Jorge Duany


*Blurred Borders* is a brisk, balanced, and well-informed set of essays on migration from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean to the United States. Jorge Duany includes material from his wide-ranging research, much of which has been published previously, but the volume offers more than just a compilation of his “greatest hits.” The essays build on the diversity of his research interests to construct a novel comparative approach to migration flows that are usually examined in distinct national frames.

Duany introduces the essays with three newly written chapters. First, he surveys the theoretical literature by social scientists working on contemporary migration from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Next, he outlines the key historical trajectories of each of the three migrant streams, with a dual focus on demographic trends and legal and political contexts. These two chapters offer a synthetic view that is not only useful for setting up the scholarly comparison raised in the book but also ideally suited for the classroom. There is no textbook available that offers this material in one place, or presents it in as complete and lucid a fashion. Next, Duany lays out a thematic system for organizing comparisons among these groups, including their location and relative concentration in the United States, social indicators, use of panethnic categories such as Latino or Hispanic, and racial identification on the U.S. Census.

At the heart of the book’s argument is the idea that transnational or diasporic ties to the homeland, of varying intensities and types, can serve as the most important variable for comparing the three cases. Although respectful of scholars who contest the representation of the Dominican Republic as relentlessly transnational, “deteritorialized,” and mobile, Duany presents a view (fairly well accepted among migration studies scholars) that Dominican ethnic formation in the United States is strongly characterized by homeland ties. For him, the Dominican Republic represents a classic case of what Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller have called the “transnational nation-state.” Since the late 1970s, a multiparty system has developed in which all major contenders for power depend heavily on overseas migrants for fundraising and organizational support. The Dominican government has pursued policies intended to build ties between migrants and the homeland, including the extension of dual nationality in the 1990s. Partly in response to these efforts Dominican migrants, as a group, demonstrate high levels of political engagement in homeland politics, traveling frequently to and from the home-
land, engaging in extremely high levels of international calling and remittances, and maintaining dense networks of family and business across borders.

In contrast to the Dominican Republic, the case of Puerto Rico is often excluded from analyses of transnationalism among contemporary migrants. Because Puerto Rico is a territory belonging to the United States and because Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens by birth, Puerto Rican migration is not international migration, and therefore not generally construed as transnational. In previous work Duany has argued convincingly that Puerto Rico, with neither a sovereign government nor a mass independence movement, has the salient attributes of nationhood: language, cultural distinction from the mainland, and a widespread sentiment of national belonging. Here he extends that argument to show that it also has some of the features of a transnational state, what he calls a “transnational colonial state.” In a sparkling case study he shows that between the 1940s and the 1970s, the Puerto Rican government used the Migration Division in order to promote migration through the Farm Labor Program as strategy for combatting unemployment (and disaffection), but also with the purpose of “giving voice” to its “migrant citizens.” This had the effect of making the Puerto Rican government one of the primary social and political referents for migrants in the period, the institution that they turned to for legal help, social assistance, complaint, and protest. Forty years later, Duany notes, Puerto Ricans remain “bifocal,” but are less likely than Dominicans to own property in the homeland, to travel frequently, or to preserve dense family networks. This is owed to the decline in intensity of transnational practices in the second generation. Transfer payments from the U.S. government also mitigate the use of remittances as a survival strategy among the poor.

Duany turns next to the case of Cuban migration. Because of the unique legal, political, and economic trajectories of the immigrants who arrived between the Revolution in 1959 and the mid-1970s, Cuban migrants are often viewed (and portray themselves) as exceptional, unlike other Latin American immigrants in most respects, including their preservation of transnational ties with the island. Cuba is the classic example of the “disinterested and denouncing state,” antagonistic to overseas migrants. As a result, while Cuban Americans construct their ethnicity based strongly on symbolic ties to the homeland, they experience a definitive break with contemporary political and social life in Cuba. Duany summarizes the excellent recent research on Cuban migration to describe the evolution toward a “less disinterested and denouncing state” since the late 1970s, changing demographics and political attitudes among migrants, and the marked rise in visits to the island by Cubans living abroad, remittances, and telephone traffic.
Several of the chapters fit less than perfectly into the overall flow of the argument. And there are places where scholars may wish that Duany had allotted himself more space to work through some of the themes that he quickly summarizes. For instance, in previous work he has provided a more nuanced interpretation of migrant racial identifications in the United States, and their difficult-to-parse relationships with popular racial identities and modes of racial classification in the Hispanic Caribbean. Similarly, one might wish he had circled back throughout the text to the distinctions among the various concepts of transnationalism, nationalism at a distance, and diaspora, being clearer about ways that his evidence supports one or the other. Yet the purpose of this text is less to give exhaustive or conclusive answers than to provide a comparative framing and begin to sketch out a set of thematic questions. This Duany accomplishes to great effect. Blurred Borders seems certain to become a key reference for graduate students planning research on migration in the region, and a widely adopted text for teaching undergraduate students.

Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof
Departments of History & American Culture, University of Michigan
Ann Arbor MI 48109, U.S.A.
jessehg@umich.edu