also a space to grow and develop an enhanced awareness of cultures and more complex frames of reference to understand them. Participants in Upegui-Hernandez' study expressed less confusion and more affirmation for their *in-between* experiences. The author clarifies that they "felt fortunate and proud of being able to draw from multiple cultural frameworks which may contribute to their overall optimism about life and resiliency despite limited circumstance" (p. 205).

The experience of *Nepantla* was enhanced by the participants' opportunities to maintain transnational ties. Many of the participants in the study had opportunities to visit their extended families in their parents' countries of origin and establish strong relationships with them. These ties started during their childhood when their parents took them to visit their families in Colombia and the Dominican Republic. As they grew up, many continued nurturing these transnational ties by travelling with their own children to introduce them to their extended families, doing tourism in their countries of origin, or sending remittances to relatives in need. Upegui-Hernández underscores the relevance of understanding remittances in the context of emotional ties. People choose to send money to their relatives and friends in the context of meaningful and reciprocal relationships.

### **Navigating Unequal Social Structures**

While Colombian and Dominican sons and daughters of immigrants had similar experiences negotiating transnational identities and ties, there were differences in their access to good quality education. Upegui-Hernández demonstrates the impactful role of a good quality education in shaping the future of these youth. Colombians had access to better schools than Dominicans, and this positively influenced their opportunities to finish high school and get a college degree. Furthermore, Dominican children attending low quality schools were more prone to skip class, and their risks of teenage pregnancies were increased.

Access to good quality schools is mediated by the neighborhood where children live. Colombians were better off financially than Dominican participants, and this enabled them to find homes in neighborhoods that were less segregated and had lower crime rates. These differences in opportunities for Colombians and Dominicans were related to their backgrounds before coming to the United States. Colombians came from urban backgrounds and many were professionals, while Dominicans came from rural backgrounds. Although Colombians were not able to find jobs in their professions, they had access to better jobs than their Dominican counterparts.

Upegui-Hernández also considered these socio-economic differences in combination with race. Colombians are typically lighter skinned than Dominicans, since the predominant race in Colombia is derived from the *mestizaje* between Spaniards and Indians. Regarding racism, participants in this study discussed their parents' fears of them dating and marrying people with darker skin than theirs. Deciding who to marry

were mediated by questions about how family heritage and social mobility would be impacted by these decisions.

In *Growing Up Transnational*, Upegui-Hernández conveys a more complex and layered picture of the experiences of Colombian and Dominican immigrant-origin youth. Her analysis of the ISGMNY survey and interview data contributes a transnational perspective that captures the *Nepantla* experiences of this new second generation. Although, there are structural factors in which race, class, gender, and ethnicity intersect to create different layers of oppression, Upegui-Hernández provides an alternative narrative that highlights these youths' voices and their resiliency. Analyzing secondary data is challenging since it is necessary to adapt the research questions to what can be answered with the existing data.

Perhaps, Upegui-Hernández would have delved even more deeply into the experiences of her participants if she had had the opportunity to interview them herself. However, she was able to achieve a comprehensive picture by combining the survey and interview data from the ISGMNY survey. Furthermore, her complex and well-articulated theoretical framework in which she discusses psychological and sociological perspectives provided an excellent conceptual background to achieve a deep understanding of the transnational experiences of these Colombian and Dominican children of immigrants. Researchers, interested in transnational studies and immigration from a sociological and psychological perspective, will benefit from reading this book, since it captures the voices and experiences of second generation immigrant youth in relation to their transnational identity construction. Although this book is primarily directed at a technical audience familiar with diverse theoretical backgrounds, parents and teachers will also find relevant insights in this book to understand the experiences of second generation immigrant youth. This is possible since Upegui-Hernández does an excellent job of integrating the different theories with the youths' voices.

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