

Transnational migration: a view from Colombia

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Abstract

This article presents the preliminary results of an ongoing research project on US-bound Colombian migration from the cities of Cali and Pereira. The project identified a dense web of economic, political, and socio-cultural transnational relations connecting migrants and their places of origin. These relations are heterogeneous and differentiated; what some scholars refer to as transnational communities are, in fact, fragmented by class, regionalism, ethnic cleavages and dominant stereotypes of Colombians as drug traffickers. We observed a complex transnational field of action, but not the formation of a transnational *community*.

Keywords: Drug trafficking; economic sociology; transnational community; transnationalism.

Introduction

Our main goal is to present some preliminary findings of an ongoing research project which examines the transnational dimensions of Colombian migration – one of the least studied Latin American groups in the United States. Our central objective is to probe the transnational fields formed by migrants' economic, political, and socio-cultural relations that connect the two countries. We aim at discerning the types, effects and character of these activities from the point of view of migrants' localities of origin in the metropolitan areas of Cali and Pereira – which since the late 1960s have been two of the most important places of origin of nationals residing in the United States (Urrea Giraldo 1982; Castro Caycedo 1990). We use the concept of transnationalism to identify a web of patterned and sustained migration-driven relations and activities that transcend national borders and connect Colombians residing abroad with their localities of origin (for a more detailed discussion of this field see Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992; Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Portes *et al.* this issue; Guarnizo 2000).

Colombian analysts, in general, have been much more concerned with

the study of processes linked to the globalization of capital and information, than with the study of the transnationalization of labour. Until recently, analysts and political decision-makers saw the international emigration of Colombians as an 'escape valve' alleviating pressures related to pervasive under-employment among the highly skilled, and to declining incomes. This official indifferent posture, however, was sporadically broken by ad hoc, short-term programmes aimed at reversing the 'brain drain', using measures to promote the return of highly trained professionals and scientists.¹ Meanwhile, for less skilled workers living abroad, especially in the United States and Venezuela, the government only provided rhetorical incentives to promote their eventual return (see Chaney 1976; Sassen-Koob 1979; Cardona *et al.* 1980; Urrea Giraldo 1982; Gómez and Díaz 1983).

By the mid-1990s, though, the international migration of Colombians had moved to the government's, and scholars', top agenda, this time with a new, more comprehensive approach (see Samper Pizano 1996; Restrepo 1998). In fact, according to a presidential adviser interviewed for this study in 1996, migration has become one of the three most urgent issues for the Colombian government for the next decades, along with drug trafficking and environmental degradation. This renewed interest forms part of the Colombian state's attempts to reposition the country in the new global political economy, in particular *vis-à-vis* the United States. Migrants are now perceived not only as an important source of hard currency and technological innovation (in the form of foreign-trained personnel), but also as potential advocates of 'national' interests before the US government. To strengthen migrants' ability to play a dual role as dollar generators and international advocates, the Colombian state has introduced a series of reforms and programmes, such as dual nationality in 1991; a global electronic network of Colombian scientists in 1993; and the programme *Colombia para todos* in 1996 (for a full discussion of these processes, see Sánchez 1996; Charum and Meyer 1998; Guarnizo and Sánchez 1998; Guarnizo *et al.* this issue). This new official approach towards migrants provides a context that facilitates and even encourages migrants to undertake regular activities connecting their places of settlement and origin, and their integration into 'transnational fields' of action (see Basch *et al.* 1994).

This essay is based on the initial results of an ongoing investigation on US-bound Colombian migration. The data come from fieldwork research conducted between September 1996 and February 1997 in Cali and Pereira. The fieldwork included sixty structured and unstructured interviews with key informants (forty men and twenty women), including 'returned', visiting, and prospective migrants; relatives, friends, and neighbours of people residing in the United States; local community leaders; local and national government officials; and students of Colombian migration.²

Colombian migration and the cities studied

Existing data on the total number of Colombians residing abroad are approximate because many migrants elude official registration. The Colombian Ministry of Foreign Relations has estimated that some 1.4 million Colombians (around 4 per cent of the national population) were living in the United States in 1997. Unlike most Latin American immigrant groups in the United States, Colombians have historically been made up of urbanites, a characteristic confirmed by previous studies (that is, Cardona *et al.* 1980; Urrea 1987; Guarnizo *et al.* this issue), as well as by data from the 1993 Census. According to the census, 88 per cent of the 1.3 million Colombians reported as residing abroad are originally from urban areas (DANE 1996a).³ As we shall see later, three main factors are associated with an increase in the US-bound Colombian migration and with migrants' emergent transnational activities, namely, economic restructuring in Colombia, drug trafficking, and the cumulative effect of a migration process that started in the post-World War II period (1950s–1960s).

The two metropolitan areas where the interviews were conducted are located in two very different regions of Colombia, in terms of size, culture and economy. But they share two characteristics: both have been hard hit by neoliberal reforms, and both have been associated with, and highly affected by, drug trafficking activities. Cali, the country's second most populated metropolitan area, is the capital of Valle del Cauca, the country's third most populous department (3.7 million, DANE 1996a, p. xvi).⁴ Located in southwest Colombia, the Cali metropolitan area stretches across the Cauca River valley, one hour away from Buenaventura – the country's largest port on the Pacific Coast and also an important source of emigrants to the United States (see Hurtado Saa 1996). Cali is one of the most industrialized areas in the country and a cradle of large-scale agro-industrial development. It houses a multi-ethnic population of almost 2 million mestizos and African Colombians (DANE 1996c).

Between 1990 and 1995, Cali's economy grew at a faster pace than the national economy (4.8 per cent and 4.1 per cent, respectively). This rate of growth is partly explained by the significant presence of the illicit drug business in the local economy since the 1970s (Castillo 1987). Drug-related money irrigated the whole system and, thus, became vital for the economic boom. It is estimated that the Cali cartel had 'yearly revenues of \$5 billion or more, [and was] the richest organized crime organization in the world' (Krauss 1997, p.71). The cartel allegedly controlled a significant proportion of the city's real estate and construction activity, and had a significant presence in the region's industrial, agricultural and commercial sectors. The construction of ostentatious mansions and housing complexes, and the rapid expansion and prosperity of exclusive businesses, was in great part triggered by drug money.

By mid-1995, however, signs of an unexpected economic breakdown began to intrude. Two main factors help to explain this sudden downturn. In good part, it was associated with the after-effects of neoliberal reforms in the country, which included the total opening of the economy to international markets and capital, the privatization of state-owned firms, cuts in public expenditures, and the elimination of social subsidies and programmes (Ahumada 1996). In the face of this new economic approach, large multinational corporations that occupied critical positions in the local and regional economy changed their business strategy. Many of them closed their plants altogether and relocated either abroad or in other regions of the country; others streamlined production, eliminating lines that were no longer competitive given the outpouring of cheaper imported goods. More important perhaps, was the collapse of the drug business following the arrest of the leaders of the Cali cartel between 1995 and 1997 – a measure prompted by pressures from the US government on Bogotá to comply fully with its ‘War on Drugs’ policy (see *El Espectador* 1997b). In 1995 alone, some US\$800 million, allegedly belonging to drug traffickers, left the city, producing a sharp contraction of the local market. The effects of the closing of traffickers’ businesses and operations were extraordinary. The extremely high level of consumerism and the city’s buoyant labour market received a tremendous blow. In the period between September 1995 and March 1997, the number of unemployed persons in the city grew from 95,000 to 165,000 persons (DANE 1997).

Pereira is the country’s eighth largest city and the capital of Risaralda, the fifteenth most populous department (844,000, DANE 1996a, p. xvi). It is the country’s second most important centre of coffee production and processing, and home to some 355,000 mostly mestizo persons (Morales 1994; DANE 1996b). Located in the heart of the country’s coffee region (*Eje Cafetero*), Pereira has been a regional hub for coffee processing, commercialization, and related services. In the last twenty years, the overproduction of coffee and the precipitous drop in world coffee prices had made this crop less profitable and attractive *vis-à-vis* other crops. A regional crisis has ensued (*El Espectador* 1997a). Neoliberal reforms have further aggravated the region’s crisis since the 1990s. *Pereiranos* have witnessed dramatic increases in the city’s unemployment and a sharp decline in the income of a significant part of the city’s population. Back in the late 1970s, Pereira had already seen the emergence of the first known drug organizations (Castillo 1987). The architects of these organizations soon became major players in the local economy, directly as formal investors, and indirectly as informal illicit entrepreneurs. Their wealth allowed them to become major shareholders in several professional soccer clubs, which later financed soccer events in New York City. As in Cali, by the end of the 1990s the increasing repression against drug traffickers has also had serious recessionary effects on the local economy, especially in the construction and service sectors.

Unlike Cali, where we did not find any spatial segregation of migrants, we found several zones in the Pereira metropolitan area with high concentrations of households that have members who have been, or are currently, migrants to the United States. We concentrated our fieldwork in Dos Quebradas and the Ciudadela Cuba, which are among the largest and most populous of these districts. Dos Quebradas (population 140,000, DANE 1996b) is an industrial and residential district and one of the country's most important areas for industrial assembly and light manufacturing. It is the site of a significant proportion of the national garment industry. As in Cali, the economic crisis resulted in plant closures. Between 1985 and 1995, some 200 businesses in Pereira and Dos Quebradas folded and local unemployment doubled (Alcaldía de Pereira 1996).

Ciudadela Cuba is a large residential district that was founded in 1960 by internal political refugees from the *Violencia*, a civil war that ravaged the country throughout the 1950s. The first refugees, who arrived from the neighbouring countryside and villages, started settling in the expansive fields of 'Cuba', an old sugar-cane producing hacienda. Today, Cuba is one of the largest residential sectors of Pereira, where a mix of middle-, lower-middle and working-class families reside. According to our informants, emigration to the United States from this district started in the 1970s. In the beginning, many emigrants left for New York with the expectation of returning with enough savings to upgrade their houses and start small businesses. Later, during the drug traffic boom in the mid-1980s, the number of people taking a *viajecito* (small trip), grew rapidly. A *viajecito* is the local euphemism for trips to smuggle small quantities of drugs to foreign countries, or to travel to the United States to import surreptitiously cash for a fee. Most of these travellers had no previous criminal records, and many of them eventually decided to stay abroad (see Castro Caycedo 1990; Molano 1997). Drug-initiated emigration coincided with two other migratory processes, namely, a) the return of many blue-collar workers who had emigrated two decades earlier, and b) a growth in the number of manual workers who were making the trek north with the help of relatives and friends already settled abroad.

The increase in both drug- and non-drug-related migration is so widespread in this district that a non-migrant community activist said that 'in this *barrio*, practically everybody has a relative in the United States, and there are [whole] families whose members have left one by one' (Field work interview, October 1996). The effects of migration are reflected in the urban texture of the Ciudadela and in the living conditions of its residents: one sees, for example, a growing number of upgraded houses, an increase in the consumption of household appliances, and an expansion in the number of small businesses. Many start-up businesses are bars, restaurants and discotheques, while a minority are in repair services and light manufacturing. Some informants recalled that, at one point, short-term travellers began to return with large amounts of money, new

customs, sumptuary consumerism and noisy entertainment businesses. The opening of these kinds of businesses reached such a level that the city authorities, alleging safety reasons, issued an ordinance prohibiting business people from opening any new night-time establishments in the area.

The coincidence in the growth of these quite different migration flows (old resident returnees, new working-class emigrants, and drug-connected migrants) has been confounded in the minds of many Colombians, and has led to the creation of negative stereotypes about the migrant population as a whole. As is the case in the Dominican Republic (see Guarnizo 1994), many of our informants described the newer migrants in disparaging and classist terms. We were told that until the mid-1980s, migrants were mostly middle-class, white-collar workers who left in search of better economic opportunities, or to improve their professional training abroad. In contrast, the new cohorts of emigrants were seen as being uniformly composed of poor, marginal people eager to get rich overnight at any cost.

However, the migration story is much more nuanced and varied than dismissive, classist perceptions allow. If anything, the social composition of the migratory flow has become more heterogeneous ('democratic'), rather than homogeneous. In effect, emigrating has ceased to be the exclusive realm of the upper-middle and middle-classes, for a growing number of working-class and unemployed people are also emigrating – not only from Pereira and Cali, but from many other regions. Some emigrate to improve their professional training; others do so because of a lack of basic opportunities at home; still others leave captivated by the possibility of attaining the 'American dream' overnight, bypassing the arduous, and often unfruitful, travails commonly experienced by immigrant labourers. Such social heterogeneity and the increasing diversity of motives for migrating are the result of three processes: a) economic restructuring policies, which greatly contributed to the deterioration of local economic conditions, and the ensuing shrinkage of opportunities; b) the maturation of the over two decade-old US-bound migration process, which made emigrating a possibility for an expanding population; and c) the expansion of drug traffickers' demand for labour for their transnational operations, which opened the migration door wider to include a larger pool of people who would otherwise be unable to leave.

Evidently, job generation in the coffee region and in Cali has not kept pace with population growth. The shrinking of labour opportunities has particularly hit the rising number of high school and university graduates, at a time when the appeal of, and opportunities for, migration have augmented. A former governor of Risaralda Department interviewed for this study summarized the situation this way:

After graduating from high school, the majority of kids dream of going to the university, becoming professionals, and getting a well-paying job. However, most can't even continue their education because of

lack of money, [and] are unable to find a decent job, or any job for that matter. Even many of those who graduate from the university end up unemployed or under-employed. The truth is that these are honest and decent kids, but there is nothing for them to do here. And then they see those who went to New York returning with money to buy or build a new house for their mothers, buy modern appliances and cars, get the best girls and party a lot [. . .]. Then, they go to the United States to try their luck [*aventurar*]. Some get a job transporting money from New York (Field interview, September 1996).⁵

Migration, in effect, became 'the thing to do' for an ever-growing population. A high school teacher, a woman who had never travelled abroad, explained that 'one sees that a lot of people pawn [*empe an*] their house and their belongings [to pay] for one of their children to leave and become the family's salvation' (Field interview, January 1997). The owner of a travel agency in Pereira recounted that 'the population of Pereira and surrounding areas that was coming and going [to the United States] grew to the point that Avianca [a national airline] established direct flights to New York twice a week' (Field interview, February 1997).

In Cali, the drug cartel's labour recruitment practices have also facilitated the migration of many who otherwise would not have been able to travel. The cartel's transnational activities in both countries, legal and illegal, have helped migrants abroad to maintain relations with their country of origin. In fact, for some analysts, 'New York City – particularly northern Queens – is probably the cartel's most vital international wholesale hub' (Krauss 1997, p.71). Some scholars even believe that the presence of a significant Colombian population in the United States has provided the cartel with a comparative market advantage and facilitated the vertical integration of the trade (Thoumi 1994).

The expansion of drug trafficking has brought about not only the incorporation of a larger population into the migration process, but has also created an environment plagued by *desconfianza*, mistrust, and social fragmentation among migrants, as well as widespread stigmatization and discrimination against Colombians in the United States. Meanwhile, in Colombia, those who return after having 'made it' abroad are often looked at with suspicion by others who question the origins of their success, regardless of the actual source of their prosperity. The time when new arrivals were admired and respected in Cali or Pereira, or welcomed and supported by their compatriots in New York, is now past (Castro Caycedo 1990). A 67-year old woman who returned to Ciudadela Cuba after some thirty-five years of labouring as a blue-collar worker in northern New Jersey recalled:

At the beginning [1960s–1970s], everything was different. I, for example, gave shelter [*di posada*] in my own house, to many, many Colombians who arrived without any family and didn't have friends

there. [. . .] Now you can't receive people just like that, from the street, it's dangerous to do that [. . .]. To tell you the truth, there are many Colombians who are ungrateful [*desagradecidos*]; and many do bad things that damage the image of all of us [. . .]. Now there is lots of ill will against Colombians (Field interview, October 1996).

The image of a migrant population without social cohesion should, however, be read with caution. Indeed, one can hardly conclude from this evidence that principles such as solidarity and reciprocity have been totally eliminated from Colombians' social repertoire. On the contrary, these remain highly valued social resources. But as we shall see below, the practice of solidarity and reciprocity increasingly tend to be limited to tightly bounded social networks of friends and relatives with similar class backgrounds and localities of origin. The poisonous effects of the drug trade have exacerbated age-old principles of exclusion prevalent in Colombian society, where closer non-kin relationships tend to be restricted to people in similar class positions, and where regionalism is deep-seated. The danger of being unwillingly associated with a *mafioso*, or mistakenly being identified as one, has only heightened this exclusionary spirit among migrants and in Colombian society more generally. Migrants interviewed for this study agreed that in one form or another every Colombian who leaves the country has the stigma of drugs attached to him or her. They also argued that this pigeonholing of Colombians has been popularized and is being perpetuated by the national and global mass media. Undoubtedly, this stigma affects migrants' behaviour, making it much harder to build diverse types of transnational social networks and activities.

Migrants' transnational initiatives

Our preliminary findings indicate that transnational activities depend in good measure on migrants' social capital (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993), a resource whose formation and character is highly contingent on migrants' place of origin, original economic and social standing, and circumstances of migration. However, migrants' economic, political and socio-cultural transnational activities are moulded by the contextual circumstances in which they are embedded abroad and in their localities of origin.

Economic transnational activities

In the two metropolitan areas studied, we identified a wide array of economic activities connected to, and dependent on, migrants abroad. The principal transnational activities found were service, commercial and real estate ventures. The most common service activities included those tied

to international travelling, remittance agencies and exchange houses, offices processing official documents, and international student information services. Commercial activities included import-export operations, such as the import of computer hardware, and the export of cut flowers, foodstuffs, and Colombian-made kitchen utensils. Another important line of transnational activity was the promotion and sale of housing in Pereira and Cali to migrants abroad. In a contracted local market, migrants' relatively high purchasing power constituted a significant potential demand for developers in these cities. We found that on some occasions small groups of migrants from the same place of origin had pooled resources to purchase land and develop housing complexes – both for their own consumption and for profit.

A more common, although on average much smaller and less profitable economic activity connected to migration, was small commercial and service ventures (grocery stores, restaurants, discotheques, repair services) created and usually subsidized by migrants' savings from abroad. As with those of other migrant groups elsewhere, these numerous micro-operations dot the areas where migrants and/or their families live, and are easily identifiable by the way they loudly advertise their 'Americanization', with many such businesses named after neighbourhoods and cities in the United States and decorated '*a la americana*'. Yet, the more typical and, in fact, the oldest transnational economic activity is the multimillion, steady southward flow of family remittances, which constitutes the most significant evidence of migrants' transnational social ties to their family, relatives and friends.

We found a noticeable sector of migrant entrepreneurs, whom we call 'successful', engaged in mid-size, stable, and profitable commercial endeavours between the United States and Colombia, and in some cases with other countries around the world. Some of these entrepreneurs were connected to Colombian financial capital and the entertainment and mass media sectors. We were interested in discerning the possible differences in the social structures that sustained successful and unsuccessful entrepreneurship across national borders. What we found was that transnational economic entrepreneurship was embedded in transnational networks of support that had gradually been woven among small, tight groups of close friends and/or kin. Migrants' class background and occupational standing previous to emigration appeared to be decisive factors explaining their entrepreneurial performance.

According to our initial findings, successful transnational entrepreneurs seemed more likely to be of a higher class origin and had higher-status occupations before emigrating than their 'not-so-successful' counterparts – that is, people whose business investments had failed, or who owned small operations catering mostly to a local market. Successful entrepreneurs tended to be persons with a good command of English, were often university graduates, light-skinned, and originally from the

upper-middle and middle classes. These entrepreneurs had built their business nexuses through their social networks, which in turn facilitated their social positioning and adaptation to a transnational setting. Two examples will illustrate these processes.

Alberto Lara, a light-skinned, 53-year old *cale o* MBA, is the owner of an export-import firm in Cali.⁶ Before leaving Cali for northern New Jersey, he was working as manager for a Taiwanese multinational firm. He left in 1975, yielding to his wife's insistence to move north to join her relatives, who were legal US residents. He started working right away upon arriving at his brother-in-law's computer company. In 1982, following various business-related problems, he left and moved south to work at the Miami subsidiary of his former Cali employer. It was then, as he put it, 'when I experienced for the first time what it meant to be an immigrant.' For a while he was by himself in Miami, while his family remained in New Jersey. Three years later, when his hopes of being promoted did not materialize, he quit and started his own firm, an accounting and business consulting company serving Latino-owned businesses. During the 1985 to 1990 period, his business grew rapidly while the Latino economy in Miami was thriving, mostly due to an expansion in demand generated by the booming drug business. By the end of the 1980s, the 'War on Drugs' expanded to include stricter bank and tax controls as well as police raids and sting operations. Latino, and especially Colombian-owned companies, were prime targets of the anti-drug crusade, and many of them folded. Mr. Lara soon saw his clientele dwindle and with it, the prosperity of his own business. By 1995 he was already back in Cali working again, albeit temporarily, for his former employer. Less than a year later, he had opened up his own import-export consulting firm. To do it, he used not only his own professional expertise, business acumen and monetary resources, but also old business contacts and friends he had met throughout his working career in Cali and abroad. At the time of our interview, he was exploring the expansion of his operations to attract Taiwanese and Japanese investments to Colombia (Field interview, October 1996).

Sergio Salazar did not have access to the same kind of social resources as those available to Mr. Lara, and faced a different situation upon returning. An African Colombian and former professional soccer player, originally from a poor Cali neighbourhood, he left in 1980 for New York, as part of a soccer-exchange tour. At the end of the tour he was offered a sports fellowship at a small college in the New York metropolitan area. He accepted, and four years later graduated from college. He later earned a Master's degree in physical therapy, and returned to Cali in 1994. His plan then was to start a physical therapy clinic there. 'It was a total failure,' he recalled. 'I think that my training was too sophisticated for Colombia,' he complained, adding that the failure was also due to 'envy, there is so much envy here.' Asked whether he knew any other

therapist in the city, or had any professional contacts there, he responded negatively. Evidently, a convergence of factors including his own lack of social capital and business experience, a mismatch between his skills and the local demand, and a hostile environment, prevented him from succeeding as an independent professional. At the time of the interview, he was involved in commercial activities unrelated to his professional training and pondering the possibility of re-emigrating (Field interview, October 1996).

Our respondents knew scores of migrants who had returned after having saved enough in the United States to start a small business. While many were able to stay in business and even expand their operations, a significant number of these returnees watched their business go bankrupt. Often, unsuccessful entrepreneurs were people who had been salaried workers in the United States. Few of them, we were told, had the business wherewithal to succeed, lacking entrepreneurial experience, business contacts, and enough money to start a profitable, competitive operation. Besides, the context greeting them in Cali and Pereira was very different from the one they left in the 1970s and 1980s, when many of them had first departed. In the late 1990s, the economic and business environment has become much harsher and much more competitive than ever before. The number of small- and micro-scale businesses, of the type in which these migrants are most likely to be engaged, has spread to the point of redundancy.

Thus, as the case of Mr. Salazar illustrates, professionals or technicians of humble social origins, who come back with high social and economic expectations, have often found it difficult to reach their goals. As a non-migrant observer put it, these professionals soon find out that 'they are no longer from here, and they never were from there'. Feeling rejected, many of them tend to become socially isolated. Unable to adapt, many of them end up re-emigrating.

Remittances

Transferring part of their income to family and friends left behind is migrants' most common economic transnational practice. It is impossible, however, to obtain an accurate figure of the actual amount of money transferred by migrants to Colombia. As a high official at the Banco de la República (Central Bank) stated to us, any estimate of the total amount of remittances received is incomplete because a) a good proportion of monetary transfers escape state control because they are sent through informal channels including unregistered remitters, visiting friends, and migrants themselves; b) there is no specific line item in the national accounting system that measures these transfers; and c) there are moneys from other origins which are reported as family remittances. Besides, it should be emphasized, the Colombian state has not yet shown

much interest in either establishing the actual amount received, or controlling the entry of these moneys into the country.

Despite the above limitations, data available from the Central Bank show that remittances have grown at a steady pace since the 1970s. During the 1970–88 period, they grew at an impressive annual rate of 26.1 per cent, increasing from about \$6 million to some \$384 million in 1988. Although the rate of growth declined by one-half between 1988 and 1992, remittances reached \$630 million at the end of the period. Although these are conservative estimates, they represent a significant amount – almost 45 per cent of the total contributions of coffee, the country's second most important export.

A common means of sending remittances has been through small, often informal *casas de cambio*, exchange houses. As part of the neoliberal reforms, in 1991, the government lifted most controls regulating foreign currency exchange. By early 1993, exchange houses were handling an amount of money estimated to be equal to the total exports of the cut-flower industry, the most important non-traditional export sector of the country. Soon these businesses became known as places for money laundering (*El Espectador* 1996). In 1993, the government introduced a series of regulations to put a stop to this situation. The Banco de la República issued strict norms (Resolution 21 of 1993) requiring a minimum operating capital (\$300,000), certified professional qualifications, and certification of the moral probity of the owners and employees. *Casas de cambio* had to report daily on every transaction, one of several measures aimed at deterring money laundering.⁷ One objective of the state's intervention has been to eliminate small operations from the market, leaving monetary transfers in the hands of a few large, operations which are easy to oversee. Despite these controls, it is estimated that 'illegal' exchange operations still make up more than 50 per cent of the money-changing market (*El Espectador* 1997c).

Transnational activities and the drug trade

The relationship between migration and drug trafficking has been significant. Drug organizations' labour demand, as pointed out above, has greatly contributed to the expansion of US-bound migration from Pereira and Cali. Drug trafficking, on the other hand, has benefited from the existence of many institutions and practices originally created by migrants themselves, which have connected migrants to their communities of origin. These include money transferring, frequent travelling, and countless immigrant entrepreneurial initiatives. Drug organizations have also profited from the presence of Colombian residential enclaves, which, in zones such as the greater New York metropolitan area and southern Florida, provide a familiar socio-cultural environment for these organizations to operate in and in which to recruit additional labour (Thoumi

1994). In the same way that organized crime became a means for upward mobility for many immigrant groups in the United States (i.e., the Irish, Jews, Italians, Chinese; see Nelli 1969; Light 1977; Rockaway 1980), drug trafficking has become one of the widest, most 'democratic' machines for upward mobility for many Colombians, from unemployed or underpaid professionals, to marginalized and disenfranchised urban dwellers (see, Castillo 1987; Camacho G. 1988; Molano 1997). The social organization of the trade helps to explain its rapid expansion and the difficulties of repressing it.

Our fieldwork reveals that drug trafficking networks are small, very closed and made up of trusted people. For migrants tied to the drug business, the individual's quest for income is enveloped in a dense tangle of social expectations and reciprocal obligations. Relations are based on strong principles of loyalty and recognition of the *patrón* as a benefactor and provider of favours. Those involved in the trade are either a) willing participants (people who knowingly become involved in the trade) recruited in Colombia and among the immigrant population already in the United States, or b) people who have ended up embroiled in the trade unwillingly – entrapped into the business by unscrupulous traffickers (see Molano 1997). Among the willingly involved, we were informed by our respondents, a significant number had first entered into the business as '*mulas*', smuggling small quantities of drugs concealed in their own bodies, or luggage.

The more consolidated groups have a very complex transnational organizational structure, with an elaborate division of labour. Jobs in the trade include '*transportadores*' (those smuggling the drug), '*caleteros*' (those guarding safe houses), '*cobrades*' (collectors), enforcers, accountants, and those who '*bajan la plata*,' transport the money from the United States to Colombia. Many of these positions are occupied by migrants. These posts provide not only access to wages far higher than those available in legal activities, but also conduits for maintaining steady relations with Colombia while abroad. The testimony of one interviewee during our investigation illustrates some of these dimensions:

I first arrived in Miami to work in a restaurant, where I earned \$10 a day. At the beginning of 1987, a friend of mine arrived and told me, "There is a little job . . ." "What kind of job?" I asked. "To go to *caletiar*". "And how is that, man? [. . .] How much does it pay?" "Look man, this is very simple. There is some wet merchandise.⁸ There are guns and you will be locked in there, guarding the merchandise. They will give you \$10,000 for one week." "Fine," I told him, "I will go there." Then I asked for permission from the owner of the restaurant. After 8 days of guarding the *caleta* they gave me the \$10,000, and I left. But later the boss [*el patrón*] called me up and told me that he needed me to work directly with him. Then he gave me a house, a car, food,

and \$2,000, and I accompanied him all the time. All the while at the restaurant I did not have any of this (Fieldwork interview, January 1997).

The consolidation of transnational activities linked to the drug trade has had a significant impact on the country's internal economic, political and socio-cultural activities. The adoption of a neoliberal model by Colombia permitted the massive entrance of money tied to the laundering of dollars from the drug trade. This money, which ended up in many economic activities of the country, played an important role in saving the country from the deleterious effects of the crisis that swept Latin America during the 1980s, commonly dubbed the 'lost decade'. Economist Roberto Steiner (1997, p. 47) estimates that during the first half of the last decade, 'the net income from the export of narcotics represented about 7 per cent of the [country's] GDP and 70 per cent of the exports [...]'.¹

Political transnational activities

Since the late 1950s Colombian politics has been characterized by high electoral abstentionism, generalized political apathy towards, and mistrust of, partisan politics. Such political alienation has been fed by a system in which a restricted set of élites monopolize public discourse and power structures. These élites perpetuate their position through loose local, regional and national patron-client cliques affiliated with the dominant Liberal and Conservative parties. In general, the national political culture has been dominated by intolerance, exclusion, and often even violent suppression of the opposition (see Delgado *et al.* 1996).

This political culture has been, for the most part, reproduced among migrants (see Guarnizo *et al.* this issue), creating an environment that has discouraged transnational political action. It came as no surprise to us, then, that our interviewees did not report much transnational political activism among the migrant population. Many of the respondents, in fact, were unfamiliar with existing transnational political phenomena, such as the existence of chapters of the traditional parties in New York, the frequent visits of politicians to Colombian enclaves in the United States, and the financial contributions of migrant leaders and emerging élites to these parties' coffers. Similarly, our respondents rarely knew about official programmes and policies in favour of the migrant population abroad – such as the *Programa para la Promoción de las Comunidades Colombianas en el Exterior*. Widespread mistrust of the Colombian political establishment may help to explain the absence of any collective migrant efforts to influence political decision-making in the Colombian cities studied.

At first glance, these findings suggest that the inclusive spirit of

extraterritorial rights granted to Colombians residing abroad – such as the right to vote in presidential elections and dual citizenship – have, thus far, not been able to overcome the alienation engendered among migrants by the dominant political system. However pessimistic this picture appears at first, we found evidence indicating that recent events are encouraging migrants to adopt a more active transnational political position. A pivotal event was the election to the Colombian Senate in March 1998, of José A. López, a wealthy physician who is a dual US-Colombian citizen and resident of northern New Jersey. Running in a slate from the Liberal Party from the Tolima Department, he became the first dual citizen ever to be elected to public office in Colombia (the other four candidates who ran from the New York metropolitan area were not elected). Dr. López's election was made possible by a December 1997 electoral reform that now allows nationals residing abroad to elect and be elected to the national Congress representing any of the twenty-five Colombian departments (see Guarnizo and Sánchez 1998, pp. 318–20). The voter turnout for this election, which took place less than three months after the passing of the 1997 reform, was twice as high as that for the previous presidential election.

Since the passing of the 1997 electoral reform, the interest of Colombian regional politicians in transnational issues seems to have increased. Several politicians, as well as prominent academics, have publicly acknowledged the national importance of migrants not only because of their economic contributions, but also because of their role as a) national citizens (potential voters and political allies in Colombian politics) whose rights, regardless of their legal status abroad, should be protected by the national government, and b) advocates of national interests *vis-à-vis* the US government (see, for example, Maingot 1998; Tokatlián 1998, p. 76).

The election of Dr. López, to take an example, has galvanized immigrant political leaders, especially those representing the traditional parties abroad. Migrant leaders are now pushing Senate approval of a law regulating the creation of a special electoral district abroad, as called for by article 176 of the 1991 Constitution. If this law is passed, migrants would be able to elect a representative to the Colombian House of Representatives, as approved in the 1991 Constitution. To this end, several migrant organizations are now counting on the support of several national politicians and prestigious scholars and public intellectuals (see Tokatlián 1998). One of the strongest supporters of the approval of the special district is liberal senator Piedad Córdoba (from the Antioquia Department, one of the principal sources of migrants to the United States). In one of her visits to New York City, Senator Córdoba emphasized the political significance of being able to coordinate 'doing politics in Colombia and in the United States'. She stated that 'the approval of the special district abroad [had] gained great importance', given the dispersion of Colombians throughout the world and the fact that 'the world

today is totally interdependent and totally intercommunicated'. There is an 'urgent need to elect Colombians to public posts and to seek political power in the United States using as a basis the organization of the Colombian political parties,' she concluded (cited in *el diario/la prensa* 1997).

Socio-cultural transnational activities

The transnational cultural ties connecting migrants and their places of origin are as varied in form, content and reach as the class and ethno-racial composition of the migration population itself. In fact, *cale os* and *pereiranos* in the United States are connected to their home cities by a wide, ambiguous and complex transnational cultural web. Transnational cultural activities include frequent exchanges of folkloric dance groups, professional and amateur soccer teams (there is even an annual tournament in Pereira, in which New York teams participate), and US tours of famous popular orchestras, singers and plastic artists.⁹ There is a constant flow of people travelling back and forth visiting relatives on the other end of the loop, especially during local and religious holidays such as Holy Week, Christmas, Mother's Day, summer vacations, and each city's annual *ferias*. Soccer and music, are perhaps the most important 'national' symbols, which seem to cross class and regional lines. As one of our informants put it, 'one of the few things that unite Colombians within and outside the country is soccer'. Soccer in Colombia generates more followers and interest than almost any other expression of Colombian life.

As cultural connections grow at the grass roots, so does the interest of corporate Colombia in capturing the demand of the expanding Colombian *colonias* in the United States. Radio and television networks and national print media have included the migrant population abroad among their target audience. *Caracol*, the largest Colombian radio and TV network, has stations in the Miami metropolitan area, while *RCN*, the second largest network, has stations in the New York metropolitan area. *Cromos*, one of the largest Colombian weeklies, has a special edition produced in Miami. Meanwhile, the principal national newspapers and magazines are distributed regularly in Colombian-owned businesses. Mass media not only carry news back and forth, but also help to reproduce cultural expressions by airing Colombian music, sports events, talk shows, celebrations of traditional and patriotic holidays, and so forth.

Despite all this close interconnection between migrant settlements abroad and these cities, we did not find any stable, ongoing migrant-based organization or collective initiative, either in Cali or Pereira. We did find, however, several cases in which immigrants had informally gathered voluntary monetary and non-monetary contributions to meet some

specific local need in their locality of origin, such as providing scholarships for the poor, building a classroom, contributing equipment to hospitals and other public facilities, or donating fire trucks, ambulances, and so forth. However, none of these initiatives was carried out by stable organizations. Rather, they were performed by ad hoc groups aimed at specific projects. The level of mistrust is such that the whole process of implementation of these projects is often carefully video taped, and later shown to all contributors to prove the honesty of the operation. Once the intended goal is achieved, the group is unceremoniously dissolved.

The processes of cultural production, transformation, and appropriation vary by class and ethnicity. In some cases, migrants' appropriation of some North American tastes and customs seems to overwhelm their own original identity. This type of rupture is noticeable among younger migrants, migrants involved in the drug trade, and those from Colombian ethnoracial minorities. In particular, this process of cultural hybridization is conspicuous among African Colombian migrants, many of whom are originally from the Pacific Coast and Cali. One of our informants referring to the young migrant population of African descent, indicated that:

Black people lack a sense of Colombian identity. There is lots of resentment against the state and the Colombian society. Black people want to create their own identity and they see in the United States the possibility of getting ahead. When they watch U.S. made T.V. programs they notice that black Americans appear as the best athletes, as singers, as victorious, owning beautiful houses and cars; and all that dazzle them.

African Colombians have historically been excluded and discriminated against in Colombia (Wade 1993). Appropriating part of the 'American dream' may promise them a kind of upward mobility that is denied to them in Colombia. In a personal interview, Teodora Hurtado Saa, a sociologist who recently finished a study of the migration of African Colombians from the port of Buenaventura (Hurtado Saa 1996), pointed out that African Colombian migrants' 'consumption patterns, behaviors, attitudes, and way of dressing are taken from the African American population, a group with whom they identify and aspire to be like.' Migration, however, is clearly not enough to overcome the barriers of racism. 'Many of them are perceived as foreigners there and as *norte os* here,' Hurtado Saa added (Field interview, October 1996).

A cultural dimension of transnational activities that may have deeper consequences is the importation, domestication and consumption of multiple cultural symbols and practices through migration and narco-trafficking. This cultural hybridization has already had important consequences for identities and social relations in the localities involved.

Drug trafficking has created transnational social spaces that have affected the economic and socio-cultural behaviours of migrants and non-migrants. Migrants and *traquetos*, as drug traffickers are usually called, have brought to these two Colombian metropolises US-inner city fashion styles, music (rap, techno), and other 'global' cultural symbols and practices that influence people who have never left their localities of origin, and in this sense have become transnationalized. In Cali and Pereira, the globalization of capital has led to the creation of new drug subcultures that are connected to transnational migration. These *culturas del narcotráfico*, as they are called, are dominated by a cult of quick money, the monetization of social relations, sumptuary consumerism, and the use of violence to solve private disputes (see Hurtado Saa 1996; Salazar and Jaramillo 1996).

Beyond cultural effects, drug trafficking has resulted in an interesting kind of social regrouping. Unlike the social fragmentation prevalent among migrants in general, it seems as though drug trafficking has generated multiple, small, well-bounded 'transnational communities'. These 'communities' are bound not only by members' common economic interests, but also by a sense of solidarity, trust, and jealously enforced by the group (for the concepts of 'bounded solidarity' and 'enforceable trust' see Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). Solidarity is both vertical (uniting the *patrón* and all the ranks of the organization) and horizontal (connecting members of the same rank). Vertical and horizontal solidarity are often amalgamated by a) a strong sense of regional identity and superiority – such as, being *paisa* (from a region that stretches from Medellín to the Eje Cafetero), or *Cale o* (from Cali).

At a more general level, it seems as though nationalistic feelings among Colombians were cloaked while living in their own country, and revealed while outside of it. This nationalism is, however, a highly 'localized' patriotic feeling, which is associated with the family, the locality (literally the *barrio*) and region of origin. Even at massive celebrations, regional identities are often openly overlaid on national symbols as a statement reaffirming regional differentiation, as one of us observed in the massive Colombian independence day festival last summer in Queens (see Plate 1). We also noted that for Colombians abroad, nationalism is episodic, expressed in sudden, short bursts of national pride and celebration, or massive, and ephemeral expressions of solidarity in cases of natural disasters or national tragedies.

The migration experience results in a transnational identity that either facilitates or hinders migrants' access to business and other opportunities in both countries. Transnational migrants that we call 'successful', experience a stronger *cultural* and *legal* sense of transnational identity than less successful migrants. In fact, during our fieldwork, we perceived that the former seemed more likely to be dual US-Colombian citizens and be less 'localized' than their less fortunate counterparts. As Mr. Lara, the owner of the import-export company in Cali, confided:

Plate 1. 'Regional nationalism'



Note the 'CALI' name written on the national flag to emphasize regional differences. Colombian Independence Day Festival, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Queens, NY, 26 July 1997. [Photo by Luis Eduardo Guarnizo]

I've started feeling that I'm no longer Colombian; it is true that I was born in Colombia, but crossing borders and living with people from different cultures have created in me a spirit of being a citizen of the world. One assimilates to the ways of each country. One learns to live together and respect other cultures and this makes easier to do business with people from very different places. I believe that being a citizen of the world is going to be the status of the next century.

Conversely, we perceived that for those of humbler origins, the fluidity of their identity oscillated between the local (*cale o, paisa*), the national (Colombian), and the transnational (dual US-Colombian citizen at most). Apparently, the better-off migrants tend to acquire, as it were, a 'global,' less localized sense of identity, whereas the majority seems to have a more localized, 'translocal' sense of identity. This observation remains a hypothesis to be tested, though.

Conclusions

The construction of the Colombian nation, as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) based on a shared repertoire of cultural discourses and

practices (Anthias and Yuval Davis 1993) has not been consolidated yet. The feeling of belonging to the Colombian nation is still overshadowed by regional and ethnoracial identities. The process of transnationalizing migrants' relations is therefore uneven and fragmented. Often, before identifying themselves as Colombian, people identify themselves and are identified by fellow Colombians according to their place and region of origin and ethnoracial group.

Building economic, political, and socio-cultural relations between the United States and Colombia is a complex, uneven process, particularly because of migrants' social and cultural heterogeneity and segmentation. Specifically, Colombian migrants are divided by different regional cultures, class origins, ethnicity, and circumstances of migration. This multi-layered heterogeneity has resulted in heterogeneous, fragmented, and differentiated transnational activities, whose viability is in part moulded by the effects of the dominant stereotype of Colombians as drug traffickers. The social support needed to gain access to transnational opportunities and activities is unevenly distributed among closed social networks. The transnational activities that we identified have been created and consolidated through social networks that tend to be well-bounded (that is, participation is carefully regulated); have low centrality (that is, relations are not centralized making it easier to mutually monitor participants); and have high multiplexity (participants are related in more than one sphere, – kinship, business, clubs) (see Portes 1995, pp. 8–12). These networks are embedded in broad transnational fields of social, cultural and political reproduction.

Transnational entrepreneurs, due to their diverse class origins, appeared to possess a differentiated 'embodied knowledge' (Fernández-Kelly 1995, p. 223), that is, an intangible form of knowledge useful in dealing with transnational conditions. Migrants of a higher-class origin seem to have availed themselves of the more appropriate embodied knowledge, which is not readily available to their poorer compatriots. Furthermore, group solidarity among Colombians, a crucial component of entrepreneurial success, especially across national borders, is class-based (horizontal solidarity), rather than ethnonationally-based (vertical solidarity).¹⁰ However, the mistrust and exclusion generated by the stigma of drugs, regionalism and racism, prevent even horizontal solidarity from expanding. This process results in high levels of social fragmentation that impede the formation of larger economic, political, socio-cultural transnational ventures and regroupings. In other words, we observed a transnational field of action, but not the formation of a transnational *community*. Ironically, the only Colombians who seem to enjoy extended social cohesion (vertical and horizontal solidarity and reciprocity) are those organized around drug trafficking. Such circles are characterized by patron-client relations, the introjection of similar collective values, bounded solidarity and enforceable trust (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993).

While preliminary and in need of rigorous testing, however, our findings clearly indicate that transnational processes are indeed a) socially bound (that is, they are embedded in social relations and expectations that bind across national boundaries); b) territorialized (that is, they occur in specific locations that provide certain opportunities and set limits to their reach); and c) they do not overcome class, racial and regional differences, categories which remain significant analytical tools for the analysis of transnational migration in general. Our goal is to pursue this kind of analysis in the second stage of our ongoing comparative research project.

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Notes

1. The first, and until recently the most important official initiative to promote the return of highly-skilled migrants was the *Programa de retorno de profesionales y técnicos*, introduced in 1972 (Decree 1397, August 16, 1972, Ministry of Finance and Public Credit). This one-year programme granted special fiscal and financial incentives to professionals, technicians, and scientific researchers to return to work in Colombia (for an assessment of the effects of this programme see Mesa *et al.* 1980).
2. This study forms part of the first phase of data collection of a larger comparative research project investigating the economic, political, and socio-economic relations established by Colombian, Dominican, and Salvadoran migrants between Colombia and the United States. The study is directed by Alejandro Portes and Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and has been funded by grants from the National Science Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.
3. These figures were calculated from Tables 20 and 20.1 of the 1993 Census. These tables report the number of children of women 12 years and older who were residing abroad.
4. According to the 1993 Colombian Census, 5.8 per cent of the total number of children born to women 12 and older in this department were residing abroad, and 96 per cent of them from urban areas (DANE 1996a, Table 15).
5. This is a reference to smuggling drug money back to Colombia.
6. Informants' names have been changed to preserve their anonymity.
7. These stern regulations were soon followed by national measures (Presidential Decree 1735, 1993) and specific rules issued by other national agencies, such as the national Banking Commission and the Directorate of National Taxes and Customs. On June 10, 1997, the Central Bank issued a new set of directives (Circular Reglamentaria 61) to further regulate the reporting system, especially regarding the identification of customers and other procedures to be followed by *casas de cambio*.

8. Wet merchandise (*mercancía mojada*) is an expression for recently smuggled drugs.
9. The most popular orchestras are often invited to perform in festivals, such as at the National Independence Day, and private clubs in New York, New Jersey and Miami. The most famous orchestras are from Cali and some of them, like Grupo Niche and Guayacán, play recently composed songs related to migration (Grupo Niche 1991, cut 8).
10. For a discussion of horizontal and vertical solidarity see Granovetter 1995, pp. 131–7.

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