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Transnationalism: Competing Definitions, Individual Agency in an Age of Globalization, and Research Trends

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Chapter 3

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Introduction

There has been a massive expansion of research on transnationalism over the last two decades, one which has permeated social sciences, where it initially took root, and beyond. Researchers (Appadurai, 2008; Guarnizo & Smith, 1998; Khagram & Levitt, 2008; Ong, 1999; Portes, Haller, & Guarnizo, 2002; Vertovec, 2003) have used the term "transnationalism" to describe many phenomena for multiple and even conflicting purposes. I define transnationalism as the inherently unbordered social practices in the world and their situadedness among the structures that have governing power over those practices. This definition aligns with several leading researchers' ideas, which I describe below.

The first section in this chapter situates the definition of transnationalism among complementary and competing ideas about the term, as well as its recent history of usage (Appadurai, 2008; Guarnizo & Smith, 1998; Khagram & Levitt, 2008; Ong, 1999; Portes et al., 2002; Vertovec, 2003). I also qualify this definition by exploring transnationalism's overlap with diaspora studies. The next section explores the notion of the agency of the subaltern during the era of globalization, a central component of transnationalism. Several of the early and still most notable researchers on transnationalism (Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton Blanc, 1994; Levitt,

2001; Sassen, 1998a) write about transnationalism and its relationship to globalization, particularly the effects of global capitalism, and they often do so from a critical—sometimes postcolonial—stance. I also show that others contest this notion of increased subaltern agency as overly romantic and unrealistic (Guarnizo & Portes, 2003), as they arguably are overshadowed by the increasing power of global elites (Ong, 1999) during this period of increased globalization. The final section of this chapter highlights empirical trends of research in transnational studies, which come largely from anthropological studies and sociology. The chapter concludes with a call for further research that expands the way transnationalism has typically been employed.

Definitions and History of Transnationalism

Transnationalism has traveled across disciplines but has picked up the greatest usage since the early 1990s. The concept first appears to have emerged in English in 1916 with an *Atlantic Monthly* essay by Randolph Bourne, describing U.S. immigrants, where he argued against the project of assimilation and instead for the United States to be a nation of international cosmopolitanism. The argument was not picked up, and neither was the term in any broad sense in either research or everyday usage. Decades later, political scientists (Nye & Keohane, 1971) argued for its usage to decenter research that privileged the roles of the nation-state to investigations that centered capital and transnational organizations to better understand international relations. Economists since the 1970s have used it to describe corporations that span various countries, with a home base of operations in one particular country (Hirst & Thompson, 1999). Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton-Black (1994) helped the concept take root

by their careful analyses and theorizing of several anthropological case studies of transnationalism. In other social science disciplines, such as sociology and political science, transnational research has sprung from the earlier anthropological theorizing to describe people who move among countries, as well as phenomena associated with a dramatic increase in the speed of movement of goods and information.

The term "transnational," and its accompanying terms "transnationals," as well as "transnationalism," have been embraced, critiqued (Smith, 2006; Waldinger, 2013; Zúñiga & Hamann, 2009), and problematized (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998). Smith, for example, refers to "transnational lives" as opposed to what he calls the "buzzword" of *transnationalism* as a term without enough explanatory power about the influences, such as life course, on "transnational lives" (Smith, 2006). Zúñiga and Hamann argue that instead of referring to people as transnationals they should be called "sojourners" because the term they use is, according to them, more nuanced in describing the processes of transnationals. It is challenging to locate trends among those who have written about the empirical nature of transnationalism as well as transnational theory. Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith (1998) explain that the meaning has shifted and been used for multiple purposes: "The concept's sudden prominence has been accompanied by its increasing ambiguity" (p. 2). Following, I offer clarification of the term based upon researchers who have embraced transnationalism as a frame for their work.

Despite its problems, the term "transnationalism" maintains helpful descriptive power. Social science researchers can better describe an increasingly complex global ecology and at the same time call into question the artificially fixed nature of borders. It also uproots the idea of immigration as a one-way process of assimilation (Sánchez & Kasun, 2012) and allows for the investigation of social practices across borders. Authors who embrace the term (Appadurai,

2008; Basch et al., 1994; Khagram & Levitt, 2008; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Sassen, 1998a) generally agree there are either new phenomena, or phenomena that have historically increased paces and diffusions, which inform the concept of transnationalism. They tend to include:

- the increased flow of goods and labor,

- global migration,

- transnationals' changes in identity formation and complications of "home,"

- the shifting and perhaps weaker role of the nation-state,

- structures and institutions that impact global flows,

- the increase in communication and ideas across borders, especially through digital media,

- changes in technology that allow for greater travel across borders, and

- changes in late capitalism and the attendant neoliberal economic policies and economic actors.

Despite the coherence described above, other researchers, such as Guarnizo and Smith (1998) and Kivisto (2001), have argued whether, in fact, these phenomena are really much different from the historic global movements of people for generations preceding the postmodern moment transnationalism attempts to describe. The field of transnationalism continues to move forward, probably due to the increasing fragmentations of postmodernity as well as the (somewhat paradoxically) increasing interconnections of peoples across borders. In fact, Khagram and Levitt (2008) coedited a lengthy reader of the field they call "Transnational Studies." Their introductory chapter highlights several ways to take transnational theory in new directions, particularly in how to extend transnationalism in methodology, theory, and even philosophy and the "public" whereby questions of power are directly centered alongside the "givens" of borders and actors within them.

Coming to Terms: Diaspora and Transnationalism

There is a question as to whether diaspora studies and transnationalism diverge or describe the same phenomena. Some have used the terms almost synonymously (Arthur, 2010). Others explore how diasporas are connected through transnationalism; for Olunfunke Okome and Vaughan (2012), "Transnational Africa means that Africa's old and new Diasporas are thrown together in interesting combinations that challenge common understandings of identity" (p. 3). Other authors (Georgiou, 2006; Johnson, 2012) argue the term "diaspora" more deeply examines cultural identity than transnationalism does. Hall (1990), one of the leading figures of cultural studies and diaspora studies, comments on the connection between diaspora and identity: "The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*" (p. 235). (p. **[AU: Please add page number of quote.]**). While some transnational literature treats the topics of identity (Wolf, 2002), it is rarely so centrally situated. In writing about what diaspora studies do, Georgiou (2006) recognizes transnational practices and (shifting) boundaries as *components* of the shifting diasporic condition; in this case, diaspora provides a larger umbrella of analysis than transnationalism.

As it relates to Black Studies, diaspora studies traditionally have described African-origin communities since the Middle Passage, while transnationalism has generally described more recent trends in global migrations over the last three decades. Tools of analysis can and likely should overlap. In comparing both transnationalism and diaspora studies, Stephens (1998) takes issue with transnationalism for describing phenomena without analyzing what she claims is the

"why" for the people involved in transnationalism's taking place. Describing Black Caribbean communities of the early 20th century to the present, Stephens (1998) explores how Caribbean intellectuals, including Marcus Garvey and Cyril Briggs, sought to create Pan-African forms of transnationalism because of their historic conditions. She claims the collective histories that influenced their individual existences—such as their countries' exclusions from the League of Nations after World War I, for instance—are the kinds of history that are often excluded in the theorizing of transnational studies. Perhaps because of the fields from which transnationalism has been developed, chiefly anthropology and sociology, historical treatments in transnational studies are less evident than they are in diaspora studies. Diaspora studies center questions of identity, history, and belonging in ways transnational research generally does not. On the other hand, transnationalism tends to include more contemporary factors as part of its framework of analysis, including economic, political, technological, and communicative factors. Transnationalism does not by definition exclude diaspora studies' lenses of analyses, as I examine below in terms of highlighting the agency of the subaltern. This notion of agency does not go uncritiqued, however, as I also note.

Globalization and the Subaltern's Agency

Several of the early and still most notable researchers on transnationalism (Basch et al., 1994; Guarnizo & Smith, 1998; Levitt, 2001; Ong, 1999; Portes et al., 2002) write about transnationalism and its relationship to globalization, particularly the effects of global capitalism, and they often do so from a critical (sometimes postcolonial) stance. Those writing from a postcolonial position (Appadurai, 2008; Basch et al., 1994; Khagram & Levitt, 2008; Levitt,

2001) recognize the dislocations and deep social ruptures already created by the colonial project and the new dislocations created among the colonized. Postcolonial theory demonstrates, among other things, how in the process of colonization, the colonizer used White supremacy to help create notions of the "other" as non-White and thus lacking, justifying the colonizer's invasions, real and metaphoric (Fanon, 1967). It also shows how the colonized are both changed from this forced contact and yet maintain strands of their ways of being, although altered (Césaire & Kelley, 2000; Glissant, 1999).

Transnational researchers often emphasize the local practices of the formerly colonized, or the subaltern, who make up the masses of waves of global migration flows. Among them are anthropologists who recognize the local processes resultant from the forces of globalization. For such anthropologists, only detailed descriptions best explain the transnational phenomena at hand. They describe, for instance, the ways racial discrimination informs transnationals' lives in multiple local contexts and how it often shifts as people live in different countries (Basch et al., 1994). It is clear from transnational researchers that even though the formal colonial era is over, racial hierarchies remain durable (Smith, 2006). Transnational researchers also tend to highlight the agency of individual actors from subaltern positioning in transnational contexts, which I describe below.

Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc (1994) describe transnationalism as resting upon four premises, the first being the relationship between capital and labor as it plays out in global relations. In addition to a sensitivity to the continued impact of race on people's lives, they present a class analysis, arguing that there is an increasingly global class of capitalists alongside transmigrant workers who move between borders to fill the need for production. Basch et al. (1994) recognize the state's role as a facilitator of economic production through the

maintenance of laws that support this production (p. 23). At the same time, they also claim

nations are becoming increasingly deterritorialized. They argue that the current transnationalism

"marks a new type of migrant experience, reflecting an increased and more pervasive global

penetration of capital" (p. 24). They highlight the role of "subordinated populations" and their

social relations, particularly as they contribute to "social movements that think beyond what is

deemed thinkable" (p. 29).

In thinking beyond the "thinkable," there is an impact on people's imaginations about

where they might live. This has a direct impact on how cities are (re)constituted and by whom.

Sassen's work focuses heavily on the role that global cities play in the current, globalized era

(1998a). Sassen describes the replacement of the nation-state's importance by global cities as a

series of swift changes from globalization and the rapid movement of global capital and its

location in these cities. She claims that the urban space becomes "denationalized" with the

increase of migrants from both the capitalist class and the working masses. She says there are

now "new claims by transnational actors . . . involving contestation, rais[ing] the question—

whose city is it?" (1998b, p. xx).

Sassen describes the "elements of a new economic regime," a growth fueled by increased

economic inequality (p. 149). Despite the increased inequality, she recognizes the agentic

capacity of all actors, from the great concentrations of "corporate power" to large concentrations

of "others," where all actors experience a reshaping of their sense of "identity formation" and

how it "engenders new notions of community, of membership, of entitlement" (p. xxxii). These

changes in transnational identity formation influence and shift people's ways of knowing.

Sassen's critique of the global economy also lends itself to a novel read on immigration,

highlighting how global cities will be central locations of power as opposed to imagining power's location in the form of nation-states and their systems of governance.

Other theorists (Appadurai, 2008; Vertovec, 2004) also celebrate the potential for transformation resultant from globalization through transnational actors. For Arjun Appadurai, there are qualitative changes in the imaginations of people the world over of all social strata, impacting *where* and *how* they spend their lives (2008). He explains that the world of fantasy and life possibilities has expanded dramatically: "More persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of 'possible' lives than they ever did before . . . through the prisms of . . . the mass media in all their forms. That is, fantasy is now a social practice" (p. 54). Through these media-infused imaginings, people have more options to consider about how to spend their lives. Would they move to a new continent? Follow families from their home village to the same location in the United States? Would they be able to accumulate the trappings of capitalism; would their children get better educations? Would they escape the difficult material conditions in their own countries? Appadurai is careful to explain that these possibilities are not limitless and not always tenable; nonetheless, the imagined futures of people are so different from the past that it does have an effect on their present. Steven Vertovec (2004) claims that transnational practices—or those activities and processes of thinking, such as returning to countries of origin for visits and maintaining relationships with people in those countries, related to lives lived across borders— will likely only increase and accelerate additional social transformations, ultimately creating increasingly rapid changes in globalization.

Cultural studies theorists (Bhabha, 1990; Gilroy, 1992) have also been cited in transnational literature as supporting the transformation potential through globalization. Gilroy is cited as encouraging researchers to look for an "explicitly transnational perspective" by

examining the agency of transmigrants, or migrants who return with regularity from the receiving country to the sending country (cited in Basch et al., p. 290). Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith (1998) cite Bhabha (1990) in his claim that transmigrants' "practices and identities" (p. 5) work against the hegemony of the state. Their ideas, however, are not left uncontested.

Some key transnationalism researchers (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998; Ong, 1999) contest the issue of subaltern agency in the process of globalization. Ong, in *Flexible Citizenship*, draws upon Foucault's work to present a critique of what she claims is an over-statement of transnationals' agency:

> Seldom is there an attempt to analytically link actual institutions of state power, capitalism, and transnational networks to such forms of cultural reproduction, inventiveness, and possibilities. This is a significant problem of method because it raises hopes that transnational mobility and its associated processes have great liberatory potential . . . for undermining all kinds of oppressive structures in the world. (p. 14)

Ong also argues that there should be an analysis of structures of power that limit the agency of actors in transnationalism. This kind of analysis is largely lacking from much of transnational literature. She does not negate that transnationalism changes people. Ong explains that many of the transnationals who become "exceptions to neoliberalism" have a type of agency reduced to what she describes as "bare life."

Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith are also at odds with what they claim is an overstated case of the agency and disruptions of hegemony by transnationals "from below." "The total emancipatory character of transnationalism in these discourses," they argue, is "questionable" (p. 5). Researchers who argue against the "emancipatory character" of

transnationalism draw the power of capital into greater focus and its hegemony in structuring behaviors. For all these authors, they are reluctant to embrace the sense of potential and counter-hegemony offered by some of the theorizing on transnationalism. They continue by citing Ong's work (1996) about Chinese in the United States who have worked toward capital accumulation as opposed to disrupting hegemony (p. 6).

Cautious framing in transnational research can be helpful in assuring that further empirical work not be blindly utopian or celebratory, though up to this point it has been neither. This caution is still important for researchers who are interested in global equality so that they do not find evidence of processes that do not truly exist, or the fictions of liberations in their own imaginations. Following, I offer examples of trends in transnational empirical research and suggest future directions and questions the field should engage.

Trends of Empirical Research in Transnationalism

Much of the scholarship on transnationalism is empirical (Khagram & Levitt, 2008, p. 5). Many anthropologists (Foxen, 2007; Miles, 2004; Orellana, Thorne, Chee, & Lam, 2001; Smith, 2006; Stephen, 2007; Wolf, 2002) have worked to demonstrate the shifting nature of social relations, identity shifts, and networks among transnational actors, while larger global processes create the conditions that often precipitate their transnational practices. Sociologists (Guarnizo & Portes, 2003; Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo, 2005; Portes et al., 2002; Portes & Hao, 2004) have attempted to quantify these phenomena as well as create models that demonstrate relational variables among these phenomena that hold predictive value. I offer some trends among key texts in transnational literature.

Anthropological literature, true to the task of the discipline, has examined local phenomena in various contexts, applying transnationalism as a methodology as well, by researching in multiple locations. Issues addressed range from the negotiation of national identity with race in the "host" country of transnationals in multinational comparative work (Basch et al., 1994) and the shifts in transnational social fields, where children from the same family inhabit multiple locations (Orellana et al., 2001). A trend in ethnographies has been to examine the relationship between transmigrants in the new migrant context and their sending hometowns in other countries. Some of these ethnographies show how people from small towns or villages maintain a negotiated form of community in usually one geographic location in the United States as well as in the sending hometown (Farr, 2006; Levitt, 2001; Smith, 2006; Stephen, 2007). These studies have shown the shifts in the agency of various actors as well as multiple social factors that work in tension with that agency. Following are brief summaries exemplifying some of these trends.

Robert Smith attempts to answer why people from the Mexican village of Ticuani, Puebla, maintain deep relationships and even return to their hometown from New York in *Transnational New York* (2006). He also tries to answer why the second generation continues these transnational practices. He shows how the life course plays into the second generation's decision making. For instance, very young children are often less interested in engaging transnational practices and, despite their disinterest as youths, they sometimes reach marriage-age as adults and return to the sending country for a partner. Parents, he finds, often want their children to return to Ticuani to develop a sense of who they are and also to enjoy their time there in relative freedom, as compared to the parents' efforts to watch for their children's safety by allowing them out less in New York. His participants' religious practices are also very important,

translating across countries with the help of the Catholic Church and the New York community's creation of similar practices from Ticuani (such as the installation of the patron saint image in their church and the annual public running of a torch to the church). Women can move toward greater work opportunities in the United States (though there are exceptions he reports), and both women's and men's gender performances shift based upon whether they are in the U.S. or Mexico. He also shows that Mexicans as Latina/o ethnic minority in New York try to make sense of themselves in the racial hierarchy there, as they compare themselves against Dominicans and Puerto Ricans.

Lynn Stephen (2007) writes about what she calls "transborder lives" while discussing many of the same phenomena of transnational studies, including migration patterns, the increasingly limited role of the state, and capitalism. She compares the practices of indigenous origin individuals from two small towns in Oaxaca, Mexico, and their lives in California and Oregon, highlighting the historical patterns of physical movement between the two countries and the more recent back-and-forth migrations. She examines her participants' indigeneity, showing how indigenous Mexicans are misunderstood as inferior in both countries, a legacy of colonialism. Some of her participants organize themselves politically and economically in both countries, striving for better agricultural working conditions in the United States and in supporting community festivals in Mexico. Stephen's work is helpful as she highlights often overlooked indigenous practices, as well as internal racial and cultural hierarchies among Mexicans in both countries. Her work also echoes Fox's (2006) and Kearney's recognition of indigenous transnational cultural practices and identities between Mexican indigenous groups and the United States.

Peggy Levitt (a sociologist who conducts an ethnography, an exception in this review of anthropologists) examines the transnational community and organization practices in Miraflores, the Dominican Republic, and New York City in *The Transnational Villagers* (2001). She draws into focus these larger groups for analysis to highlight that transnational practices are often heavily situated in the collective. She also writes at length about the impact of transmigration on the sending community, Miraflores, and how the community is affected, often creating disruptions and new pressures—such as the new need to have more things inside the newer, "better"-constructed house. In her analysis, transnational political organizations in Miraflores are largely subject to the moneyed organizations' interests in New York (to create nicer school facilities, for instance, even though instruction may not improve). Regarding race, Levitt shows how the Dominicans in her study struggle against preconstructed notions of who they are in the United States, expectations which, she explains, lock them out of ever becoming "fully American" because of how they were read phenotypically. Her work shows how culture and ways of knowing were affected, even among Mirafloreños who never left the island.

One of the largest studies of transnationalism based on qualitative interviews brings much rich comparative data across countries (Pitkanen, Icduygu, & Sert, 2012). Researchers worked in four pairs of countries with histories of transnational migration; 640 people were interviewed. The countries included former colonies and their colonizers—India and the UK as well as Morocco and France—and countries that have histories of established migrant communities—Germany and Turkey, as well as Estonia and Finland. The researchers set out to understand the qualitative aspects of their transnationalism, including economic, political, and life-course aspects. Among their findings, they recognized transnational migration flows expand well beyond traditionally described North-South patterns to include South-South patterns and South-

East patterns. They also found that many families were beginning to increase the scope of their fields of participation to a vaster global level beyond two nation-states.

The above researchers have offered data regarding complicating shifts in gender relations, race relations, class positioning, the increased tensions among kinship networks in multiple, expanding locations, and shifts in religious practices. Some works (Basch et al., 1994; Smith, 2006; Stephen, 2007) highlight novel cultural practices among transnationals that erupt from the deterritorialized spaces created from their transnational positionings. Some researchers (Basch et al., 1994) attempt to define who is transnational and who engages in transnationalism, even expanding the definition to include those who are engaged with communities outside of the country in which they reside in "simultaneity" (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

Sociologists (Guarnizo & Portes, 2003; Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo, 2005; Portes et al., 2002; Portes & Hao, 2004) have tended to emphasize categories of transnationalism, arranging criteria to determine who is transnational and rates of transnational participation. These researchers have also attempted to map and model trends among variables of transnational actors' behaviors and experiences, including their political participation, return rates to the country of origin, and senses of racial discrimination. For instance, Portes, Haller, and Guarnizo (2002) demonstrate that immigrants who qualify as "transnational entrepreneurs" in their model are only a single-digit percentage of the U.S. immigrant population. They claim the phenomenon of transnationalism, borrowing the definition established by anthropologists, is still worth investigating, explaining that "the impact [of their activities] goes well beyond themselves." (p. 293). Guarnizo and Portes (2003) examine the transnational home-country and host-country political participation of immigrants in the United States, finding in their survey data that only about one sixth of respondents participated in transnational political activities with regularity (p.

1225). They also note that higher education levels, gender (male), national origin, and higher socioeconomic status were predictive factors of transnational political participation (ibid.). Itzsigohn and Giorguli-Saucedo (2005) create a model that shows the connection between gender, incorporation, and immigrants' linkages to country of origin, based on the same data set used by Guarnizo and Portes. The variables in their model play out in complicated ways, but some quantitative data indicate that women incorporate into U.S. society more easily than men. Itzsigohn and Giorguli-Salcedo (2005) also show that both incorporation and transnational practices are "complementary rather than competitive processes" (p. 917). These trends served as signposts for research regarding broadening understndings of political participation, gender and incorporation into the receiving country, and socioeconomic status and incorporation. These quantified data from sociological research show that transnational phenomena are not merely interesting curiosities or celebratory musings of anomalous cases highlighted by anthropologists.

Conclusion

In as much as people engage in the practices of transnationalism, the concept itself has spread across disciplines of research, reaching well beyond its origins in anthropology. The term's definition remains contested and used broadly. Generally, however, transnationalism is invoked to describe movements across borders of people and ideas, cultural practices that span borders, and the increasingly globalized context in which this occurs, especially as this context relates to neoliberal economic practices. As it relates to diaspora studies, researchers have claimed that diaspora studies provide better descriptive power in terms of community and individual identity, history, and belonging. Those who write from transnationalism tend to highlight contemporary

issues such as global flows of people, communications, and ideas, especially as impacted by neoliberal economic forces.

Transnationalism has been used widely to examine and describe the agency of subaltern people. The concept often celebrates the expansiveness of imagination and the possibilities for individuals' lives due to globalization. Researchers do not negate the negative impacts of globalization on the subaltern but highlight how they maintain and cultivate agency as a result. Subaltern people are portrayed as having agency to change their individual, family, and even cultural circumstances, based upon the kinds of contact they have with new cultures upon contact. They are shown to skillfully navigate multiple contexts at once. Some transnational researchers caution that the emphasis on the subaltern's agency through transnationalism is exaggerated and that issues power need to be carefully examined as well in transnational analyses. Transnational research has tended to demonstrate empirical cases. Anthropologists have generally examined case studies of communities across borders, while sociologists have generally looked for trends among larger samples of people have transnational forms of cultural participation, especially economic participation across borders. Despite the contested nature of the term transnationalism, it effectively describes phenomena that are qualitatively different as they occur in the world's increasingly globalized and neoliberal context.

There are a host of ways "transnational studies" may continue to evolve. Transnational studies needs to "further shape and specify appropriate units of analysis for transnational phenomena (where topics like social inequalities, power relations or collectives actors are more prominent)" (Pries & Seeliger, 2012, p. 235). These evolutions should include more nuanced understandings of individual, community, and multinational realms and crossings in empirical studies as well as theoretical work. Regarding diaspora studies, transnationalism could expand its

analytic lenses by more explicitly incorporating some of the area's strengths, such as critical reads of history and also by using diasporic communities as a starting point of transnational analyses. Transnational research also stands to improve by including more research from the subaltern themselves and from their lenses of analyses, as diaspora studies has done. The concept of transnationalism has helped move social science research and other fields beyond uninational boundaries and appears poised to continue to gain traction as an analytic for years to come.

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