The Diaspora Strikes Back: Reflections on Cultural Remittances

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Countries like Puerto Rico, Mexico and the Dominican Republic with huge diaspora populations in the United States are having a hard time digesting their return migrants. These nations and others are facing the many challenges posed by contemporary transnational communities and cultural flows. Widespread patterns of circular migration and multiple new forms of cultural transmission and diffusion exert a complex and often unsettling effect on life in home countries, beginning of course with economic realities at individual and collective levels. The immense scale and dramatic significance of cash remittances have been amply documented and analyzed, especially since they have come to make up preponderant shares of entire national economies in many countries.

Whether in the luggage of exiles or emigrants returning to visit or stay, or in the stories and experiences recounted by friends and family, diasporas carry and send back more, however, than money and material goods. Ideas, values, political causes, cultural styles and preferences all make their way from diaspora to homeland settings. In many instances, the financial remittances themselves come with political intentions attached, as in cases of community-to-community monies or resources sent for civic and other benevolent projects to hometowns or regions of origin. Local political participation is often maintained, and even increased, across borders and geographical distances.

The engaging documentary film The Sixth Section shows Mexican diaspora communities in upstate New York organizing to sponsor a new sports stadium and to purchase a new ambulance for use in their hometowns. Along similar lines, there are many upstart business ventures in Caribbean and Latin American countries that were conceived in far-off diaspora settings with the savings and entrepreneurial skills acquired by emigrants abroad. In Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic such businesses may even bear names—like “the Bronx” or “Broadway”—that evoke diasporic locations and indicate the origin of the idea or start-up capital.

In her book, The Transnational Villagers, on relations and interactions between Dominicans in Boston and the Dominican Republic, sociologist Peggy Levitt coins the term “social remittances.” She uses the term to account for the range of ways that individuals and communities in the diaspora send and bring back social values and experiences along with the concomitant repercussions of such flows when they land “back home.” Levitt writes of social remittances as “the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from host-to-sending-country communities.” She calls for an understanding of how the social and cultural resources that migrants bring with them “are transformed in the host country and transmitted back to sending communities such that new cultural products emerge and challenge the lives of those who stay behind.” Using ethnography and interwoven life-stories, Levitt addresses forms of business practices, political participation and changing gender relations to illustrate the dynamic effects brought to Dominican social experience at a local level and in everyday life.

As helpful as The Transnational Villagers and its guiding concept of social remittances may be in transcending a narrowly economic and demographic understanding of reverse migratory flows, the intense role of national and international power structures that typically underlie this process still go largely unanalyzed. The focus on the local and everyday as a base of research, and “the individual [as] the appropriate unit of analysis,” remain valuable as a way of concretizing and humanizing the process under study. However, this approach tends to delimit the ideological and political range such that the hierarchies and asymmetries of imperialism and rigid class and racial divisions recede from view.

The concept of “transnationalism from below” may serve as a significant corrective in this regard, in contrast to the globalizing processes generated by corporate and politically dominant interests “from above.” Remittances may come from either elite sectors of the diaspora, and generally have the effect of reinforcing existing traditional hierarchies, or from the poor and working-class sectors, with the potential effect of challenging or upsetting reigning relations of power and privilege. Levitt, whose book is the most sustained examination of non- or more-than-economic remittances to date, misses the cogency of this contrast by limiting the meaning of “from below” to
“everyday, grounded practices of individuals and groups.” Her conception differs from, say, sociologist Alejandro Portes (hardly a Marxist, it might be mentioned), who characterizes transnational communities as “labor’s analog to the multinational corporation.”3 The point is that social remittances, when generated “from below” in the form of lessons learned abroad by poor and subject peoples may, and often do, have a radically unsettling impact. Social remittances often collide with the traditional cultural and ideological values prevalent in home countries. The elitism, racism, rampant sexism and homophobia that have held sway for so long in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Mexico and countless other countries of origin frequently confront their supreme challenge and are forced ever so reluctantly to change when their own compatriots come back with the experience, knowledge and values they have acquired in transnational diaspora communities.

This is not to say that return- or remitting-migrants have learned “American culture,” and are then blessing their homelands with “American values,” such that their remittance process simply goes to reinforce predominant patterns of Americanization and the spread of hegemonic world culture. Rather, experiencing diaspora life “from below” has to do with recognizing individual and group oppression more clearly, becoming more sharply cognizant of the place of one’s native culture and nationality within transnational and local structures of power, and learning how to struggle for equality and justice. What the diasporic experience in the United States offers millions of emigrants and exiles from Latin America and the Caribbean is the space and perspective to comprehend their own individual and collective subordination in its many dimensions, as well as the need and means to stand up to it, whether by self-advancement or grass-roots political activism.

Though most public and scholarly attention has focused on entrepreneurial initiative and know-how, it is clear that civic conscience, political savvy and critical, oppositional vision constitute at least equally widespread and significant lessons derived from life in present-day diaspora communities, especially when our sights are set on changes emanating “from below.” Clearly, when such lessons take the form of “social remittances” by intervening in home-country ways and doings, they make for serious challenges wrought not “from outside,” but by “one’s own.” As I heard a woman say in response to the sundry injustices she encountered after returning to live on the Island, “Soy puertorriqueña, pero me crié en Nueva York y sé de las leyes” (I’m Puerto Rican, but I was raised in New York and I know how the laws work).

The idea of social remittances needs to be supplemented and sharpened by what I would term “cultural remittances.” In most social science accounts of more-than-economic return flows, as exemplified by the work of Peggy Levitt and others, culture is reduced to behavior, and thus not examined in relation to the national ideologies and cultures of either “host” or “sending” countries. Furthermore, no attention is paid to forms of cultural expression altered by the to-and-fro movements of contemporary migratory patterns. It is, after all, in language, music, literature, painting and other artistic and expressive genres that the values and life-styles remitted from diaspora to homeland become manifest in the most tangible and salient ways.

Who are “we”? What does it mean to be Dominican, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Latin American or Caribbean? Can I be Mexican and speak more English than Spanish? Can I be Puerto Rican and prefer cheeseburgers to rice and beans? Am I American if both of my parents were from Haiti? Am I Haitian if I was born and raised and lived all my life in Philadelphia? Can I be both at once? These and similar questions swirl around the cultural sensibilities of diaspora peoples today, and satisfactory responses (not to say answers) call for a robust, dynamic and encompassing concept of culture. Perhaps the primary cultural consequence of transnational diaspora life is that it necessarily stretches the idea of national belonging by disengaging it from its presumed territorial and linguistic imperative, de-centering it in relation to any putative “core” values or marks of greater or lesser “authenticity.”

Since those in the diaspora continue to claim a connection to their national or ancestral heritage (which is what makes them a diaspora and not simply an immigrant population), an archetypical diaspora stance is, “I am, even though...” Or in other terms, “I may do, say, eat, prefer or hang out with this, but I am still of that cultural place.” It is a stance of insistence, even defiance, and sometimes a reaction to a sense of rejection or deprecation of one’s background by the host society, which is often also the society into which one was born and where one has always lived. It is an anti-assimilationist position, albeit by those who have otherwise taken on a full range of U.S. ways and attitudes.

It is a stance that engenders complex, ambivalent, but in any case extreme reactions from non-migrant nationals in the “home” country. “Los de afuera” (those from the outside) or “de allá” (from over there) are common ways of referring to the return diaspora, thereby qualifying, othering and generally dismissing the claim to belonging lodged by returnees, much to their pain and frustration. Yet at the same time, and often in the same breath and from the same mouth, there is an embrace, a sense of pride that they’re back in the fold, having chosen home and family over that strange and different other place. Intense emotions mingle: rejection and resentment alternate with acceptance and inclusion. In short, a place is made at the table, but not without lingering
discomfort and suspicions. This kind of highly charged, affective encounter, so familiar in contemporary literature and in the lives of millions of transmigrants worldwide, lies at the heart of cultural remittances as a social experience.

Aside from this broad question of identity, authenticity and group belonging, there are remittances having to do with issues of class, race, gender and sexuality with perhaps a sharper political and ideological content. The perspective “from below” primarily concerns class position and cultural capital, even though other lines of social differentiation are also pertinent in this regard. Cultural remittances from below—the values and ideas emanating from poor and working-class diaspora communities or sectors—come to clash head-on with elite and paternalistic versions of the national culture as purveyed by the guardians of established traditions and historical narratives. An outstanding, historically expansive example of such an alternative vision of the national culture “from below,” as it could only have been voiced from a diasporic location, is Bernardo Vega’s memoir documenting the early history of the Puerto Rican community in New York. Since that remarkable book was published in the 1970s, thousands of working-class Puerto Rican families have returned to the island from varied diasporic settings in the U.S., seeking in vain their chapter in the conventional story of their country’s history. Though few come bearing a trained political viewpoint, many do have experience in working-class and community-based organizations, and their very presence in traditional Puerto Rican society is no doubt a critical and challenging one.

Cultural remittances having to do with gender roles and sexual orientation have caused nothing short of a shockwave in home societies, as has been documented and analyzed in a range of scholarly, journalistic and literary writing about women’s, gay and lesbian experience in Latino and Caribbean diasporas. It has been important to avoid creating or perpetuating the ridiculous image of the United States as a haven from sexism and homophobia; here again, it is appropriate to speak in relative terms of greater spaces and perspectives for movement and change. In the case of women’s relative independence, in particular, social experience in the diaspora, as a process, has involved an altered relation to work and educational opportunities, which has then had its ripple effect on domestic life and family roles. The examples of the Dominican and Mexican experiences, both in the diaspora and in the home countries, has been the subject of much research and scholarly analysis, demonstrating in graphic terms the unsettling impact of cultural remittances. Queer experience in diaspora settings, sometimes referred to as “sexile,” has also had significant repercussions when remitted to deeply homophobic Latin American and Caribbean societies. The documentary film Brincando el charco (Jumping over the puddle) by Frances Negrón provides an interesting glimpse on this phenomenon in the Puerto Rican context.

Perhaps the most electrified field for the play of cultural remittances, however, has involved the issue of race and racial identity, and most of all, questions of blackness. Although the legacy of denial and the age-old myths of “racial democracy” do persist in Latino and Caribbean diasporas, significant alterations in relation to African heritages and awareness of racism are evident, sometimes dramatically so—especially among younger generations and, of course, Afro-Latinos. Many Caribbean Latinos are racialized toward blackness, not only by the wider U.S. society but to some extent by light-skinned Latinos as well. This process has been complemented, and complicated, by relations with African-Americans and non-Hispanic Caribbeans, which has in some cases—most strongly, again, among youth—engendered an Afro- or Atlantic-diasporic consciousness and identity. Political activism and organized politics going back to the 1960s, and the more recent cultural phenomena related to hip-hop and reggaetón, have fostered this eminently diasporic sensibility. A vibrant sense of cultural hybridity and racial affirmation has made such sensibilities the crux of cultural remittances in our times. Youth in countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean and in many parts of the world are asserting their specific and often combative sense of cultural identity in these expressive and philosophical terms. Indeed, the forceful new video documentary Estilo Hip Hop by Chilean-American Vee Bravo and his associates provides stark portrayals of the highly politicized, revolutionary use of hip-hop in Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Cuba.

It is no exaggeration to say that growing up in urban diaspora communities has been a lesson in blackness for many Puerto Rican, Dominican, and other Latino and Caribbean young people. Racism in the form of profiling and police brutality has wielded the stick that imparts this bitter learning experience. But the emulation of African-American culture has been a national and international pattern for many years, one that has by no means abated in recent times of transnational cultural diffusion. Whether it be Brazil, Belize, Trinidad and Tobago, Colombia, Mexico or El Salvador, there is not a country or region of the hemisphere that has been without its imprint of African-American expression and stylistic influence. But it is in those national cultures with massive diasporas in the United States, and particularly those among them with sizable Afro-Latino populations such as the Dominican and Puerto Rican communities, that this diffusion has most conspicuously taken the form of a cultural remittance, with its usual explosive effects. In our time, the very foundations of Dominican, Puerto Rican and even Cuban national ideologies are being shaken by the remittance of Afro-Dominican, Afro-Puerto Rican and Afro-Cuban identities. These are borne in decidedly new ways by return migrants and their children as they resurface in home-country settings after a veritable apprenticeship in black consciousness acquired in working-class diaspora
“hoods” in the United States. Can this be written off as just another phase of Americanization, as globalization “from above,” or is it rather a cogent example of what has been termed by cultural theorist Stuart Hall “vernacular cosmopolitanism” and by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai “grassroots globalization”?5

It is only in practical terms, and in reference to particular instances of cultural transfer, that this line between above and below can be ascertained with any sense of certainty. Much of the hip-hop that is emulated in local settings is of course nothing other than the thoroughly commercialized version that prevails in the media, and it is articulated at a great remove from its original site of expression among marginalized and often-rebellious youth in U.S. ghettos. And, indeed, the violently anti-social and drug-related gang culture remitted from inner-city neighborhoods in Los Angeles and other U.S. cities to countries like El Salvador and Belize are hardly compatible with agendas of inclusiveness and democracy. In fact, this phenomenon only bolsters the criminalization of many returning youth in the public mind, which is of course an experience all too familiar to Nuyoricans and Dominicanyorks when they venture back to the land of their parents and ancestors. Yet countless are the stories to the contrary, of working-class immigrants from Caribbean and Latin American countries spending formative years in diaspora communities, discovering and internalizing new cultural identities and social roles, and facing walls of resistance from their non-migrant compatriots who seem to have a stake in upholding traditional ways and values. Despite the resistance, though, change does gradually and reluctantly ensue.

A very memorable account of this process is that presented by Dominican writer and educator Chiqui Vicioso in her short memoir entitled, simply, An Oral History.6 Vicioso tells of going to New York in the late 1960s to study, getting caught up in the struggle for ethnic studies at Brooklyn College and over the years coming to realize that she is a black woman, a Caribbean woman, an independent woman. She attests that these were revolutionary insights for her that changed her life, but they were self-discoveries that brought her constant and often bitter hardships when she returned to live in the Dominican Republic. This kind of transformative process and the impact it has had in the Dominican Republic in recent decades is captured in sharp terms by Dominican historian Frank Moya Pons. In a recent essay he writes, “Racial and cultural denial worked for many years, but migration to the United States finally cracked down the ideological block of the traditional definition of Dominican national identity.”7

The workings of cultural remittances thus suggest a radical re-charting of anti-imperialist cultural politics in the hemisphere. In the traditional view, national territory is thought of as the fount of cultural perspectives that are alternative and oppositional to hegemonic metropolitan cultures of domination, and that resistance then informs the cultural and political agenda of the nation’s diaspora within the metropolis. It is now becoming evident that this transnational flow may also travel in the opposite direction and that the colonial diaspora itself may well generate a culture of resistance to national elite domination and complicity. Cultural remittances—eminently transnational as a consequence of circular migration and the ubiquity of contemporary communications technology—implode in the national territory as something foreign, and yet in their local relevance not so foreign after all. When the focus is on popular culture (in the sense of community experience and working-class expression) and on youth culture, this multidirectional cultural movement and impact comes most clearly into view, as does the mutual articulation between cultural remittances from the outside and some of the oppositional cultural experiences occurring within the national territory.

New and promising cultural processes do not necessarily translate easily into more directly political strategies and lines of analysis. Whatever the progressive implications that innovations in the cultural field may carry, they need not be initiated or informed by a resolute intention to foment social changes of a structural kind, or be directly aligned with activist social movements. What the resonant effects of cultural remittances do indicate, however, is that present-day struggles for change must be transnational in scope and vision, and at the same time sharply attuned to issues of cultural identity: what people call “home” and the ways that they identify themselves beyond the bounds of circumscribed national territories and traditions. As the historian of global diasporas Robin Cohen succinctly puts it, diaspora peoples have changed “from victims to challengers,” a transformation of social roles that contemporary political thinking about Latin America can ill afford to overlook.8

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