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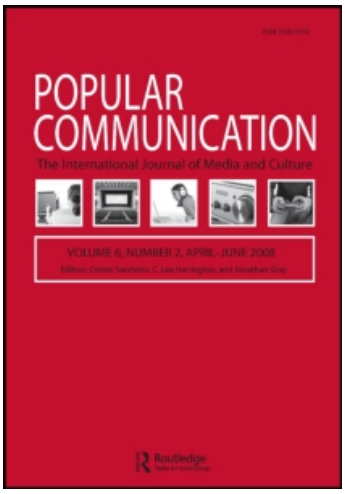

Popular Communication
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t775653693

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Online Publication Date: 01 January 2008

To cite this Article Vargas, Lucila(2008)'Ambiguous Loss and the Media Practices of Transnational Latina Teens: A Qualitative Study',Popular Communication,6:1,37 — 52
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/15405700701697587
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15405700701697587

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Popular Communication, 6: 37–52, 2008
Copyright © Taylor & Francis Group, LLC
ISSN 1540-5702 print / 1540-5710 online
DOI: 10.1080/15405700701697587

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Ambiguous Loss and the Media Practices of Transnational Latina Teens: A Qualitative Study

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Drawing on ethnographic data from a study with 17 working-class, transnational Latina teens, I examine the media practices they perform to cope with *ambiguous loss*. According to Pauline Boss (1993, 1999, 2006), ambiguous loss refers to a distinct type of loss that defies closure, such as the feelings of the family of a missing person. My findings suggest that Latina teens use media to recreate cultural spaces, bridge gaps between the familiar and the foreign, and sustain a sense of historical continuity. I argue that many of the teens' media practices are rituals of both bereavement and reincarnation; as such, media practices may be essential not only to successfully cope with ambiguous loss but also to develop resiliency and to construct transnational subjectivities.

Migration is not a single event but a lengthy process.[1] Migrant families spend years planning their departure and then years establishing themselves in the "host" country. During this process, they live in a liminal zone. Being "neither here nor there" engenders confusion about the world and may bring about a loss of the sense of self. For migrant youth who are also in "betwixt and between" life stages the compounded transition can be traumatic. Statistics regarding the high incidence of depression and suicide among Latina teens, as well as evidence of their high levels of emotional vulnerability (Hovey & King, 1996; Vargas-Willis, 1987; Zayas, Lester, Cabassa, & Fortuna, 2005), suggest that navigating multiple transitions is extremely challenging. Given the saliency of media and popular culture in the lives of today's adolescent migrants, research on their media practices is urgently needed. Latina/o adolescents are largely invisible in the research of most academic fields, however, and studies of the uses of media by these teens are quite rare (Montero-Sieburth & Villauruel, 2000).

[1] *Un millón de gracias* to the Latina teens who participated in my study. I also appreciate the help from my editor Jennifer Drolet and from Kelly Toon, who was my research assistant during the Durham program. Also thanks to anonymous reviewers and to Jane Brown, Cornel Sandvoss, C. Lee Harrington, and Jonathan Gray, who offered me useful suggestions. My work was made possible by a Chapman Family Fellowship and by grants from the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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My aim in this essay is to contribute to a clearer representation of the ways in which working-class, transnational Latina teens[2] use media to deal with the chaos and disjunctions that come with migration. Following the lead of Celia Jaes Falicov (1998; 2001/2002), who has used the notion of *ambiguous loss* to cast light onto the meaning of migration loss for Latinas/os, I explore the uses of media of a small group of teens. The notion of ambiguous loss was developed by Pauline Boss (Boss, 1993, 1999, 2006) and it refers to a distinctive kind of loss that defies closure, such as the uncertainty and sadness felt by the families of missing persons, by the children of Alzheimer's patients, or by immigrants who crave what they left behind (Boss, 1999). I argue that, to a great extent, transnational Latina teens use media and popular culture to cope with ambiguous loss, and that successfully coping with this loss may be prerequisite to developing resiliency and constructing whole transnational subjectivities.

Media anthropology scholars have dealt with the broader questions of mobility and ritualistic uses of media that concern me in this paper (e.g., Morley, 2000). Especially germane is the body of literature on the domestication of technologies theory (Silverstone & Hirsh, 1992) and on the production of locality, the process whereby we construct a sense of belonging (Appadurai, 1996; Sampedro, 1998; Tufte, 2001). I draw on this line of research, particularly on Roger Silverstone's (1993) argument that media provide ontological security in the postmodern world by occupying the transitional space between self and other, but my argument is primarily built on Boss's notion of ambiguous loss. This term refers to a distinctive type of loss that is vague and defies closure, such as the turbulent emotions felt by the family of a missing person, as opposed to clear-cut losses such as death. Falicov (1998; 2001/2002) has applied Boss's insights to cast light on the meaning of migration loss for transnational Latina/o families. She has specifically examined the functions of family rituals and their potential for helping migrants live with ambiguous loss.

In this essay, I interpret ethnographic material collected from a project with 17 working-class, transnational Latina teens who live in the U.S. South. As immigrant Latinas in the United States, these young women occupy subordinate positions in their schools and U.S. society. Following a discussion of theoretical and methodological considerations, I talk about the multiple journeys of the transnational teen by presenting a self-description of one teen's crossings, which illustrates how migration traverses the adolescence of these teens. Then, because toys are popular culture artifacts that are increasingly tied to media, I discuss toys and playfulness. After that, I illustrate the way teens use children's media to cope with anxieties produced by the separation that is part and parcel of the immigrant experience. In addition, I discuss the teens' use of media to maintain a sense of continuity and to develop resiliency. To conclude, I highlight the most salient uses of media I found and clarify the contribution of the study to research on Latina/o youth and to scholarship on youth, media, and mobility.

[2]By the term *transnational Latina teens* I refer to both first- and second-generation young women of Latin American and Caribbean descent. With the adjective *transnational* I mean to highlight that they go through adolescence while also crisscrossing national borders. Traveling back and forth between the home and the host countries, or *circular migration* (Rouse, 1995), is not unusual in their social networks, and ties to the home country are continuously reproduced by transborder media and interpersonal telecommunication.

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AMBIGUOUS LOSS AND MEDIA PRACTICES

The concept of ambiguous loss comes from the work of Pauline Boss, who combines insights from her own clinical practice with a broad theoretical foundation that draws on phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and social constructivism. Her social psychological perspective on family stress highlights social and contextual factors. This research assumes that the psychological construction of family, which may overlap or be at odds with the physical family, plays a vital role in loss and trauma as well as in health and resiliency. Along with its emphasis on the grief and mourning brought up by loss, Boss's theory underscores that ambiguity and uncertainty also entail hope and openings: "In the confusion and lack of rigidity lie opportunities for creativity and new ways of being," she argues (1999, p. 9). She points out that people need to reconstruct their own perceptions of who they are to successfully navigate through life stages and other changes that bring losses of various kinds. All cultures have created rituals to help people cope with clear-cut losses such as death, observes Boss (1999), and most societies have rituals that mark life-cycle changes, such as the funeral and the wedding. Still, most cultures lack rituals for ambiguous losses.

Boss distinguishes two types of ambiguous loss. The first type is "perceiving loved ones as present when they are physically gone," such as when persons are missing due to war or natural disasters, kidnapping, or incarceration. More common situations include divorce, adoption, and relocation. The second type is perceiving loved ones "as gone when they are physically present" (Boss, 1999, p. 7), such as with cases of Alzheimer's disease, addictions, and chronic mental illness or homesickness and extreme preoccupation with work (Boss, 2006, p. 9). Migration involves features of both types, for example, parents may be physically present, but psychologically, they may stay behind in the home country and thus be emotionally unavailable; grandparents may be physically far away but still be the predominant members of a child's psychological family.

In her application of this theory to clinical work with migrant Latina/o families, Falicov (2001/2002) has stressed the function of rituals and their significance for helping families cope with the numerous ambiguous losses that come with migration while, at the same time, helping them to gradually incorporate aspects of the new culture into their everyday lives. Among the various types of rituals described by Falicov, "spontaneous rituals" performed by migrant families illuminate the use of media to cope with migration loss. These include rituals of memory (e.g., telling stories about the home country), rituals of re-creation of public spaces and ethnic networks (e.g., neighborhoods like Little Italy), rituals of connection (e.g., sending money back home), and traditional cultural rituals that deal with the life-cycle, religion, healing, and daily life.

Although Boss and Falicov are interested in family therapy rather than in media practices, ethnographies of the media consumption of diasporic groups (Durham, 2004; Gillespie, 1995; Mayer, 2003a, 2003b; Rojas, 2004; Tufte, 2001) have documented that media are thoroughly implicated in many of the rituals that Falicov identifies. Falicov includes calling home among the rituals of connection, and she points out that watching television is one of the everyday rituals that may help families gradually incorporate elements of the host culture. Falicov's ideas find ample support in the extensive scholarship on media and popular culture rituals (see Couldry, 2003). Boss seems less optimistic regarding media, however, when she mentions the "obsession with computer games, Internet, TV" as a situation that may result in ambiguous loss by making someone psychologically absent for other family members (Boss, 2006, p. 9).

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MEDIA AND THE SENSE OF ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY

To frame my interpretation of the teens' talk about their media practices, I complement Boss's theory with Silverstone's interpretation of ontological security and media as transitional objects. Drawing on Anthony Giddens's theory of the structuration of everyday life, Silverstone suggests that media (television, in particular), with its "veritable dailiness" and its structuring relation to daily routines, help people manage the threat of chaos and keep a sense of ontological security. In Giddens's definition, ontological security is "the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (cited by Silverstone, 1993, p. 577). To Giddens's argument that ontological security is based on the experience of basic trust, Silverstone adds that such development also requires the experience of the symbolic. Therefore, he incorporates a key insight from Donald W. Winnicott's (1971) reformulation of psychoanalytic theory: the transitional object. Winnicott hypothesizes that during the developmental stage that he calls "transitional experience," the infant begins to separate from her mother and to distinguish between inner and outer worlds. In this liminal, potential space, the child encounters the paradox of having to keep "inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 2). This space is where play, creativity, and the symbolic emerge, but it is also the source of much anxiety. The mother's breast, which the child perceives as neither internal nor external, alleviates anxiety and is later replaced by other transitional objects. Silverstone argues that people use media to deal with transitional phenomena. His compelling argument, which is part of an elaborate theory of the place of television in everyday life, has been widely discussed in research on media consumption, and it finds support in empirical research on "ethnic media" and diasporic audiences (Gillespie, 1995; Naficy, 1993; Ogan, 2001).

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METHODOLOGY

The essay is based on ethnographic material from an action-research project with 17 working-class transnational Latina teens. Action-research is a broad term that encompasses many methodological approaches that seek to understand social phenomena and at the same empower the participants. I followed the Southern Cross University approach (Dick, 2000).[3] My project included two phases; during each one, I implemented an after-school program on media literacy.[4] As "interventions," such programs aimed to be teaching-learning spaces for the development of critical media literacy skills. Then, as the "sites" for my fieldwork, they aimed to facilitate participant observation and in-depth interviewing.

In 2002 I taught a semester-long course in Durham, North Carolina, and in 2004 I taught a summer course in nearby Carrboro. Like other cities in the U.S. South, Durham and Carrboro had little history as a destination for Latina/o immigrant streams until the 1990s. Until recently, the residents of Durham (pop. 187,035) were equally divided between Blacks and Whites. Latina/os now make up a small segment (8.6%) of the population (Blacks are 43.8% and Whites are 45.5%). Carrboro (pop. 16,784) prides itself for its commitment to cultural diversity and

[3]In the Southern Cross University approach to action research, the extent of participation may range from participants being co-researchers to only actively participating as informants (Dick, 2000).

[4]For further explanation of the after-school programs see Vargas (2006).

tolerance of alternative lifestyles. Most residents are White (72.7%), and the proportion of Blacks and Latina/os is similar (13.5% Black, 12.3% Latina/o) (United States Census Bureau, 2000). Initially my plan was limited to the Durham program, but I became acutely aware of the links between media practices and separation and decided to collect further material from teens for whom the memory of crossing the border was still very fresh. I chose Durham and Carrboro in large part because I had access to the community organizations that helped me carry out the project. My systematic observations were mostly limited to interactions within the framework of the programs, but I also drew on my years of both personal and professional involvement in the local Latina/o community. I have not found any evidence suggesting that the social world and media experience of the teens who participated in my project might be significantly different from those of other working-class, transnational Latina teens living in the U.S. South.

The urgent need for research on Latina/o youth and my interest in women's lives led me to work with young women. Through community organizations, I recruited 17 teens between the ages of 12 and 20 years. Twelve were foreign-born (seven Mexicans, two Salvadorans, one Venezuelan, one Honduran, and one Colombian), four were the U.S.-born children of Salvadorans, and one was born in Puerto Rico. The foreign-born teens had lived in the United States from a few months to 11 years. Most of the 17 teens lived in modest neighborhoods, and their parents held working-class jobs. Some had participated in the informal labor market by cleaning houses. Regarding race and ethnicity, these young women saw themselves as different from White, Black, and Asian American youth. Their bodies mirrored the diversity of U.S. Latinas and—more importantly—the foreign-born teens were intensely experiencing the effects of racialization. The immigrant experience and residency status of both the young women and their parents were key factors that shaped their ongoing identity (re)construction projects. While the teens' wide range of developmental stages, levels of bilingualism, national origin, and immigration experience brought in dire challenges for the programs' pedagogical goals (Vargas, 2006) they offered a wide variety of individual experiences.

In both programs, we met once a week for 90 minutes at the community center. In Durham, I recruited 12 teens and held 12 sessions; in Carrboro, I recruited five teens and held five sessions. I also met individually with nine Durham teens and with all five Carrboro teens.[5] I audio-recorded the group sessions, as well as the 30- to 45-minute individual interviews. I took field notes of my interactions with the teens and about the media they brought to the class, such as cell phones, CDs, and magazines. I also collected materials produced by them, such as media worksheets. Finally, because I was particularly interested in changes and continuities in the teens' media practices during the migration process, I collected what I call *media narratives of self* through two methods that I adapted from anthropology and sociology (Vargas, 2004). One is the *life media calendar*, which aims to uncover aspects of people's media practices throughout time, and the other is the *who I am collage*, which allows teens to compose a visual narrative by pasting magazine cut-outs onto a poster. The calendar is a method widely used

[5]My university's Academic Affairs Institutional Review Board approved the project. During recruitment, I did my best to explain to the teens and to their parents that one of the program's purposes was to investigate the teens' media practices. Then, I dedicated half of the first class to further clarifying my research aims. The teens were offered a few schools supplies, snacks, and a gift certificate for their participation. In Carrboro, teens were offered $40. In Durham, teens were offered $50 plus an official certificate of completion of the course.

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by sociologists; the collage was inspired by the work of Wendy Lutrell (2003).[6] After the first class session, the teens composed their collages as homework; my directions for this assignment did not specifically stress media. In their visual narratives, thus, the teens "talked" about media without my direct prompting. However, it is important to keep in mind that they made these collages for a media literacy class. I collected calendars from all teens, and 14 explained them to me during individual meetings. I also collected 16 collages, and 15 teens presented their work to the class. Naturally, I had to work within the inherent limitations of after-school programs (e.g., participant self-selection). Although my programs' attrition and absenteeism rates are not uncommon in programs in which attendance is not mandatory (Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, & Muhlenbruck, 2000), they do represent a limitation of the study. In Durham, six teens attended between 8 and 11 sessions, and the other six attended only about half of the program's class time. In Carrboro, three teens attended between four and five sessions, but the remaining two attended only three sessions.

Notwithstanding the age and class differences between us, the teens' feelings of ambiguous loss resonate with my own. Like many of the teens, my son grew up between two countries because I migrated to the United States following economic opportunity. To use Gloria Anzaldúa's phrase, I share a "state of soul" with the teens that enabled me to bond with many of them (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999, p. 84). Our roles were those of students and teacher, but the subject matter of the class and its Freirean pedagogical approach, based on dialogue and experiential knowledge (Freire, 1999), made possible less authoritarian relationships than those that typically develop in classrooms. Language usage was crucial for bonding too. At class, we constantly code-switched between English and Spanish, and on more than one occasion, the teens corrected my English pronunciation.

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MULTIPLE JOURNEYS OF TRANSNATIONAL TEENS

A perceptive teen who had been in the United States only a few months at the time of the fieldwork, Paty composed an eloquent narrative of her ongoing passage to womanhood. In it, she described the multiple transitions implicated in the adolescence of the transnational teen. Her narrative emerged first in the collage in Figure 1, and it subsequently took an oral form during class. Like many of the teens in my study, Paty (age 15)[7] has lived long periods separated from family members, and she developed strong attachments to those who acted as a surrogate family. The following excerpt comes from the "show and tell" session in which Paty explained her collage to the class. As were most of the excerpts that I quote in this essay, this dialogue was originally in Spanish, but for reasons of space I include only my translation:[8]

Paty: When she [my sister] left, better said [when she] came here, and I stayed in Mexico. And all this represents my life when she left, friends, boyfriend [...] then here I put, represent, that I came [...] to the United States [...] and this is the path [giggles]. Here is when I'm here, in the United States.

[6]Lutrell's book was published in 2003, but I was fortunate enough to hear her talk about her on-going research years before.

[7]I use pseudonyms to refer to the teens. Numbers in parentheses indicate age.

[8]I conducted the individual interviews mostly in Spanish, but, as it happened in the class sessions, the teens often code-switched between Spanish and English.

FIGURE 1 Who I Am Collage by Paty (age 15): Representing Her Passage into Womanhood.

Lucila: That means, when you were a child, when your sister left, then you had friends and your boyfriend, that's right? You didn't have your sister anymore.

Paty: Uh, uh. Then all my life [...] everything that was worth anything were my friends. I have found something that made me happy.

Lucila: And then you came here?

Paty: I mean, they gave me my sister back, but, like, mmm. [....]

Lucila: And then here [pointing toward the lower right side of the collage], it seems like there's a lot of sadness, no?

Paty: All of this is the United States. Here this is supposed to be, I mean, I represent here, when for example people have tried to be close to me, and perhaps for a while I was inside my shell, and, I didn't want to make friends. [...]

Lucila: And this girl here?

Paty: Then, this is not anymore, I'm alone but, I put there "wait," like, like I'm alone but at least I'm resigned that I'm going to wait to come back.

The dialogue and Paty's visual narrative movingly show that transnational teens go through adolescence while also navigating many other difficult transitions. Paty first had to adjust to living without the sister who left for the United States ahead of her, and then she herself had to leave behind familiar surroundings and relationships and adapt to another culture and to new relationships. Paty had lived through the numerous separations that characterize the migration experience, and she was coping with ambiguous loss. That the teens were intensively dealing

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with migration loss became apparent to me when I screened *Almost a Woman* (Kaplan, 2001), a docudrama that describes the adolescence of Puerto Rican writer Esmeralda Santiago who moved to Brooklyn, New York, at age 13. I noted that the teens were nodding and showing other expressions of agreement when young Esmeralda talked about her migration losses. During a scene when she is longing for her father, who stayed in Puerto Rico, the Puerto Rican teen in the program, Leticia (12), commented: "She's like all of us." Leticia's volunteered comment was remarkable because up to that point, she had seldom spoken in class.

At the time of the fieldwork, only two of the teens were not living with their mothers, but seven had spent long periods away from them. Susana (16), Carla (13), and Natalia (16), for example, lived several years with their grandmothers while their mothers worked in the United States. Most of the Durham teens lived in households headed by single mothers, a "new transnational family form" that, according to Pierrette Hongdagneu-Sotelo (2002, p. 259), has become more common. In cases of two-parent families, the migration pattern was more typical: the father came first and the family followed.

For transnational families, kin networks are extremely important because migration typically depends on their support. In many cases, children are left behind with relatives until the parents establish themselves in the host country. When the children join their parents, the joy of reunion is mixed with the ambiguous loss resulting from the separation of the kin left behind. Susana, for example, left the grandmother who kept her for most of her childhood; Lidia (14) left her father and grandmother; and Natalia's (16) migration was precipitated by the death of the grandparents who raised her. Peers left behind represented painful losses, too. In her calendar, Carmen (17) put "cousin" as her closest relationship the year before her migration; Gabriela (19) included her cousins as some of her closest relationships during the entire decade prior to her migration; and Carla (13), who only put names of friends and "cousins" as her closest relationships, expressed her yearning for the life she lived in Mexico with her "more than ten" cousins. As Paty notes in the excerpt above, leaving her friends was difficult because they were "everything that was worth anything."

Migration, however, also meant that new rituals of connection were created. Like other girls do, these teens were avid users of the telephone and most used the Internet to chat. Yet their engagement with these media was different in the sense that it was also a migrant ritual of connection. On describing her collage to the class, Gabriela (19) pointed out the words "love.com" and said: "Oh, because this person [she refers to the picture of a Latino boy] lives far away, so we're always keeping in touch through computer, telephone, letters." And Paty (15) said about the cutout of a computer in her collage: "Actually my life is based on the computer because it's the only way I have to communicate with my friends, it's the computer." Yet Carmen (17) explained her collage by saying: "latinchat.com is because, it's not, I chat with other people from different countries, get to know them, and everybody knows me there." These are new rituals of connection that the teens had created, but while Gabriela and Paty talked about keeping old relationships, Carmen spoke of making new ones.

PLAY, PLAYFULNESS, AND MATERIAL CULTURE

Because teens spend large amounts of time with media and because many of their leisure activities are tied to media, the ending of media rituals—especially those that they performed

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with other children—may be significantly disruptive of their play and playfulness. When asked about why they listened to certain music or watched certain television shows, the teens often responded that it was because friends, siblings, or cousins did so. Since many of the teens spent years with their extended families before migrating, in many cases cousins became as important as siblings. Lidia (14) said that she and her cousin were "like sisters." Gabriela (19) explained watching *He-Man* at ages 11-12, saying: "And *He-Man* was for my cousins, because the super hero, the one who can do anything, then that was the fad at the time, the, *He-Man* and the *Power Rangers." He-Man* was one of the first cartoons based on a toy (Mattel's *Masters of the Universe* series). Because the pervasive merchandising that exists in children's media has blurred the line between media and artifacts such as dolls, I included a column for "favorite toy" in the calendar. I found that leaving toys behind seems to accentuate the loss of childhood that adolescents typically suffer. Most of the teens mentioned Barbie as one of their favorite toys as children, but for Carmen (17), who said that she used to have a "huge" collection of Barbies, the doll seemed to have had special significance. Carmen had also talked at length about her devotion to Selena, the famous Texan singer, but when I asked her if she had the Selena Barbie, she complained bitterly that her parents did not allow her to buy it: "I wanted to, but my parents didn't let me, like buying many things, they used to tell me all the time, no, that *how was I going to take all that"* [my emphasis]. This means that her parents did not want to spend money on artifacts that would have to be left behind. Working-class families cannot carry much with them when they emigrate. For the children, having to separate from toys that often become transitional objects can be quite distressing and jeopardize their sense of ontological security. Boss argues that "the process of reconstructing identity after loss requires embracing change while maintaining some historical continuity" (2006, p. 127). Reflecting on Susana's (16) life narrative, I came to the conclusion that she felt great confusion at the time of her migration, which coincided with her early adolescence. Since she was lively and assertive and wrote in her collage the words "I'm happy," I was puzzled by her confusion and memory lapses about the time of her migration. Then I noticed that her favorite toy from ages 4-11 was "a tiger," but that she had left blank the space for favorite toy at the time of her migration. At age 14, when Susana mastered English and returned to participating in extracurricular activities, she wrote in her calendar: "I bought a new tiger." Like Linus's blanket in Schultz's cartoons, the tiger served as a transitional object. The loss of self that adolescents typically experience was exacerbated by migration, but Susana was able to regain a sense of ontological security, recover her playfulness, and thrive in her new environment. By buying a new tiger, she established continuity while constructing a new identity. Susana appeared to develop resilience and regain her strong sense of self at least in part through her family media rituals family. For instance, Susana was one of only two teens who marked in their worksheets that they watch television with their families "most often." During a class when we were discussing movie watching, she said: "In my home my mother rents a bunch of DVDs and everybody at home, everybody there, everybody in the living room, watching, all the movies, we spend hours there and until midnight [watching]." By renting "a bunch of DVDs" Susana's mother encouraged a family ritual that kept "everybody in the living room."

Everyday media rituals in the private and familiar space of Susana's home helped her to successfully cope with ambiguous loss. By contrast, when Natalia was about to migrate and join her mother after many years of separation, she developed a strange illness that, according to her, doctors could not explain. Most likely, it was a somatization of her anxiety, but Natalia had

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another explanation. She had been an avid consumer of horror media until the traditional healer who cured her of her illness recommended that she cease consuming this content. She said:

> That's why I stopped reading horror books. Because the healer told me that those were super bad energies for me, and since I have been into that all my life, because, I don't know, I was fascinated [by horror content], I wanted to find out more about the, the after-world, but I never found anything, I wanted to know how the witches were, how they, whether the devil existed or not, all of that.

The healer's advice may well have helped her overcome her distress. The research on mood management suggests that horror content aggravates anxiety and depression (Zillmann, 1991). What is fascinating is the cultural syncretism embedded in her story of illness and media use. Natalia went on to channel her curiosity into astronomy and medicine, but at the time of the fieldwork she did not engage in family media rituals that may have helped her keep a sense of ontological security. Natalia was the teen who most consistently reported watching television alone and never talking about media texts with her mother or other family members.

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TRANSNATIONAL USES OF CHILDREN'S MEDIA

In her ethnographic work on the media consumption practices of a small group of working-class Latina/o teens, Vicki Mayer briefly mentions some children's media (e.g., *Cinderella* movie) and notes that one of the teens said she enjoyed reading a children's book series *(The Babysitter's Club)* and that the Disney channel was among her favorites (Mayer, 2003a, pp. 120-124). Yet Mayer does not explore the function of children's media. Most of the teens in my project had a strong preference for cartoons; for example, animated Disney movies such as *Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, The Little Mermaid*, and *Beauty and the Beast* were among their favorites. In a worksheet asking for the three television shows that they watched most often, several indicated cartoon shows; Carla (13) put *Blue's Clues*, Stephany (14) put *Cita's World*, Susana (16) put *Dora the Explorer*, Natalia (16) put *Sponge Bob Square Pants*, and Gabriela (19) put *Scooby Doo*. In another worksheet asking for the three channels they watched the most, Natalia (16) gave the Cartoon Network as her first choice, Sabrina (15) as her second choice, and Stephany (14) as her third one. Anabel (12) and Paty (15) mentioned the Disney Channel as their first choice, and Leticia (12) and Alex (14) put it as their second one. In addition, Anabel also put Nickelodeon as her third choice, and Isabel (20), who had repeatedly indicated that she did not watch television, mentioned Bugs Bunny's foe, the Tasmanian Devil, as something that she liked to watch "sometimes." Such strong preference for children's media finds an explanation in Silverstone's theory of media as transitional objects, but it can be further explicated by making use of the notion of ambiguous loss. The following excerpt comes from the individual interview with Carla (13), in which I asked her to elaborate on her calendar:

Lucila: And Nickelodeon, why?
Carla: Because it has cartoons, and cartoons, like my brother right now he isn't living with me. The ones he used to watch, no? So, they remind me of him, that's why.
Lucila: Do they remind you of him?
Carla: Yeah.
Lucila: Where is your brother?

Carla: In Mexico, with his father.
Lucila: Uh, uh. And when did he leave?
Carla: Uh, it has been, I guess three or two years.
Lucila: And you miss him a lot. How old is he, five?
Carla: He's five.
Lucila: That means that he left when he was two years old?
Carla: He left when he was two and a half, yeah.
Lucila: And you love him a lot, no? Don't you see him?
Carla: I call him. I didn't bring my wallet, I have his picture there.
Lucila: And that's why you watch TV, because it reminds you of him?
Carla: Yeah. I like that program a lot, with him.
Lucila: Is there any program in particular? That you like?
Carla: Ah! *Aventuras en Pañales (Rugrats)* 'Cause, it's about babies, so it reminds me of him, because he's still a baby, that's why.

The poignancy of this dialogue shows that Carla's cartoon watching was a healing ritual. The fact that she describes her brother as a baby—the way she remembers him—rather than as a five-year-old—the age he was at the time of the interview—tells of her way of keeping him present through a television practice. "In mobile cultures," says Boss, "the people important to us may or may not be the people we live with physically" (2006, p. 30). The excerpt also shows that Carla engaged in what Falicov calls "rituals of connection" by calling her brother and by keeping his picture in her wallet. Further, Carla was creating real and imaginary practices involving music to cope with the physical absence of her brother. She described one of her favorite songs *"La hoja en blanco"* (The Blank Page) as being about "a girl who was left by herself," and she expressed her desire to publicly perform her rendering of Selena's song "*Missing My Baby*." Looking to heal not only herself, but also her psychologically absent mother, she wanted to dedicate her performance to her mother.

DEVELOPING RESILIENCY THROUGH MEDIA PRACTICES

Resiliency is one of the key concepts in the theory of ambiguous loss, and it takes into account both individual and family coping skills. Boss says that resiliency is "the ability to stretch (like elastic) or flex (like a suspension bridge) in response to the pressures and strains of life. When crises occur (as opposed to just pressure, stress, or strain) resiliency is defined as the ability to bounce back to a level of functioning equal to or greater than before the crises" (Boss, 2006, p.40). Rituals serve to strengthen resiliency. Falicov describes the rituals that migrant Latina/o families perform to cope with ambiguous loss. The research on Latina/o audiences indicates that *telenovela* watching is a prevalent media ritual (Barrera & Bielby, 2001; Rojas, 2004). Apart from Lidia (14) and Isabel (20), the teens have access to Univisión, the largest Spanish-language network in the United States. When I inquired about the channels they watched the most, both foreign- and native-born teens mentioned Univisión.[9] *Telenovelas* are the network's

[9]Nine teens (Beatriz [17], Alex [14], Yvet [16], Sabrina [15], Jennifer [14], Carmen [17], Gabriela [19], Leticia [12], and Susana [16]) responded that Univisión was their first most-watched network, and another four (Stephany [15], Daniela [15], Carla [13], and Natalia [16]) said it was their second most-watched channel.

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staple, and the genre is widely popular among both U.S. Latina/o and Latin American audiences (Lopez, 1995). For example, in her reception study with Latina adult women, Rojas found that most of her 27 respondents raised criticisms of Spanish-language television, but "surprisingly, newscasts and soap operas…were almost exempt from respondents' criticism" (Rojas, 2004, p. 132). As in the studies by Mayer (2003b) and Moran (2003), watching *telenovelas* was a ritualistic practice carried out by the teens' caregivers. Talking about her *telenovela* watching at age 9, the year before she emigrated, Alex (14) said: "It is because my babysitter, when I was little, she used to sit me with her, and she liked the *novelas*, so I used to sit with her and I watch them too." Paty (15) also made the same point: "Well, as a matter of fact," she said, "when I was little I used to watch all the *novelas* with my grandmother, because I would spend every day with my grandmother. Then I used to watch all the *novelas*, and I knew their titles and their [giggles]." Paty giggled because *telenovela* watching is a clearly gendered and classed practice and thus the object of much public derision. *Telenovelas* are often a guilty pleasure, which may explain why only eight teens put *telenovelas* as one of their favorite television shows in their calendars. However, in my interactions with them, it became clear that all teens were quite familiar with the genre. For example, when I asked the Durham group if they had seen *Salomé*, a *telenovela* that had just ended at the time, Carla (13) jumped up to say: "I watched it in its entirety, and I loved it!" Her comment was unexpected to me because she had not indicated in the calendar or worksheets her preference for the genre.

The pleasure associated with *telenovela* watching is apparent in Yvet's (16) explanation of the magazine cut-out that she pasted in her collage, which is shown in Figure 2. It is a drawing of a dark-skinned young woman practicing yoga in front of a television set. "I put a girl watching TV and exercising," she explained, "because I like to do that, I don't do it very often [group giggles], and I had one of this, a *novela*, and 'cause I like to watch *novelas*, and I like to relax when I'm watching my *novelas*." The pleasure described by Yvet seems to emanate from the ontological security that one's own cultural dwellings can provide, an idea that resonates with Vivian Barrera and Denise D. Bielby's finding that, through *telenovelas*, unrooted Latina/os re-create familiar experiences (2001, p. 6). Furthermore, *telenovelas* seem to also sustain rituals of connection. Mayer found that *telenovelas* "were a way to connect to women of all ages on both sides of the border" (2003a, p. 132). She notes that the Mexican American teens in her study exchange news about *telenovelas* and other popular culture fare with their extended kin across the border. In the following excerpt from Mayer's book, Lupe, one of the teens in her study, describes a typical conversation with a cousin who lives in Mexico:

> A lot of them, they'll be like, 'Well, this *novela* came out over here.' And I will be like, 'Oh, it just started over here.' And they will be like 'It just started over there? That was a good one!' And they know what's going to happen, and we won't see that happening until maybe a few more weeks. Like maybe three weeks later, we'll be like, oh, okay, that's what she was talking about. There's a lot of communication. (Mayer, 2003a, p. 132)

In describing her conversation, Lupe concludes that "there is a lot of communication" with the extended family across the border. The quotation shows that *telenovela* watching is a ritual through which Lupe reproduces her relationship with her Mexican cousin; the practice not only provides her with a current topic for telephone conversation, but it also re-creates a familiar space in which her cousin is psychologically present. As such, *telenovela* watching is a ritual

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FIGURE 2 Detail of Yvet's (age 16) Collage Representing Her *Telenovela* Watching.

of connection as well as a ritual of re-creation. Boss underlines that when people suffer an ambiguous loss "resiliency erodes as rituals and celebrations are cancelled." She recommends adjusting old rituals to the new situation and creating other innovative rituals (Boss, 2006, p. 40). Gabriela (19), Paty (15), and Lidia (14) indicated in their calendars that, upon their arrival to the United States, they were avid *telenovela* watchers. In the following excerpt, Paty responds to my question regarding why she liked to watch *Clap*, a teen *telenovela*:

> Because it's the only choice here [...] When I arrived here, I haven't seen TV, and then when I turned [it] on and I saw that *Clap* was showing, which was what I was starting to watch there, I said "I have to finish it!" because I have started to watch it there. So, I'm watching it. It's not that it's very good, or that it's my favorite but rather that it's the only thing I watch.

Paty's limited English was, most likely, one of the reasons for her *telenovela* watching, but the practice cannot be explained just in terms of language proficiency. It has to do with the need to re-create rituals that were broken by migration. Watching "ethnic media" like *telenovelas* may well be a practice that boosts resiliency. However, these functions may not be unique to "ethnic media," because given the market dominance of U.S.-based transnational media abroad, foreign-born teens were familiar with much of the U.S. popular culture that they would encounter across the border. Susana (16), for example, said that her favorite show at age 10 was *Mellizas y Rivales (Sweet Valley High)*, and that she still watches a police drama that she used to watch in Honduras. Paty said that she was reading in English the same *Harry Potter*

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books that she had read in Spanish in Mexico. These practices, as Falicov observes, may help the teens to incorporate elements of the new culture in the safety of known media rituals.

CONCLUSION

As an ethnographic inquiry, this study offers further empirical evidence for Silverstone's argument about the way in which people use media to cope with transitional phenomena. Its specific contribution is to scholarship on youth, media, and mobility. To some extent, the study confirms a number of findings from previous research on transnational youth, such as the use of media for recreating cultural spaces and for keeping connections across borders. Then, the essay adds to this emerging literature by arguing that transnational, working-class, Latina teens use media first and foremost to deal with the chaos and disjunctions that come with translocation. Among the various, interrelated media uses that the teens who participated in my project described, I find the following four remarkably telling of the use of media and popular culture to cope with ambiguous loss.

The first is the use of media to resist the disjuncture of quotidian life and preserve a sense of historical continuity by reinventing old rituals. For example, Paty said that the only thing that she watched on television was a *telenovela* that she had started to watch in Mexico and that she was re-reading *Harry Potter* books. Susana's story of her tiger gives us an idea about the detrimental effect that leaving behind material culture may have on transnational teens. In an oblique way, it casts light onto a potentially beneficial effect of media and popular culture that are available in multiple geographic locations: These popular culture fare may help transnational children and adolescents to keep a sense of stability and permanence in the mist of profound change.

The second, closely related, use is bringing into play one's previous familiarity with global popular culture fare as a means to bridge two worlds. Paty's re-reading of *Harry Potter*, as well as Susana's watching of the *Valley Girls*, exemplify the way in which migrant teens draw on their experience with the flow of transnational cultural products to become accustomed to a new culture and a new language. This use, especially, reminds us that the practices of today's transnational Latina teens are located within the larger social consumption of global popular culture. Many of the media rituals in which they engage in the host country are not entirely new. They appear to be re-enactments of previous performances.

The third is the use of media to create a space of complete belonging. Yvet's *telenovela* watching, which she described as deeply relaxing, illustrates this use. The access to spaces of complete belonging may be vital for the well-being of teens who are racialized and stigmatized at schools and other settings of the U.S. South (Olsen, 1997; Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2001). While uses of *telenovelas* entail a yearning for the past, they exceed the meanings of nostalgia as they provide not only imaginary visits to past times and places, but also resources to navigate a challenging present and an uncertain future.

Finally, the fourth use is a practice performed with the purpose of bringing about the subjective experience of being with a loved one who is not physically present. Carla's use of cartoons, which allowed her to re-live time shared with her absent brother, exemplifies this use. Within the limits of a highly constrained agency, teens like Carla mobilize available cultural resources to sustain a sense of ontological security and to develop healing strategies that hint at their intuitive sense of the potential power of media rituals for developing resiliency.

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In addition, the juxtaposition of the cases of Susana and Natalia confirms Falicov's point about the potential of spontaneous family media rituals for coping with ambiguous loss. While Susana, whose mother encouraged these rituals, was able to develop resiliency and thrive at her new school, Natalia, who lacked these rituals, became physically ill. Moreover, Natalia's case of illness and traditional healing reveals the cultural syncretism embedded in her narrative of media and migration. The stories of these two teens suggest that further examination of the specific functions of family media rituals in the successful adaptation of transnational teens may point to valuable insights for clinical and other practice-based work with Latina/o youth in particular, and with transnational youth in general.

While there has been a preoccupation among scholars studying "ethnic minorities" on the relationship between media use and acculturation, acculturation was not at the heart of the teens' talk. What was urgent to them was to cope with ambiguous loss, and they used both "ethnic" and global cultural products for this purpose. By providing a space to deal with ambiguous loss and thus regain ontological security, global popular culture fare and "ethnic media" may be precious resources for transnational youth. These findings further complicate simplistic notions of cultural imperialism and linear models of acculturation. The use of "ethnic media" may facilitate rather than hamper acculturation, as some studies have suggested (e.g., Bhatiaa & Ramb, 2001). This claim evokes the paradox identified by Winnicott, but with a twist into the sociocultural: the paradox of having to keep inner (home) and outer (host) reality separate yet interrelated. Hence, the findings imply that—as the advocates of bilingual education have long argued—acculturation into the foreign can only occur within the territory of the familiar.

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