Courageous Voices of Immigrants and Transnationals of Color: Counter Narratives against Discrimination in Schools and Beyond

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Foreword by Zeus Leonardo
Afterword by Richard Delgado
INTRODUCTION

Why write a book on immigrants and transnationals of color at this present historical moment? I reflected deeply on this question before deciding to embark on this book project. But before I attempt to shed light on this question, it’s important to explain what I mean by immigrants and transnationals of color. By these terms, I mean people from formerly colonized, occupied, or currently occupied and neo-colonized countries who have immigrated to other countries, including the United States. In terms of race and ethnicity, these immigrants and transnationals of color are not defined as White in the U.S. and European context, although they may well be defined as White in their country of origin. They are Brown, Black, or Yellow people from different parts of the world. Transnationals and immigrants of color often move back and forth between their adopted or “foreign” land and their native land.

Transnational migration is not a new phenomenon. It has been happening since the dawn of time (A. Chomsky, 2007; Robertson, 1994). As Aviva Chomsky (2007) points out, “People have been moving around the earth ever since they stood upright millions of years ago. National borders, and attempts to govern the flows of migration from above, are only a few hundred years old” (p. 188). With the invention of the airplane and other forms of transportation, it has become more feasible for people, especially those who are privileged, to move around and explore different parts of the world. Further, thanks to the invention of the internet, information from around the globe has been made available to transnational subjects, including transnational subjects of color. The internet particularly has enabled many people to be connected throughout the world. Having access to this information has stirred curiosity in many people and led them to visit and/or immigrate to other parts of the world.

People usually immigrate to places where they hope to have a better life than the one they had in their country of origin. While some leave their native land to immigrate to another because of poverty and economic exploitation, others do so to avoid political or religious persecution. We have witnessed this social phenomenon for centuries, and it will continue as long as the world exists. It is part of our narrative as human beings living on this earth.

Colonialism and capitalism are two of the determining factors that have led to transnational migration. It has been historically documented that powerful western countries such as the United States, France, and Great Britain have occupied and colonized other countries to expand their economic and political power (Chomsky, 2004; Prashad, 2007;
Thiong'o, 1986; Zinn, 2003). Once a country is colonized and occupied, those who are from the occupying and colonizing power typically occupy the land as special agents or envoys to protect the interests of the metropolis; while the occupied and colonized people often flee their land seeking a better life elsewhere. As Aviva Chomsky (2007) stated, colonization sets the stage for later migration. This is why Juan Gonzalez called his book on Latinos in the United States *The Harvest of Empire*—because empires spawn migration. Colonization creates cultural ties. It brings people from the metropolis (the colonizing power) to the colony and places them in positions of power while destroying local institutions. (p. 123)

Special envoys or agents defending the interests of the colonizing power are not the only ones who go to colonized or occupied lands; those who want to maximize profits at the expense of the colonized or occupied—individuals working for corporations or for themselves—are also drawn to these places. Furthermore, during the colonial era, ordinary people from the metropolis immigrated to colonized lands in search of a better life. This happened, for example, during the colonization and occupation of Haiti by France and the United States, respectively. As C. L. R. James (1989) brilliantly explained in his book *The Black Jacobins*, during the French colonization of Haiti, Whites from various social-class backgrounds moved to and resided on the island. Some of the French commonly called “les petit blancs” (small Whites) moved to Haiti seeking a better life than what they had in France. James stated:

In the towns the great merchants and the wealthy agents of the maritime bourgeoisie were included with the planters as big whites. On the plantations the managers and the stewards were either agents of the absentee owner, or were under the eye of the planter himself and, therefore, subordinate to him. These in the country, and in the towns the small lawyers, the notaries, the clerks, the artisans, the grocers, were known as the small whites. Included among the small whites was a crowd of city vagabonds, fugitives from justice, escaped galley slaves, debtors unable to pay their bills, adventurers seeking adventures or quick fortunes, men of all crimes and all nationalities. From the underworld of two continents they came, Frenchmen and Spaniards, Maltese, Italians, Portuguese and Americans. For whatever a man’s origin, record or character, here his white skin made him a person of quality and rejected or failures in their own country flocked to San Domingo, where consideration was achieved at so cheap a price, money flowed and opportunities of debauchery abounded. No small white was a servant, no white man did any work that he could get a Negro to do for him. (p.33)
As James pointed out, while in their native land, les petit blancs may have been poorly treated because of their social class; however, in the colony they enjoyed a high level of respect and possessed slaves, of whom they made gigantic profits (Trouillot, 1995). Finally, even though the rich French plantation and slave owners treated them as pariahs, they were much better off than their poor White counterparts living in France.

As for the French special envoys, they enjoyed a prestigious life in the French colony. They were sent to the colony with a specific mission; that is, to ensure that there was no political disturbance from the slaves that would threaten the interest of the French colonial power (James, 1989). The colony was known to be a place where any White could easily become rich at the expense of the slaves, who labored and were brutally exploited. Though les petit blancs did not enjoy the same privilege that the French special envoys and administrators enjoyed, they were much better off living in the colony than living in France (James, 1989).

Similarly, during the U.S. occupation of Haiti, many Americans who were established there enjoyed privileges similar to those the French colonizers enjoyed during the French colonization of the island. During this occupation, Haiti became a place where many Americans went to enjoy a good life. Unlike poor people from impoverished countries who immigrate to industrialized countries to seek a better life, many Americans went to live in Haiti to enjoy the beauty of the tropical island. According to the Haitian historian Roger Gaillard (1982), American officials, soldiers, and special envoys established in Haiti did not do much in terms of making sure that security and peace were restored on the island, which was the pretext used by the U.S. government to justify invading and then occupying Haiti from 1915 to 1934. Instead of restoring peace and order in Haiti, these officials, soldiers, and envoys were merely enjoying a luxurious life at the expense of Haitians, particularly the poor and dissident Haitians like Charlemagne Peralte, who revolted against the U.S. occupation and was murdered by the Yankee army (Gaillard, 1982).

Likewise, this colonial-expansionist mission in other occupied and colonized lands, including Algeria, led to the migration and establishment of colonial administrators in those lands. In A Dying Colonialism, Frantz Fanon (1965) explained this sociopolitical and historical phenomenon. Fanon argued that after decades of colonization of Algeria by France, the presence of French citizens drastically increased from year to year. In other words, many French citizens moved to Algeria to get rich while those who were already wealthy moved there for pleasure. As
was the case in Haiti during the French colonization and U.S. occupation, relatives of colonial administrators in colonized lands often moved there to join their family members.

They all enjoyed a life that perhaps they would not have been able to enjoy in their own lands. The colonized, on the other hand, were treated as second-class citizens, maids and servants in their own lands (Fanon, 1965). In fact, as illustrated in the documentary movies *La Bataille d’Alger* (Labib and Boisset, 2006) and *Lumumba* (Peck, 1992), many Algerians and Congolese were treated as servants by the French and Belgian colonizers. At restaurants and bars, they were the ones serving the colonizers. They did not own the restaurants and bars; they were merely laboring there to earn a low salary while the colonizers were maximizing their profits. These colonizers controlled both the political and economic power of Algeria and Congo. As these examples illustrate, transnational migration is not always caused by poverty, war, tribal conflicts, or political or religious persecution. The insatiable economic and political thirst of many imperialist countries to expand their economic and political power also leads to transnational migration.

I return now to the question posed at the outset of this introduction: Why write a book on transnationals and immigrants of color at this present historical moment? For the last decade or so, I have been exploring the literature on transnational migration. Though the literature on this subject is vast, I have not found too many autobiographical or autoethnographic studies that focused specifically on the personal narratives of transnationals and immigrants of color moving from formerly colonized and occupied countries to the West. Nor have I discovered many studies that have looked specifically at how transnationals and immigrants of color have been racially, linguistically, and economically marginalized in western countries such as the United States. This book is intended to fill this gap in the literature, joining the few studies that have already explored these issues.

For this book project, my initial plan was to do an empirical study in which I would interview about 50 immigrants and transnationals of color. However, as I started writing it, my personal stories as an ELL (English language learner) and transnational of color took me on a different path. I ended up writing about my own journey as a transnational of color from my native land, Haiti, to the imperialist land, the United States, while situating my journey in the broader U.S. racial, sociopolitical, neoliberal, and imperialist context. Needless to say, my personal narrative runs throughout the book and greatly shapes its content. However, being fully aware of “the danger of a single story” (Adichie,
2009)—that is, a story that offers and privileges one side of a story over others—I decided to incorporate narratives of several transnationals and immigrants of color in this book.

I included the voices of transnationals and immigrants of color from different parts of the world, with varying ages and racial, cultural, linguistic, sexual, and social-class backgrounds. In doing so, my goal is to provide a multiplicity of voices echoing the varying experiences of immigrant and transnational subjects of color living in the West, particularly in the United States. The immigrant and transnational subjects of color who shared their stories with me are from countries that were formerly colonized or occupied or currently occupied by western empires, such as the United States and Great Britain.

They immigrated to the United States at different ages, for different reasons, and at different times. While some immigrated to the United States with their families, others moved here alone. Still others came to the United States as international students but managed to stay here after they completed their degree. Finally, some moved here because they married a U.S. resident and/or citizen who helped them come here. Some are graduate students and others are college and university professors. Some are Muslims and some are Catholics. Their ages range from 22 to 59.

The immigrants and transnationals of color whose voices are included in this book are from countries such as Jordan, Algeria, Nigeria, Palestine, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Haiti. Each one has a unique story about their racial marginalization in the United States. However, they all share something in common: They all have been targeted racially, religiously, and culturally. Though many are professionally accomplished, institutionally they feel they have been marginalized. Furthermore, they all have their own outlook on the western world, which many of them claim they both like and dislike.

While appreciating the opportunity to study and to earn a living in the West, many stated they are mentally exhausted from dealing with racial marginalization in school, at work, and in western society in general. Further, they state that their countries and culture have been misrepresented in the western media. In addition, many of them, including myself, feel that the United States does not feel like home to them, even though they have been living here many years. At the same time, they do not quite feel like their native country is their home either. Their primary reason for this is that when they return home to visit family members, they are treated differently, sometimes merely as visitors.