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Hidden Knowing of working-class transnational Mexican families in schools:

Bridge-building, Nepantlera knowers

Ethnography and Education

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Abstract

Reframing immigrant families as transnationals, this article highlights transnational families' ways of knowing. This study is based on a three year, multi-sited critical ethnographic set of case studies of four families in the US and Mexico. Transnational families in this study demonstrated Nepantlera knowing, or liminal, bridge-building knowing which continually endures remarkable transformations through oftentimes ambiguous and conflicting circumstances. Families experienced the world as liminal knowers, or people who lived the ambiguities of being in-between, and as shapeshifters who navigated that in-betweenness. They also knew the world through their bridge-building efforts, and through the risks, pain, and satisfaction of bridge-building work. Families managed multiple tensions of knowing in such an in-between space, and they were path-breaking in the ways they reached out to disparate groups by bridging differences. This article includes recommendations for educators and researchers toward creating a more democratic and equitable society by drawing from Nepantlera knowing.

Keywords: Transnationalism; Mexican families; ways of knowing; Nepantla; immigration; US schools

Working-class immigrant students and their families are often understood as deficient and in need of being fixed (Menchaca 1997; Valencia 1997; Valencia 2010). Countering these stereotypes, researchers demonstrate how working-class immigrant students are not culturally deficient but have historically accumulated knowledge (González, et al. 2005) and cultural capital (Yosso 2005) that are valued differently from Whiteman society wherein hegemonic behavioral norms of White thinking pervade (Urrieta 2009). Because children of immigrants represent a fast-growing part of the population in the US and in many other parts of the world, educators need more tools and understandings for working effectively with this population. Transnationalism describes the world's limitless and inherently unbordered social practices, recognizing how they are situated among the structures which have governing power over those practices (Kasun In press). Transnationalism not only implies physical movement across borders but also emotional ties across borders (Aranda 2006; Wolf 2002), which, in this case, includes epistemological senses that are informed by knowing that spans borders. Reframing the transnational abilities and experiences most immigrant students have support the different understandings of transnational students (Kasun 2013).

Based on three years of ethnographic research, this article illustrates how the transnational, working-class, Mexican origin families in this study used ways of knowing that were generally hidden from the view of educators in US schools (Sánchez 2007) despite the richness and importance of these experiences on families' ways of knowing and being in the world. In part, these ways of knowing are hidden as a form of self-protection from a society that has been racist toward Mexicans ever since their territory was reassigned as the U.S. (Acuña 2010). Ways of knowing are the orientations people draw from to understand and act in the world around them (Kasun 2012). A *Nepantlera* is one who bridges differences and survives and sometimes thrives

among difficult contradictions and ambiguities (Anzaldúa 2002). Nepantlera knowing manifested itself in the ways family members made decisions, navigated ambiguities, and worked toward building bridges of understanding among people, all within in the context of their liminal positioning. This knowing manifested itself from school communities to communities spanning borders, despite and because of the differences in these various locations.

This article explores the literature surrounding educational research and transnationalism as well as the lens of Nepantlera knowing, by examining the ways of knowing of Mexican-origin transnational students and their families. I next describe methods and findings of the study as well as their implications within education. I conclude with recommendations for educators and researchers regarding future work in the field of transnationalism and ways of knowing.

Educational research and transnationalism

Educational research has begun to document the lived (Brittain 2009) and often hidden experiences (Sánchez 2007) of transnational students. Using transnationalism rather than immigration theory alone allows for more expansive interpretations of transnationals' experiences and ways of knowing. Sánchez (2007) found that the transnational Latinas in her study were seldom understood as transnational by their teachers, regardless of grade level, despite their frequent return visits to Mexico and their deep participation in community during these visits. Some researchers show how return visits to sending countries strengthen transnationals through the ways they are welcomed back and cared for, a respite from the often racialized travails they face in daily life in the US (Martínez and Urrieta 2009; Sánchez 2004; Sánchez 2007; Urrieta and Martínez 2011). These trips help people feel a sense of worth and value that is often negated within their roles in the US where they are often mistreated for their language, racial, and class backgrounds (Valenzuela 1999). Transnational experiences can ebb

and flow in a person's life course (Ek 2009; R.T. Smith 2006); however, such experiences remain part of the fabric of transnationals' life experiences (Sepúlveda III 2011). These experiences may imbue transnational students with broad senses regarding globalization, civic participation, and education (Knight 2011).

The interpretive framework of transnationalism (Khagram and Levitt 2008) is a tool to reconceptualize the ways we think about people who engage in transnational practices and the activities which constitute lives lived across borders, including visits back-and-forth and various forms of communication that keep emotional connections alive. Transnationalism supports the rethinking of social phenomena and the disruption of embedded nationalism and its influence on the ways the social sciences have been constructed through nationalist discourses (Sassen 1998) by both shifting sites of research to cross borders and analytic constructs that span borders as well. Researchers who embrace the concept of 'transnationalism' (Appadurai 2008; Basch, et al. 1994; Khagram and Levitt 2008; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Sassen 1998) tend to agree upon the phenomena which inform the concept of transnationalism. They include: expanding global migration, increased flow of labor and goods, shifting and often weaker role of the state, institutions bearing upon global flows, increased telecommunications spanning borders, changes in technologies which allow for increased movement of people across borders, and the influence of neoliberal economic policies.

Nepantlera knowing as a lens

Authors describing transnational experiences have drawn from Western constructs, such as 'cultural repertoires,' (Levitt 2009) and have attempted to relay these complexities through concepts such as 'simultaneity' of activities and feelings in multiple contexts where life experiences from different countries overlap and cross borders (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004).

The notion of those who live in the state of Nepantla—Nepantleras—is a necessary additional lens to understand transnationalism. The word Nepantla is Aztec for being liminal, or in-between and has been applied to describe the location of where people who straddle cultures reside (Mora 2008). Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa (2002; 1999) built much of her work around this Aztec concept. She explains that Nepantla is a ‘liminal state between worlds, between realities, between systems of knowledge, between symbology systems. This liminal borderland terrain, or passageway, this interface, is what I call ‘Nepantla’ (Anzaldúa 2000b). Indeed, transnationals, by virtue of living between nations, necessarily find themselves betwixt and between (Turner 1967) many terrains—both real and metaphorical—navigating a host of ambiguities born out of often conflicting laws, customs, conventions, and ceremonies between countries.

Nepantla extends existing understanding of transnationalism in its keen focus on the ability to live through intense ambiguities for long and often undetermined periods of time, rather than forcing a Western interpretation of the world as being logical and something that is fully apprehended by the mind alone (Anzaldúa 2002). This concept has been brought to academic discourse by Chicana feminist theorists (Anzaldúa 1999; Keating 2006; Mora 2008), among others, as a way to highlight both the importance of the knowing of subaltern people and their embodied ‘theory in the flesh,’ or their subaltern understanding of the world based on lived experience (Moraga 1981). Anzaldúa explains that by understanding one’s liminal experience of Nepantla, one can allow space for ambiguities, often painful contradictions, and ‘zones of possibility’ (1999) toward bridge building. In *This bridge we call home*, a person who successfully navigates these zones of possibility is a Nepantlera (Anzaldúa 2002).

Ana Louise Keating (2006) elaborates on Anzaldúa’s notion of Nepantleras:

Nepantleras are threshold people: they move within and among multiple, often conflicting, worlds and refuse to align themselves exclusively with any single individual, group, or belief system. This refusal is not easy; Nepantleras must be willing to open themselves to personal risks and potential woundings which include, but are not limited to, self-division, isolation, misunderstanding, rejection, and accusations of disloyalty. Yet the risk-taking has its own rewards, for Nepantleras use their movements among divergent worlds to develop innovative, potentially transformative perspectives. They respect the differences within and among the diverse groups and, *simultaneously*, posit commonalities. (2006).

Keating shows Nepantleras are able to hold many ideas and beliefs in tension. They risk being misunderstood and hurt due to the strength of the Nepantlera's willingness to understand differently while attempting to build bridges. Nepantleras are not themselves the bridges but rather they are in pursuit of finding and creating bridges of understanding, able to make sense of differing perspectives, while not necessarily embracing them in order to achieve meaningful communication (Koegeler-Abdi 2013). The Nepantlera is able to both see through the eyes of the "other" and establish alliances through this meaningful communication (Koshy 2006).

Transnational students have the potential to exhibit many of these Nepantlera knowing characteristics based on their shifts and navigations of ambiguities. A Nepantlera has the ability to shapeshift, or experience one's identity and agency as 'flowing and in process,' and not fragmented or damaged (Anzaldúa 2000a). Shapeshifting is a possible form of knowing and being for transnational students and their families as well which can enable them to participate meaningfully in multiple communities and spaces, including school spaces.

This study examines the question, ‘What are the ways of knowing of Mexican-origin transnational students and their families?’ Four working-class, Mexican origin transnational families served as case studies which provided rich data spanning the US and Mexican border. Their experiences indicated a greater degree of transnationalism than one-way adaptation as suggested by much of the literature regarding immigration (Sánchez and Kasun 2012). Tools of transnational theory as well as subaltern theorizing, specifically notions surrounding *Nepantla* and *Nepantleras* became necessary lenses in light of the data collected. *Nepantlera* knowing was one major theme which emerged, and this is highlighted throughout the subsequent sections surrounding findings and discussion.

Methods

This article draws from the study of four Mexican-origin families’ experiences and ways of knowing in both the US and Mexico and how their ways of knowing were manifested as related to US schooling. To this end, I employed critical ethnography, ‘critical theory in action,’ (Madison 2011) or an approach wherein the ethnographer interrogates her positionality, maintains a dialogic relationship with research participants who are typically positioned as ‘other,’ all the while working toward social change related to the issues she explores in her research. As a critical ethnographer, I was both reflective (Foley 2002) about my positionality as an anti-racist white person and reflexive about what my relationships meant to the families in this study and what they meant to me. Being bilingual and having lived in Mexico in roles ranging from student, researcher, to employee of various schools, did not mean that I was somehow ‘the same’ as the people who participated in my research. Aware of the long history of (White) researchers’ exploitation of people of colour (L.T. Smith 2006), I attempted to serve as a cultural broker, especially as one who could demystify the hidden curriculum of schooling in the

US (Apple 2004) to support the families' goals of education for their children. I was able to assume this role in large part because I had taught public school English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in the Washington, DC area research for seven years. I also tried to be transparent about the goals of my research with families by sharing my agenda of hope for transformation by fuller inclusion of transnational students in schools. In a very small part, this hope included my work with students and families in my study.

Methods included: participant observation (Spradley 1980), ethnographic interviews (Rubin and Rubin 2005), oral histories (Chase 2005), and photograph review with participants. I conducted multi-sited critical ethnographic case studies (Foley 2002) from 2009 to 2012, in Mexico and in the Washington, DC area. Each of the four families constituted a case study, as each family was a 'bounded system' of study (Stake 1995). These Mexican-origin families were working-class and resided primarily in the US. They hailed from two sending towns in Mexico in the states of Jalisco and Michoacán, both with histories of sending labor to the US. At the time of study, the families were participating in at least bi-annual return trips to Mexico.

These four families, all US-based, formed the core set of participants for my data collection. All families were headed by two parents and had three children; all the adults were either formally employed or had been in the past. The elder children also earned money to pitch in, as the families were all struggling financially in the US. Each family had lost income since the economic downturn of 2008, and three of the families lived in mobile homes. In the US, I formally interviewed family members, in either Spanish or English—depending on their preference—at least twice for about 90 minutes. I participated in daily life activities in participants' homes, such as meal preparation and sharing meals, watching television together, engaging the Internet and social media, and in phone conversations. I also attended school

events with families such as multicultural nights and visits to family members at schools. I was called for assistance at times regarding the death of loved ones in Mexico and for advice about how to manage the apprehension of one participant's husband at the US border. While in Mexico, I attended annual patron saint festivals in the sending communities with study participants and made other visits as well. I interviewed family and community members, many of whom had transnational experiences as well, for additional context. I also visited some of the schools which students attended and interviewed teachers from some of the students' schools in order to gauge perspectives of the people who worked in the schools where the families in my study attended.

Figure 1. Participating families (insert Figure 1 here)

All my materials, which included interviews, observation notes, and notes from events I attended in Mexico and the US, were transcribed and sorted for emergent themes (Emerson, et al. 1995). Emergent themes included among multiple families included: courage despite cultural barriers and borders, straddling cultures, ambiguity, bilingualism, bridging cultures, resistance to cultural expectations, spiritual resilience, and pioneering sense about one's positioning. I then used pattern coding, wherein I aggregated subsets of codes into larger thematic codes through visual graphing and multiple reviews of first round codes (Miles and Huberman 1994; Saldaña 2009). Codes were sorted until they were all placed into their most salient categories. The largest categories included chained knowing, sobrevivencia (survivalist) knowing, and Nepantlera knowing. Multiple themes were shared among all families (Merriam 1998).

A limitation of this study is that it is dependent on my subjective lenses as researcher with my unique positioning and background; it would be difficult to exactly replicate this study. This is a small group from only one country background. It would be important to see if similar

results would be found by other researchers with Mexican-origin families as well as families from other nationalities.

Findings

The families in this study exhibited Nepantlera knowing in two clear ways. First, they experienced and understood the world as liminal knowers, or people who lived the ambiguities of being in-between, and as shapeshifters who navigated that in-betweenness. Second, they knew the world through their bridge-building efforts, and through the risks, pain, and satisfaction of the bridge-building work. They managed multiple tensions of being in such an in-between space, and they were path-breaking in the ways they reached out to disparate groups by bridging differences. To illustrate, I share families' liminality of experiences, including the shapeshifting they did as part of this liminal knowing. I then offer examples of bridge-building Nepantlera work and discuss the implications of how these exemplify Nepantlera knowing and implications for schooling.

Experiencing and understanding the world through liminality and shapeshifting

All family members revealed various forms of liminality in their knowing. Family members found themselves betwixt and between in terms of their *knowing* in decision making processes about deciding which country their families' lives should be spent and conceptualizing their families' futures over borders, among many other things. I begin by drawing from one mother's experiences to highlight the everyday liminality of experiences and ways of knowing. I conclude the section with a portrait of the liminal shapeshifting of youth in return visits to San Gabriel, Michoacán.

Lupita Medrano

Lupita Medrano, a childcare provider and mother of three, was not convinced about her life choices. From the time she decided as an adolescent to move to the US to the time of my research, she continually shifted among senses of her knowing. She risked her life to cross the border, a risk based on a future whose end she could not anticipate. *‘Yo decía si me quedo va a ser para estar con mi familia y después casarme y después seguir la vida de ellos, o no casarme y estar con mi familia también toda la vida, entonces yo quería hacer algo más,’* or ‘I said if I stay it’s going to be with my family and then to get married and then follow their lives, or not get married and stay with my family my whole life, so I wanted to do something more.’ Lupita included an economic calculus in her decision making as well, aware that life options would be limited by the economic forces which sent over half the men from her hometown to Mexico (Donato, Hiskey, Durand, & Massey, 2010). Her sense of ‘something more’ was an ambiguity, an unknown future whose outcome remained questionable to her, twenty years after her arrival to the US.

This ‘something more’ was utterly complicated because Lupita and her husband remained without legal papers to live in the US alongside an estimated 11 million undocumented residents. *‘Yo quisiera ser más’* or ‘I want to be more’ was a common phrase Lupita used to describe her inability to attend university on reduced-rate in-state tuition and to take jobs that did not require documentation of her legal status in the US. She and her husband discussed returning to live in Mexico for years; their bi-annual visits to Mexico did not satisfy their curiosity about life on ‘the other side.’ Lupita described the ambiguity of her liminal ways of knowing between the US and Mexico as the reason her family remained in the US. She attributed her lack of clarity about deciding where to live to the mixing of her thinking, with some of the thinking having been Americanised, though never fully:

Porque si no, si [yo] no pensara... si no pensara como los americanos o si no conviviera yo con esta parte, tal vez sí ya nos hubiéramos ido... porque si yo le hubiera dicho a Santiago [mi esposo] hace, no sé, dos años, tres años, vámonos... yo sé que ya nos hubiéramos ido... Como yo no le he dicho que no estoy a gusto o que me quiero regresar, tal vez por eso no nos hemos ido.

Because if not, if I didn't think... if I didn't think like the Americans or if I hadn't lived with this part, perhaps we would have gone... because if I had told Santiago [my husband] a couple, three years, ago, 'Let's go,' I know that we would have gone back. As I haven't told him that I'm not feeling well here and that I want to go back, perhaps it's for that we haven't returned.

Lupita was also attempting to raise her children in a hybrid fashion, though she often questioned her decisions to do so. She and Santiago took her children to Mexico despite her and her husband's being undocumented, risking their lives to return to the US. She and her family had educated her children with the values she had grown up with in Mexico in terms of respecting the family (Valdés 1996) and deep ties to the extended community. At the same time, she was also quite willing to consider letting her children leave home to attend college far from home, a far more 'American' notion of childrearing. She questioned these ways of raising her children when her husband was apprehended at the US border after returning to the US from a visit to his ailing mother in Mexico. A second failed attempt could have resulted in his incarceration for years. She agonized over taking her children back, as she was not convinced the youth would be able to manage the lifestyle in their pueblo in Mexico because of the hybrid ways in which she had raised them and because of their lack of academic Spanish, a skill they would need in order to succeed in Mexican schools. *'Al final van a querer brincar al otro lado*

como yo lo hice,’ she said, or, ‘At the end of it all they’ll want to go to the other side of the border as I did.’

Ruminating and even agonizing about major life decisions for years on end was an aspect of liminality, or being in-between (Anzaldúa 1999) that all families experienced. Each of the parents spent a great deal of energy considering returning to Mexico, to live permanently or for extended, multiple-month return visits. The families struggled with being in between countries and ‘knowledge systems’ (Anzaldúa 1999). Lupita Medrano was aware she was behaving and thinking as an American at times and at other times as a Mexican. She experienced discomfort that often accompanies shifting, where one is ‘jerked’ from ‘familiar and safe terrain... into Nepantla... this liminal, transitional space,’ (Anzaldúa 2002), a space where she also described having great doubts about her family’s decisions. Because of their subaltern positioning in the US as racialized ‘others’ and the sense of being Mexican for having grown up in Mexico, parents understood they were not fully American. Their own ‘theory in the flesh’ (Moraga 1981) was one where they knew dramatically different scenarios would have played out for their own lives and those of their families had they stayed or even returned to Mexico, as several extended family members did. It was also a sort of ‘self-division’ (Keating 2006) they experienced between understanding the world through both Mexican and ‘American’ ways of knowing and how those knowings overlapped. Educators could develop greater appreciation for their transnational families if they tapped into the many difficult decisions these families continuously faced.

Cristián González

Participants in this study shapeshifted across various contexts. By shapeshifting, I refer to what Anzaldúa describes as a way to navigate ambiguity and understand differently while

taking on different ways of knowing and being (Anzaldúa 2000a; Lara 2005). Like several other youth in this study, high schooler Cristián Gozález shapeshifted from child who helped his parents in their formal employment in the US to school students to village participants.

Cristián worked every morning at 5 am to help his parents prepare their two food trucks, stocking supplies and preparing dough for pupusas and tacos. ‘I don’t really mind getting up so early; I like to help them,’ he said, ‘because I respect them.’ These dutiful and respectful attributes did not translate into how he was understood at school. A read of his grades and discipline report demonstrated his rank as ‘low-performing’ and ‘behavior problem’ student. Despite the low marks, Cristián was not ignorant of the subjects he studied. In the school’s eyes he was one kind of student; in his he was different. For instance, he offered a well-reasoned historic analysis many US high schoolers would be hard-pressed to articulate:

Americans think they were born here but originally they came from Europe and then they started taking the land over and that’s how the United States came here. I hear them say ‘this is our country’ but the original *original* ones are the Indians.

Cristián used this analysis to help buoy himself against racialised insults he endured, such as being told, ‘Go home, wetback’ at school. He possessed a subaltern sense of US history while he navigated his US schools, where he was a ‘low performing student.’ In many ways, his daily life in the US was like a chess game, a constant shifting of positions.

Cristián shifted still further when he made return trips to Mexico with his family for the annual Christmas festival held over three days in San Gabriel, Michoacán. He shapeshifted by embodying representations of ‘viejitos’ or ‘old men’ in public, village-wide festivals. The viejitos were represented through handmade pink flesh toned masks with jagged teeth. They were as an offering to the Christ child and also as an indigenous representation of a pre-Christian

god. For hours during all three days, Cristián inhabited these masked representations among hundreds of community members, playing mirthful tricks on townspeople. By the nighttime during each of the three nights, Cristián and the masked dancers galloped in enormous circles, their hands on the waists of the person before each of them. Grandmothers, town leaders, and small children, among others, were escorted inside the circle for a mirthful dance at different turns to the laughter of townspeople. This continued until the earliest hours of the next day. Cristián and Diego Medrano, Lupita's son, agreed this was an exciting and different way of seeing the world, from behind the ceremonial mask. I asked the youth if they ever shared their experiences about these ceremonial dances with their US based teachers. 'No, they wouldn't get it; I wouldn't even begin to know how to explain,' Diego said. The youth's families were actively discouraged from ever leaving school to attend these pueblo events which often overlapped with the school year.

All family members shapeshifted among contexts and countries, taking on different roles and understandings from being workers and students in the US to engaging extended family and community members in Mexico. Cristián González and other youth in San Gabriel shapeshifted (Anzaldúa 2000a) in a way that allowed them to take on symbolic masked representations which allowed full participation in important ceremonies in their home pueblo. They were transformed from US students to communal participants of rituals which reached back hundreds of years. This communitarian, ancestral connection experience was something they felt their teachers would not understand.

Bridge-building Nepantlera knowing

Family members engaged in bridge-building work they said was not recognised in or by schools. Bridge builders move among conflicting worlds (Keating 2006), taking personal risks which

include experiencing isolation, being misunderstood, and even enduring self-division. Their knowing is a ‘connectionist’ (Anzaldúa 2002) knowing which seeks commonalities and where individuals attempt to serve as bridges among disparate groups and people. Potential rewards of this connectionist knowing include transforming perspectives of various people spanning these bridges (Anzaldúa 2002) toward positive social transformation. Because of the families’ ability to manage ambiguity and tensions as *Nepantleras*, they bucked trends and expectations. Following, I show how two youth participants used bridge-building knowing.

Nicolás Delgado

Nicolás Delgado was a high school student at the time of my research, sporting a short, trendy, spikey hairstyle and a small gold bracelet with his name engraved in it. He wore brightly coloured sweaters which were meticulously clean and matched his tennis shoes. Like many Mexican-origin youth in the US and my research study, he was tracked by his teachers into general education courses (Oakes 2005), the ones which generally lead students toward vocational work rather than university training. His first year of high school, he decided to attempt honours coursework because he enjoyed science and thought he could manage a bigger academic challenge.

‘My freshman biology teacher said I couldn’t handle honours chemistry the next year, that I’d never make it,’ he explained. Despite the teacher’s discouragement, he talked his guidance counselor into allowing him to register for honours chemistry, a step that can be viewed as shifting outside his comfort zone and attempting bridge-building. Not only did he pass, but this class became a gateway toward Advanced Placement (AP) courses he completed such as AP Government and AP Spanish Language.

Nicolás explained that he brought friends along into the advanced courses, a situation similar to half of the youth in my study who said they tried to bridge the low expectations of Latinos in schools with their academic performance. He achieved this, in part, by listening intently to the white and Asian youth who were college-bound to figure out his attempted path toward academic success. *‘Me metí a un clase avanzada en química y allí conocí a gente que estaba avanzada desde séptimo. Aprendí como puedes sacar dinero para la universidad que donde puedes aplicar,’* or, ‘I got into the advanced chemistry class and there I met people who had been in advanced classes since 7th grade. I learned how you can get money for university and where you apply.’ He then shared this information with his first-generation friends whose parents, like his, had not completed middle school in their home countries.

During his final year of high school, I observed Nicolás’s participation in a highly competitive regional science fair. He submitted two entries, a small model car in a dragster competition and another small golf cart. I watched Nicolás navigate many of the bridges he had created. He willingly explained events to his entire family, who happily attended to support him. He joked with white, Asian, and Latino student friends who also participated, and he also spoke at length with his design teacher. Nicolás’s golf cart placed third, which would allow him to go to Houston to compete at a national science competition. If only Nicolás or his family had had the funds, he would have gone. Nicolás’s story is not one of rainbow-coloured bridges without peril. The entire family had spent thousands of dollars traveling to and from Mexico for an emergency funeral for Nicolás’s uncle the previous month; he had been killed suddenly in a freak car accident. This family decision left them without any resources for cross-country travel for such a luxury as a national science fair. Another bridge would fail, too. Despite the difficult

high school course load and his aspirations to attend a four-year university, Nicolás was denied admission to the nearby four-year institution to which he applied.

Nicolás Delgado took risks as a bridge-building innovator in being the only Latino in his first advanced classes. He then reached out to include other students traditionally marginalised from honours coursework and access to higher education, the very work of a *Nepantlera* as defined by Keating (2006). When asked, Nicolás explained that his teachers never knew about how he managed to get into courses against the odds; they certainly knew little more about his transnationalism, he said. Teachers might be less likely to track (Oakes 2005) their transnational students as they come to understand the actual bridge-building abilities students may have. Additionally, Nicolás risked ‘accusations’ of disloyalty to his ethnic group (Keating 2006), as did so many transnational youth in this study, by being the first Latinas/os in their honours courses. He, and the other transnational youth, managed to successfully work the bridge building across racial divides in their friendships and at times for other nonwhite students to work the bridge into advanced courses. The bridge between Nicolás’s parents’ support and aspirations toward university and his actually attending vanished—the peril of attempting to bridge manifesting itself in this situation which was entirely outside his control, a ‘reward’ ungranted (Anzaldúa 2002). He would try a different bridge, a two-year community college which *may* have led to completion of four-year university study, but without guarantees. Instead of the pervasive sense educators often have that transnational families don’t care about their kids’ education (Valenzuela 1999), educators could work toward helping build bridges toward families’ aspirations for their kids.

Gloria Paredes

When I returned with recent university graduate Gloria Paredes to her home pueblo of San Juan Diego, Jalisco, for its annual patron saint festival in 2011, I observed her bridgebuilding, Nepantlera knowing on the other side of the US border. As we dropped our bags in her aunt's house in San Juan Diego, she said, '*Ahora sí, tenemos que hablar puro español,*' or, 'Now yes, we have to speak nothing but Spanish.' This was a dramatic shift from the almost exclusive English we spoke in the US. 'Speaking Spanish in Mexico is a way I show respect and also part of how I connect to the community,' she said. Even when we were alone in the room, she stuck to the Spanish she said we needed to speak, as if she were working the linguistic bridge between her self in the US and the one in Mexico.

One complicated experience for Gloria was her participation in what is referred to as '*dando la vuelta,*' or, 'going the round.' This event, on each of the three nights, was a gendered courting ritual where men 'chose' women to whom they wanted to talk or flatter as they circled the town's central kiosk. The men threw confetti and ribbons on women and offered them flowers. Gloria had spent a great deal of time preparing herself for the ritual alongside her cousins, applying make-up, three-inch heels, an elegant green dress. She cried before leaving her aunt's house the first night, nearly refusing to go, almost cracking under the pressure of feeling the need to be so 'made up.' Her equally elegant cousins lovingly encouraged her to go, assuring her they would stay by her side. She mustered the courage and made her way to the lively kiosk, complete with a large brass band playing traditional music at the kiosk.

Both during the first evening and upon returning to the US, Gloria said her participation in this event allowed her to both be more deeply present in the pueblo and to also understand her extended family better, especially her mother. 'Now I *know* what she was talking about, *dando la vuelta,*' Gloria said upon returning to her home in the US, and she said it helped her

understand her mother's experience of youth as well as her mother's memories of her youth in the home pueblo much better.

Gloria Paredes's insistence on speaking Spanish indicated one sense of knowing while being present among her family in Mexico, one where she felt the need to build bridges on many levels with her family in Mexico. Spanish was part of one medium for allowing her to tune into her community as she shifted toward knowing and being among her family. Similar to Nicolás, Gloria didn't just engage various 'cultural repertoires,' (Levitt 2009) as if she were changing clothes for a performance; she actually *knew* differently as a Nepantlera who built bridges across cultures, borders, and within her extended communities and families. Gloria used unique knowing in her analysis of the experience of 'dando la vuelta' at the kiosk in San Juan Diego. She said she realised the event was highly gendered, but she participated because she wanted to be part of the pueblo in all ways that she could, bridging her being from life in the US to this important ceremonial rite of passage for youth in the pueblo. She maintained a sense of understanding a cultural phenomenon without necessarily agreeing with it (Koegeler-Abdi 2013) while bridging toward the local practices through participation. Similar to the youth who participated in the masked dancing in San Gabriel, she also lived and understood the experience liminally. She later recognised she was bridging her understandings of the pueblo, her understandings of her mother's memories, and her very being among extended family and community in San Juan Diego.

Conclusion

Findings from this study demonstrate that four working-class, transnational Mexican-origin families possessed ways of knowing which allowed them to skillfully navigate the challenges of their lives in many worlds, spanning national borders. They were Nepantlera knowers, or people

who lived among and operated successfully in liminal, ambiguous tensions while often shapeshifting among contexts. They took risks toward building bridges, managing different cultural and generational expectations at once. Unlike frameworks of transnational theory, (Khagram and Levitt 2008) the lens of *Nepantlera* (Anzaldúa 2002) knowing allows for understanding transnational families' complicated lives. *Nepantlera* knowing helps illuminate transnationals' skillfulness in creating bridges (Keating 2006) that others may not readily have. *Nepantla* and *Nepantleras* are concepts not originally designed to describe transnationals. These concepts can be applied in further educational contexts—such as researchers have begun to do in the field of science education (Aguilar-Valdez, et al. 2013) and math education (Gutierrez 2012)—and more specifically to those who are transnational.

There are many bridge-building opportunities for educators. They can collaborate with transnational students and their families if they recognise the otherwise hidden work in which students are engaged. Educators may reach out to students across racial boundaries and migration statuses, for instance and be educated by their transnational students by simply asking questions in a respectful way about students' experiences. They may design curricular units which highlight the back-and-forth, *Nepantlera* experiences of transnationals rather than traditional units of study on immigration which highlight one-way assimilation. Such work can invoke the global forces at play which generate economic migrations as well as technological innovations and networked movements which support transnationalism. Their efforts can work toward the goals of creating an equitable, democratic society and preparing all students to effectively engage an increasingly globalised world. If educators fail to recognise their students' transnationalism, schools will continue to reproduce similar social inequalities (Foley 2010), especially racial inequalities, that have been perpetuated by schools for decades (Lewis 2005;

Orfield 2001).

Educators can experience liminality if they break out of the comfortable patterns of their own (commonly Whiteman) knowing in their responses to communities that are ‘other’ and learn to build bridges of understanding toward greater democratic participation of all families in schools. Some examples include spending time with transnational families through meaningful *convivencia* or “being-with” in a shared space where all voices are valued and all are cared for (Trinidad Galván 2010). Such *convivencias* can include get-togethers at school, through invitations to students’ homes, and through social events such as students’ rites of passage in the US (including quinceañeras, or 15th birthday parties, for instance). This shared space can lead to more shared decision-making at the administrative level where transnational and immigrant family voices are currently not well-included in schools’ practices (Olivos, et al. 2011). This kind of bridge building is not necessarily easy, but it is the kind of discomfiting work teachers must engage in if they are to truly know their students. These efforts can lead to social transformation toward creating a more equitable society, through meaningful inclusion of those who are traditionally marginalised (Freire 2008). This will require a shift in knowing on behalf of educators—the kind of shifts of knowing that are commonplace for transnational families.

The field of transnationalism in education is ripe for further research and necessary as borders continue to shrink. It would be useful to see what happens when educators recognise the *Nepantlera* knowing of their students in terms of educational achievement for transnationals as well as their peers. Parents and extended family members may be further empowered through this recognition, and new research regarding such family-school partnerships could help in efforts toward improving student achievement. While research has demonstrated how educators may work as border crossers and with border pedagogy, (Elenes 2001; Giroux 2005) this article

suggests that educators may engage Nepantlera knowing to do border work among transnational students and their families to engage them more fully. Researchers may examine if and how educators develop their own Nepantlera knowing and its impact on their work with youth. It would also be important to see the psychic impacts of transnationalism on students as their transnationalism became increasingly recognised instead of remaining hidden. In an increasingly globalised world, this process of understanding transnational ways of knowing can benefit educators and students alike. Ultimately, a better informed educator can better help create a more democratic society, one that includes the transgression of borders through transnational participation and understanding.

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