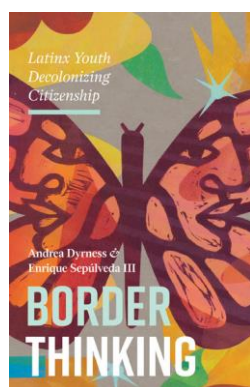




Book Review. Border Thinking: Latinx Youth Decolonizing Citizenship, by Andrea Dyrness and Enrique Sepúlveda III

2020, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 279 pp., \$27
ISBN: 978-1-5179-0630-6

<https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/border-thinking>



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By defying the binaries of the (neo)colonial discourses that portray immigrants as either *assimilated* into the mainstream or *oppositional* – and therefore as outsiders and a threat to the nation –, *Border Thinking* attempts to flip the script on the ‘crisis of immigration’ in Western liberal democracies. The authors’ full ethnographic immersion into the citizenship experiences of the young people growing up in the Latinx¹ diaspora offers the reader of this engaging and theoretically-elaborated book some firsthand new insights into key questions in the field. One of the main areas exhaustively analyzed is how the experiences lived in the diaspora and the awareness of transnational belonging can shape young people’s citizenship formation and civic engagement. In this vein, the role of youth’ participation in transnational social fields is explored as a device to understand oneself and to develop strategies of resistance and resources for facing the violence of nation-state

¹ The terms *Latinx* and *Latino* and *Latina* are used interchangeably in this review according with the criteria followed by the authors in this book (p.33). The former is the gender-neutral and inclusive term and the latter are the terms used by the research participants to refer to themselves or others.

discourses. Ultimately, this methodologically innovative study delves into the most valuable pedagogies and methodologies not only to bring these potential resources for democratic citizenship to the surface but also to cultivate and embolden them so that Latinx diaspora youth are provided with “a critical perspective on citizenship and deepened yearnings for new forms of belonging that [...] embrace the multiplicity of their transnational selves” (p. 235).

Drawing on research with Latinx youth in three different locations (Northern California (USA), Madrid (Spain), and El Salvador), the authors Andrea Dyrness and Enrique Sepúlveda III, depicting both themselves and the children in *their* stories as “having grown up in transnational social fields”, engage in a dialogue with their young interlocutors in the diaspora as a path to find the most rooted and sincere form of community, but also as “an affirmation of their call as educators to accompany those who cross borders on their journeys” (p. 31). With these ingredients in mind, the authors’ passionate commitment to the research proves contagious to the reader.

The book opens with a complex political and methodological contextualization of the authors’ research, which aims to add up the voices of the young people at the Latinx diaspora to the testimonies of Latinx cultural activists, critics, artists and intellectuals who have addressed and commented on the diaspora condition. Grounding on the review of existing research on immigrant integration and transnationalism, Dyrness and Sepúlveda III openly claim, from their very introductory chapter, that prevailing research on immigration reproduces binaries of *assimilated* or *oppositional* migrant youth. To contrast these hegemonic forces, the authors adopt the framework of coloniality/decoloniality (Mignolo, 2011, among others) and borderlands feminist theories (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999; Sandoval, 2000; among others) to underscore the alternative hybrid ways of being and living in the space between nations, social categories, languages and knowledge systems in the diasporic *third space*. Relying on decolonial thinking to challenge dominant discourses of immigrant integration, Dyrness and Sepúlveda III engage in young people’s border crossing and accompany them in the space between *belonging* and *exclusion* “to excavate the cultural knowledge and border thinking of diaspora youth as a means to decolonize and rethink citizenship in a global era” (p. 25). In their endeavor to unbury and bring to light diaspora youth’s experiences and yearnings that some hegemonic discourses neglect or even erase, the authors use critical ethnography and a range of participatory methods to invite young people to participate as experts and coresearchers of their own experience. A full account on the origin and the different articulations of PAR (participatory action research,

inspired by Freire, 1999, among others), along with their approach to such methodological and analytical device, is given in this section.

Having laid the theoretical and methodological groundwork of the study, the following chapters take the reader to the different scenarios where Dyrness and Sepúlveda III conduct their research and they do so through an accurately immersive – and even impassioned - description of the location, the participants involved and the actions developed.

In Chapter 1, *Acompañamiento in the Borderlands. Toward a Communal, Relational, and Humanizing Pedagogy*, Enrique Sepúlveda III delves into his experience as a researcher and an ethnographer in a public school in Northern California, where he gets involved with (and documents and analyses) the actions of a group of *insurgent* – in his words - educators that he calls “border brokers”, who rebel against and depart from the official curriculum (and the focus on the achievement gap). Instead, these ground-breaking educators prioritize “the fundamental needs of students in the learning process: the need to belong, the importance of durable and supportive relationships, and the development of a healthy sense of self” (p. 41). Such experience, illustrated with abundant inspiring testimonials of teachers and young participants, is presented by the author himself as a crucial moment and a “process of re-education” (citing Mignolo, 2002) in his own personal journey in realizing that U.S. schooling was designed “to incorporate migrant workers and their children into a subcategory of exploitable, precarious and expendable subjects” (p. 66). It is through this meticulously narrated process of the author’s “self-discovery” that the reader also begins to see borderlands young people as agentic individuals that transform themselves into subjects that speak back to colonial discourses and racialization and are capable of creating a deep sense of belonging within a community of relations.

Chapter 2, entitled *In the Shadow of U.S. Empire*, places the focus on the impact that transnational mass migration from El Salvador into the United States has on education and citizenship formation in communities of young people who have not migrated but who probably will (or are planning to) eventually. After amply framing their research within the historical context of El Salvador and its long history of U.S. hegemonic influence, the authors present the fieldwork for their ethnographic study: (1) an elite private school, representing the cosmopolitan elite, socialized to imagine futures as neoliberal self-sufficient entrepreneurs pursuing their economic interests in global circuits, and (2) a public school within an underprivileged urban community in San Salvador, representing the community

socialized to imagine futures as undocumented immigrant workers in the U.S., as expendable labor force lacking citizenship rights and, even, as potential security threats and enemy-outsiders to the nation (p. 72). However different in terms of their economic and legal status, what brings these two groups together in this research is the fact that both groups experienced “contradictory forces of cultural socialization that encouraged them to look to the United States for opportunities but also communicated the inaccessibility or unattainability of full membership there” (p. 118). In this chapter, the reader is fully immersed in the realities of these two contrasted settings through the voices and the testimonies of these young people’s transnational experiences. The authors make a final claim to educators, researchers and the media for increased attention to these new subjectivities in the Latinx diaspora as a space to discuss Salvadorans’ experiences with inequality at home and abroad, and a unique educative context to unwrap a shared civic imaginary “to counter the dismemberment produced by migration, neoliberal economic development, and U.S. immigration policies” (p. 119).

In Chapter 3, *Negotiating Race and the Politics of Integration: Latinx and Caribbean Youth in Madrid*, the authors take the reader to the context of Madrid to analyze the ways immigration, race and cultural difference are treated in popular and national discourses of integration stemming from Spain’s colonization of Latin America. This persistent dominant discourse, portraying only two identity options - either *assimilated* or (if only visibly different) *alienated* -, creates the collective imaginary of immigrants integrating smoothly, identifying nationally and assimilating culture, and it induces the internalization of the idea that discrimination is not racially-based. A key finding of this study, only revealed thanks to the ethnographic multi-layered data collection methodology conducted, is the way this self-complacent national discourse of integration denies immigrant youth’ experiences of racism and complicates their struggle to make sense of them, making the racial harassment and discrimination experienced every day by immigrants imperceptible.

Chapter 4, *Transnational Belongings: The Cultural Knowledge of Lives in Between*, explores young people’ transnational belongings to understand how multiple connections to both their countries of origin and their communities in Madrid, alongside with various forms of exclusion and separation, fostered the development of critical awareness and –in Anzaldúa’s terms– *pensamiento fronterizo* (border thinking), contributing to the project of decolonizing citizenship. Through a painstaking and intimate account of the reflections of the young participants, the authors describe the *in-between* location where diaspora youth discover themselves, struggling to make sense of their identity as immigrants and expected to erase any aspect

of cultural difference. Dyrness and Sepúlveda III delve into construct of the “third space” (Sandoval, 2000; Anzaldúa, 1987/1999; among others), situated between the “here” of the host country and the “there” of origin, between the “us” of a dominant community and the “them” of multiple forms of racialized identification (citing Lukose, 2007). Drawing on participatory research methods once again, the authors place their focus on these young people’s fluid and hybrid identities, unfolding “their role as cultural brokers mediating two irreconcilable points of view” (p. 180). The whole process allows diaspora young people to take advantage of their twofold in-between valuable perspective to form new identities that are different from the ones associated to the nation-state and its dominant social formations.

In chapter 5, *Feminists in Transition: Transnational Latina Activists in Madrid*, Andrea Dyrness explores (and becomes part of) the context of feminist activist associations in Madrid where migrant women make sense of their transnational varied experiences and multiple identities to turn them into a source of resistance to violence and colonial thinking. The role of *autoformación* –theorized by Dyrness “as a process of collective self-recovery and consciousness raising that is reminiscent of Chicana/Latina and U.S. Third World feminist journeys” (p. 188) – is a crucial resource in this context to embrace the contradictions of life *entre mundos* (between worlds) and “to imagine and enact a more humane world” (p. 217).

Finally, the book culminates with an uplifting concluding chapter that does not only capture the main goals, approach and findings of the study but it also includes a final note on how the authors, *cultural brokers* and *agents of change* themselves, experienced their own journey as educators, ethnographers and researchers in the process of accompanying Latino diaspora youth on their pathway from being *victims of migration* to becoming *agents of change* themselves. Dyrness and Sepúlveda III end their book with a link to the children’s stories that open the book and the lesson learnt by *these children* in the story (and possibly the reader) to find “their place in the world not by forgetting but by remembering how and why *we* are different” (p. 235).

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Pratginestós, C. (2022). Book Review. Border Thinking: Latinx Youth Decolonizing Citizenship, by Andrea Dyrness and Enrique Sepúlveda III. *Bellaterra Journal of Teaching & Learning Language & Literature*, 15(2), e1120. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/jtl3.1120>

<https://revistes.uab.cat/jtl3/>