

*Walking Contradictions:  
Immigration Meets Sexual Citizenship Among  
First-Generation Lesbian Latina Immigrants*

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## *Abstract*

The objective of this project is to approach the productive constructs of the U.S.-Mexico border including immigration, citizenship, social class, gender, sexuality and symbolic violence through the lens of Latina immigrant women who identify as gay or lesbian. The presence of Latin American immigrants has penetrated popular culture in recent years with mass migrant protests, pressures in policy changes and grassroots work for better working wages. More recently, however, studies on sexuality as it pertains to immigration have become more visible in the social sciences. Hector Carillo and the late Leonel Cantu have conducted influential research on gay Mexican men and their experiences immigrating to the United States (2002, 2006), and Gloria González-López has published research about heterosexual Mexican immigrants and their sex lives before and after migrating (2003, 2005). However, recognition of, and inquiry into, the experiences of Latina immigrants in lesbian relationships is oftentimes still absent from our discourses. My current project expands on research of immigration and sexuality research by providing a nuanced lens through which we can study gender, sexuality and citizenship as it is experienced by Latina immigrants who identify as lesbian, queer or bisexual, a group that has remained invisible in this recently emerging literature. Furthermore, scholarship troubling citizenship as it is experienced by marginalized persons is an important and growing area of research, particularly among immigrants. This project takes an intimate look into the multi-faceted identities immigrant Latina lesbians embrace and how these (sometimes expressed as) marginalities are experienced on the body through discourses and lived realities of citizenship, nationality, gender, sexuality and symbolic violence. The research presented is based upon interviews conducted with first-generation Latinas who identified with a queer sexuality, meaning non-heterosexual, and who reside in California.

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## Introduction

This project started out as something I thought could fill an academic gap. When I started thinking about going to graduate school a friend of mine gave me a book that, after having read it, truly inspired me to pursue my academic interests. The book, *Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and their Sex Lives*, was written by University of Texas at Austin Professor of Sociology Gloria González-López. My admittance to the university and her presence at UT seemed fortuitous. I have always had a strong interest in sexuality and supporting the lives of queer women of color; I just wasn't sure how to frame my interests within the context of research. Upon entering the University of Texas at Austin as a graduate student in Latin American Studies I began taking courses that I hoped would emphasize identity and socially based markers such as gender, sexuality, race and class. However, a few things became very apparent. There was not enough critical discussion or dialogue surrounding queer sexuality, race was simply an addendum to most course packets and the two of them never seemed to converge. My desire to bring experiences of queer women of color into academia had never been more obvious and seemingly necessary.

The other piece of the motivational puzzle which helped me realize my need to return to school was a workshop I attended at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center. The workshop was lead by lesbian activists from Mexico City. They had made incredible strides in creating lesbian visibility and fighting for rights as women, as lesbians, and as activists. They were rarely, if ever, paid for their work and they emphasized an exclusive lesbian ideology, not a homogenous gay and lesbian movement. This impressed me, and made me think about a few things. First, these women's stories were not as visible as they could and should be. Second, perspectives and understandings of lesbian or bisexual women on an international level are

imperative in understanding ourselves. Especially for women of color, where our histories are often sites of internal contention, we oftentimes find identification and disidentification in transnational familiarity. These women also challenged popular ideas of privilege, class and sexuality as we understand it in the United States.

Initially the idea for this project was a comparative analysis of lesbian activists living in the United States and Mexico. This would have explored the identity formation and beliefs about privilege regarding their Chicana or Mexicana counterparts. This project proved bigger than what I could handle, and I was feeling very removed. I had felt so strongly attached to my experience in learning from the activists from Mexico, yet there was a disconnection of some sort. A different alternative would have been to concentrate on queer Chicana activism in Southern California. However, as a queer Chicana who lived in Los Angeles for a number of years this felt too close to home. In my decision-making processes and exploration of literature in sexuality I realized that I had been doing something that I stood so firmly against. I had been exclusive in what I thought it meant to be a queer woman of color.

In exploring Chicana feminist thought I came across literature that really challenged the nationalist ideologies of language. Terms such as border, citizenship, nation and home became malleable and sites of affective embodiment. I placed this alongside the book that had motivated me to return to school. I placed this alongside research which had privileged men in queer immigrant literature. I placed this alongside hetero-centric research which had privileged heterosexual immigrants over queer immigrants. I placed this alongside Chicana research which had privileged American-born experiences over those who were born in Latin America. Where were the lesbian Latina immigrants? There was a *neither here nor there* about them that would become somewhat apparent about their social location. It was in this literature that I began to

realize the academic and physical placement of Latina immigrant women who identified as lesbian. There seemed to be an absence. Although there is new and emerging research being done about this group of women they are still largely absent in many ways. This absence is not just met in literature about sexuality, immigration, gender and nationality. Rather it is a disservice that furthers hegemonic ideologies about what it means to be a woman, to be a lesbian and to be an immigrant.

The questions I seek to answer are the following: What are the lived experiences of Latina immigrants who identify with a non-normative sexuality? How do these women perceive their realities in terms of sexuality, social class and citizenship? How do they challenge hegemonic notions of sexuality, social class and citizenship? This research is an attempt to begin to *fill* those gaps with a human ontology. There is an impossibility in the desire to *close* these gaps because the conversation never really ends. It is always ongoing and always becoming. I cannot say that it is nuanced because these women are not new. They have been here and continue to live among people who do and don't resemble them. This is adding to the current statement with different voices.

## Literature Review

### *Migration and Sexuality*

Immigration as a research topic has been reviewed and researched under many disciplines. Immigration scholarship has undergone vast revision in recent decades, impelled in part by the enormous growth in migration worldwide. Traditionally, studies of immigration have been framed by a view of migrants as individual actors making rational choices based on cost-benefit analysis, the horizon of the nation-state, and models of assimilation (Luibheid 2005). Sexuality is a fairly new framework of analysis in looking at immigrants and their experiences. I begin this section with literature review by some researchers in the area of sexuality and immigration. Because my participants are all from Latin America I focused predominantly on researchers who focus on this demographic as well.

To begin, in *Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and their Sex Lives* Gloria González-López searches to understand the complex lives of heterosexual Mexican immigrant men and women and the changes in the dynamics of their sexual lives. In her work she addresses the many dimensions that affect the decisions in her participant's sex lives. She introduces *capital feminino* as a way in which Mexican immigrant women construct the meanings of virginity. She argues that sexual purity is socially assembled as a life-enhancing resource and virginity takes on a social exchange value used to improve and maximize Mexican women's life conditions and opportunities. She continues this conversation by exploring family dynamics as culturally tied to sexuality. Women in particular are subject to an immense amount of familial pressure when making decisions about their sexuality and sex lives. These decisions have also been significantly altered by their status as immigrants in the United States and the many factors

surrounding this identity. González-López informs her readers of the complexities within the intersections of immigration, sexuality and gender, as experienced through heterosexuality.

Second, I draw upon the work of the late Lionel Cantú (2009) and his research in *The Sexuality of Migration: Border Crossings and Mexican Immigrant Men*. Cantú's work focuses on the lives of queer Mexican immigrant men. He explains the value of this work by expressing that "viewing the immigrant experiences from the standpoint of the gay immigrant raises critical questions regarding sexual identity formation in a transcultural setting and the linkages among human sexuality, state institutions, and global economic processes". Cantú found that gay Mexican men migrated for reasons concerning discrimination, economic marginalization and transnational gay social relations.

Finally, Eithne Luibheid (2002) looks at immigration and sexuality as it pertains to women. She argues that "the immigration apparatus has been a major site for the construction and regulation of immigrant women's sexual identities". In her chapter titled *Looking Like a Lesbian* in her book *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border*, she finds that "Since 1990 lesbians and gay men have no longer been automatically debarred from emigrating to the United States", but that "lesbians and gay men are still likely to be excluded for lacking good moral character".

### *Borders and Symbolic Violence*

In alignment with feminist of color theory, the lens through which I interpret women's experiences with migration is through an intersectional framework. Through this framework I analyze the process of immigration and the border as sites of symbolic violence, as well as power and determination, on the bodies of my participants. Patricia Pessar (1999) states that



“By acknowledging and theorizing the interpenetrating class, racial, legal, and gender oppressions characterizing immigrant women’s lives, we are best prepared to interpret their modest challenges to patriarchal privilege and exploitative family practices, despite the fact that migration tends to narrow the material and social foundations for gender inequities”.

I seek to interpret terminologies of border, nation, and home in nuanced ways. Looking specifically at theorizing the U.S.-Mexico border and migration, Anzaldúa (1987) calls the U.S.-Mexico border *una herida abierta*, an open wound, where the lifeblood of two worlds merge to form a third country – a border culture. She views the border in a constant state of transition and as a mechanism to distinguish *us* from *them*. Anzaldúa views migration from Mexico to the U.S. as a return to the odyssey of the historical/mythological Aztlán, as the southwest region of the United States was once Mexico. Aldama (2005) introduces four propositions in discussing migration and the border. First, the border is a “free zone” for U.S. citizens and corporations to exploit “cheap” labor and lax environmental regulation controls. Second, the border is a free zone of violence, a barrier to those trying to cross from the South. Third, the border forces a discourse of inferiorization on Mexicans and other Latinos. Finally, once crossed, the border is infinitely elastic and can serve as a barrier and zone of violence for Mexicans or Latina/os. Immigrants continuously cross this border, regardless of where they are in the U.S. Jabri (2009) states that “the crossing of boundaries is evocative of exclusion, displays of power, of incursion and invasion, a politics of dispossession that seeks to subsume the other in totality”. Later, she describes

“borders as geographic as well as corporeal and when conceived politically, borders come to be understood as the always contested terrain...the border as a space of contest, emergency, and violence is, now in late modernity perhaps more than at any other time in history, carried corporeally by the subject targeted, so that the locations of the border with all its social, economic, political consequences are always within, on the streets and in proximate neighborhoods”.

Finally, I rely heavily on the work of Sarah Ahmed in understanding ways in which to reconfigure further understandings of migration, borders and home. In *Strange Encounters* she claims that “the experiences of migration – of not being in a place one lived as home – are felt at the level of embodiment, the lived experience of inhabiting a particular space, a space that is neither within nor outside bodily space”. She problematizes the idea of “home” as a familiar space by collapsing nation and body. If home is a safe place then perhaps it is assumed that the nation would be a purified space. This ideology, however, denies the differences within this space, assuming that strangers are only encountered at the border. She challenges the assumption that a stranger is just anybody we do not recognize; rather some bodies are already recognized as strange and stranger than other bodies. Migrant bodies are strange bodies that stretch and contract as they move across the borders that mark out familiar and strange places.

### *Citizenship*

While citizenship is a legally fixed term it is believed and lived as unfixed and in motion. Citizenship is legally constructed yet socially lived in different conditions. Nicholas de Genova (2002) argues that “‘illegality’ (much like citizenship) is a juridical status that entails a social relation to the state”. He goes on to say that

“illegality,” then, both theoretically and practically, is a social relation that is fundamentally inseparable from citizenship...The law defines the parameters of its own operations, engendering the conditions of possibility for “legal” as well as “illegal” practices. “Illegalities” are constituted and regimented by the law—directly, explicitly, in a manner that presumes to be more or less definitive (albeit not without manifold ambiguities and indeterminacies, always manipulable in practice) and with a considerable degree of calculated deliberation.

But citizenship needs to be discussed on terms that are irrelevant to legalities. Renato Rosaldo (1997) discusses the term *cultural citizenship* and claims that “analysts need to anchor

their studies in the aspirations and perceptions of people who occupy subordinate social positions”. *Cultural citizenship* names a range of social practices which, taken together, claim and establish a distinct social space for Latinos in this country. Latino social space is evolving and developing new forms, many of them contributing to an emergent Latino consciousness and social and political development (Flores et. al. 1997). Therefore, citizenship can refer to thoughts, behaviors, beliefs and lived experiences. In *Sexual Citizens: The Legal and Cultural Regulation of Sex and Belonging*, Brenda Cossman (2007) uses a framework of citizenship that invokes a set of rights and practices denoting membership as well as cultural practices and representations. She also views citizenship as invoking ways that different subjects are constituted as members of a polity, the ways they are, or are not granted rights, responsibilities, and representations within that polity. This is representative of the discourses and practices of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness and the many shades in between.

A deeper analysis is necessary when discussing citizenship and sexuality. Because gay and lesbian persons have been historically been denied rights and responsibilities as afforded through citizenship this posits them at a location of tension. Cossman furthers her discussion of citizenship and sexuality by stating that gay and lesbian subjects “have begun to cross the borders of citizenship, unevenly acquiring some of its rights and responsibilities and performing some of its practices...reconstituting the terms and subjects of citizenship as well as the borders themselves”. In defining sexual citizenship Bell and Binnie (2000) state that citizenship discourse must be recognized as heterosexualized, and that part of the task of the sexual citizen must be to challenge that – so, while we are all sexual citizens, in that citizenship is a particularly contextualized enunciation of identity which must take into account of sexual identity. Furthermore different forms of sexual identity mark claims to citizenship differently. The needs

of one sexual minority group will be different than another one's. Castle (2008) argues that claims for citizenship may go well beyond claims for rights or legal recognition of citizenship status, and may simultaneously be elaborated with little to no reference to the obligations of the nation-state in granting or denying citizenships claims. She further notes that citizenship claims are about full, participatory inclusion in public life and not simply about access to specific rights. Furthermore in contradistinction to analyses that focus almost exclusively on the obligations of the nation-state in granting and recognizing citizenship claims, that social actors who demand full citizenship may concomitantly place demands on themselves to become what constitutes in their view, "ideal citizens", thereby neutralizing, at least in theory, the possibility of exclusion.

## *Methodology*

The methodological foundation of this research is based on the theoretical framework of grounded theory. Grounded Theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves. The guidelines offer a set of general principles and heuristic devices rather than formulaic rules (Charmaz 2006). Therefore, I concentrated heavily on in-depth, in-person interviews. In this section I will explain the methods used to recruit and interview the participants for the research presented. I will also detail experiences and methods used outside of the interviews which helped formulate my arguments.

In grounded theory, Kathy Charmaz advises the researcher to “let your research problem shape the methods you choose” (2006). I specifically wanted to learn about personal experiences regarding sexuality and immigration, focusing on lived experiences, traumas, celebrations, violations and joy. The most accurate way for me to attain this information was through in-depth interviews. Over the course of eight weeks I interviewed eight women in California, specifically San Francisco and Los Angeles. The interviews were digitally audio recorded, conducted in English and generally lasted about 2 hours. These interviews were conducted in locations most comfortable for my interviewees. They ranged from popular coffee shops to family kitchens. All participants signed permission forms and were briefed regarding the nature and use of their answers. All of the women were born in Latin America (mostly Mexico) and resided in the state of California at the time of interview. They had all migrated to the U.S. at very young ages, from 6 months to 16 years young. Every woman interviewed identified as gay, lesbian or queer and lived fully in this identity. Only a few participants were in relationships at the time and all were either working or students.

Participants were recruited in a variety of ways. To begin, I sent out a call for participants to a number of friends and listserves. I also contacted the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center and Bienestar, two community based organizations which serve the gay and lesbian community of greater Los Angeles. Unfortunately I did not receive as positive of a response from these two organizations as I would have liked. Predominantly, the snowball method became most reliable. One participant, who I knew personally, introduced me to a few other interested women. These few women knew other women through their social networks and after interviewing them I was trusted with personal information in contacting other potential interviewees. I attempted to recruit at social spaces for Latina lesbians, but this became problematic for several reasons. This kind of atmosphere wasn't always conducive for academic interests. I did, however, meet one participant at a Los Angeles Pride function which was marketed for lesbian social activity.

Interview questions were grouped into six categories: demographic, background of education in sexuality, beginnings of sexual behavior, current circumstances, citizenship and concluding questions. I attempted to, in true grounded theory fashion, develop open-ended questions with room for interpretation. I often asked for clarification with the more abstract questions and encouraged the participants to speak for as little or as much as they wanted to. My intention was to gather a real understanding of my participants and how they viewed themselves as immigrants, women and members of a sexual minority. I also sought to understand any social or class tensions they may have encountered with U.S.-born Latinas. Although the option to speak in Spanish was available, all participants chose to participate in the interviews speaking English. However, this is not to say that Spanish was not used intermittently as it certainly was.

The final part of my methodology focused on research outside of the interviews. I spent four weeks in San Francisco at the National Sexuality Resource Center's Summer Institute. This four week intensive coursework in sexuality provided not only a challenging atmosphere for research, but access to gay and lesbian history, other sexuality scholars and networks with fellow graduate students, all of which were priceless methods of research. In Southern California I attended a weekend LGBT equality training titled Camp Courage in East Los Angeles. At this function I met activists and artists who focused on re-thinking hegemonic ideals of what it means to be LGBT. Their work is dedicated to the inclusion and validation of gay and lesbian immigrants by challenging how the dominant LGBT community functions in exclusionary ways. I also draw inspiration from performances by queer women of color activists such as Adelina Anthony, Nicole Lopez and Sharon Bridgeforth. I consider all of the aforementioned activities as a methodological approach to researching sexuality and immigration because it is impossible to come to realize this community of Latina lesbians without the influences of art and activism.

## *Preliminary Results and Discussion*

### *Children as Migrants– Enter Gender*

One of the more obvious similarities among my participants was the young age in which they immigrated to the United States. All of the women I interviewed entered the U.S. for the first time as minors. Some do not even remember the journey because they were infants at the time, and others recall vividly being teenage girls and part of an illegal trek which brought them to the U.S. At face value this information is not unusual. Newly arriving migrants often emigrate as a means of providing opportunities for their children. This is just one reason why families may migrate, as children may or may not play a role in the decision to immigrate. However, one thing is clear: children are immigrating with their parents in large numbers. According to the Migration Policy Institute (2009), between 1990 and 2000, the number of first-generation immigrant children grew 42.8 percent (from 1.9 million to 2.7 million). By contrast, the number of first-generation immigrant children declined 13.2 percent between 2000 and 2008 from 2.7 million to 2.3 million.

The statistics provided do not account for gender or sexuality. It is unclear how many of these children are young girls, or if they identify with a queer sexuality. However, I find the age of my participants very interesting for a few reasons reflecting sexual and gendered norms. First, I want to look at this in terms of sexuality. In returning to the literature review, González-López' research reflects that the Mexican women (heterosexual identified) who participated in her study immigrated to the U.S. as adult women. An overwhelming majority of these women were married or cohabitating during the time of interview. The descriptive nature of the constructions of these marriages, from family involvement to the cult of virginity, assumes that the majority of these women's marriages were performed in Mexico. Because family unification continues to be



the main reason for female migration (Messina et al 2006) we can perhaps draw the conclusion that these women's lives were established as heterosexual, married before migration. Their status as immigrant women, it would seem, is part of the reunification with a family unit. In comparison with my interviewees, because all of the women were minors at the time of migration, there was not a window of opportunity for them to marry in their home countries. They came of age in the United States, a place where the majority of my participants felt open and liberated in expressing themselves as sexual minorities. There was a dominant sentiment regarding their home countries and the lack of acceptance or inclusion of lesbians. When asked about the possibility of living openly in Honduras, one participant responded "I think I'm better off here...I think that if I would have stayed at home I would not have come out. I would have probably got married, had children, become a housewife". Another woman, born in Mexico, responded to a similar question by saying

"...it's really difficult because it's really different like there's no way that I can see them...bringing into our family life like my partner. You know? And I think that I feel that um...me being in the States is a blessing in a sense. I don't really like this country but knowing that I can be queer and find have access to women who love women so easily is a blessing. I guess.

Therefore, I would argue that my participants were exposed to an ability to live openly as queer women by immigrating to the United States at such young ages; as opposed to González-López participants who immigrated with already established lifestyles of heterosexuality and marriage. Whether or not my interviewees would have realized and lived freely within the definitions of their sexual orientations in their home countries cannot be said for sure. However, perhaps if some of González-López' participants would have immigrated as children their sex lives would be a bit different, especially since "some of the study participants reported same-sex fantasies and practices". What is gendered about these studies is the likelihood of women,

especially young women, immigrating by themselves. Perhaps because of patriarchal norms, young gay men would be more likely to migrate by themselves than young lesbians. As was the case in Cantú's research, many young men made a choice to migrate and were physically and socially able to do so. It seems more likely that young women would migrate with families to the United States, insinuating a gendered norm in "queer migration".

*Sexuality and Immigration Collapse – Walking Contradictions*

CL: What does the word "citizenship" mean to you?

Interviewee: I don't know. I don't know because for me originally it was something I never, it meant where I was from. Of course I was born in Mexico in my heart. And my hearts in a lot of places but that's primarily one of the places because every time I went there as a kid on and off...just the smell of what Mexico is...the feeling the way it touched your body. It was...it felt like home like what was real. It's like being with a woman...it is...it's like home. It's the feeling of being sucked in by the light.

I found this particular interview to be one of the most compelling. The interviewee, a 32 year old Mexican woman, explained her (dis)connection with Mexico through descriptions of her queer sexuality. She aligns the experiences of being an immigrant, a story of home common to non-natives, with the feeling of being at home with a woman. I return to an earlier quote by Sarah Ahmed (2000) in rethinking home and the body. She states that

"The experiences of migration – of not being in a place one lived as home – are felt at the level of embodiment, the lived experience of inhabiting a particular space, a space that is neither within nor outside bodily space. Throughout the story, the trauma and pain of not being fully at home is narrated through skin sensations. The physical sense of moving through space is enough to trigger a memory of another place. Memory hence works through the swelling and swearing of the skin: the memory of another place which one lived as home involves the touching of the body, and the animating of the relation between the body and the space which it inhabits and is inhabited by".

The woman interviewed understands home through a traumatic process of skin memories. This trauma is, however, not necessarily translatable towards her sexuality. Being at *home* with

a woman is seemingly safe and where she wants to be. The intimacy and touch associated with her relationships does not describe a location of hurt or strangeness. Another participant, a 39 year old Mexican woman, was undocumented at the time of the interview. She described the United States as a place that allows her to live openly as a lesbian, yet restricting at the same time because of her immigrant status. When I asked how she reconciles these two conflicting emotions she responded, “I don’t, I guess. I don’t...I can’t”.

I highlight the sections of these two interviews to demonstrate the unique circumstances of Latina lesbian immigrants. To begin, because the women’s early migration this places them in a unique category of gay and lesbian immigrants. They did not experience queer migration because this implies that their sexualities would be the basis of their migration, which was not the case. They are not sexual refugees because they are not fleeing persecution on accounts of homophobia in their home countries. They are, as one participant stated, *walking contradictions*. I would not use this term as a means of categorizing, nor do I wish to negatively imply that they live their lives in contradictory ways. Rather, the sentiments my participants have expressed regarding gratitude yet frustration, isolation yet liberation and fear yet happiness are deliberate contradictions. *Walking contradiction* was a term used to describe one of my participant’s feelings toward her family’s attitudes and beliefs about her lesbian identity. Despite the fact that her mother was available and willing to discuss sexuality (perhaps a contradiction of many Mexican families), she was in constant disapproval of the interviewee’s lesbian sexuality (a contradiction she found within her mother’s own views of sexuality). She used this phrase to discuss the many contradictions in her life, including the gratitude of being able to live openly as a lesbian in the U.S., yet a hatred for this country because of the pain and trauma she has felt as a Mexican immigrant woman.

Eithne Luibheid (2001) argues that “lesbian and gay exclusion never functioned as an isolated system, but instead was part of a broader federal immigration control regime that sought to ensure a “proper” sexual and gender order, reproduction of white racial privilege, and exploitation of the poor”. The U.S.-Mexico border has served as a site of exclusion on the basis of gender, sexuality and ethnicity by symbolically and literally separating what is home and what is strange. The strange is not welcome; what is *strange* is what had undeniably developed the United States as a “nation of immigrants”. Ultimately, I would argue that the border serves as a site of many contradictions for my participants on the basis of their gender, sexuality and national origin in a way that recreates and reproduces embodied meanings of home, belonging and citizenship.

### *Other Considerations*

Other considerations I would like to include are citizenship and language. First, the women interviewed reflected in their responses common theoretical understandings of citizenship as legal and social. However, they formulate citizenship in ways that create meanings toward their individual situations and reproduce and re-imagine citizenship as an embodied experience. As one participant stated when asked what citizenship meant to her,

“Um citizenship to me means having governmental recognition as like being a member of U.S. society. Um, but it also means being a part of the culture of the country being included within the culture and recognized as a part of the culture and having the privileges behind being a citizen of that country. Be it economically, be it with educational attainment, health, whatever. That’s what citizenship means to me”.

This woman’s response reflects a theoretical framework of analysis surrounding citizenship. The history of citizenship has been one of conflicts over the real content of the category in terms of civil, political and social rights (Castles and Miller 1993). Its tangibility is

hotly in question. When asked who should be able to call themselves a citizen, one of my participants, an undocumented woman from Mexico, responded that “I am a citizen...regardless”. My participants imagine citizenship as something intangibly within reach. Several women recognized citizenship in greater terms as a membership in the human race. Two women explicitly defined the attainment of their citizenship in the United States as moments of betrayal and anger. Therefore, the idea of citizenship is a continual process, evolving through the many ways in which these women live as Latinas, as lesbians and as immigrants.

Second, like many immigrants from non-English speaking countries, several of my participants expressed trauma and hurt surrounding language. In particular these experiences occurred within school classrooms with Mexican-American classmates, a reflection of social and class privilege among Latinos in the United States. These experiences created shame and isolation surrounding the Spanish language. Shannon and Escamilla (1999) comment on this use of language as a form of symbolic violence against Mexican American students in U.S. schools. They argue that “this symbolic violence emerges from the asymmetric power relationship that immigrants, particularly Mexican immigrants in the United States, have with mainstream America”. As one of my participants observed with high school students she currently works with,

“And then some of them...their Spanish accents are horrible and they’re born in Mexico and it’s because...some kids have language problems, but some of them was because their parents make sure they don’t speak any Spanish. And it’s a long history that these families have had to ...have had trauma with the language”.

The traumas that she reflects upon are not unlike traumas faced by the women who participated in this research.

## Conclusion and Future Goals

In conclusion I have outlined my research conducted so far with lesbian Latina immigrants. The literature review covered three areas that I am exploring in terms of immigration and sexuality, borders and violence and citizenship. I discussed methodology that I have used and will continue to use including in-depth interviews and involvement with art and activism. Preliminary results have been grouped into three categories. First, I find that since my participants migrated as children, perhaps their coming of age in the U.S. provided a window of opportunity to explore and affirm their sexualities. Second, as one participant considered herself a *walking contradiction* I use this phrase to discuss the many internalized contradictions felt by my participants as immigrants and sexual minorities. Finally, my participants develop language surrounding ideas of citizenship that reflect dominant discourses of citizenship, defined as legal and social, yet their experiences challenge this language. They imagine and experience citizenship as intangibly within reach. On a side note, I also commented on the similarities that my participants have had with language. Many of them experienced language as a site of trauma, which may not reflect who they are as lesbians, but a general similarity with non-English speaking immigrants.

Future goals for this project are many, but they are attainable. First, a continued discussion and exploration into the unique situation of young Latina immigrants coming of age as lesbians is necessary. What other factors may be associated with how and when they come out? How much of this is related to their immigrant status? Second, in order to gather a better analysis of gender, sexuality, citizenship and home I will need to conduct more interviews. I am currently in the process of recruiting participants in Los Angeles through universities and have a goal of conducting eight interviews in addition to the ones I already have. Finally, a deeper

analysis is needed regarding the interviews. Because I am still in the transcribing stage it is challenging to come to concrete conclusions. This is a priority in my thesis process, as well as researching women of color theorists, writers and activists whose work I hope will best speak to the experiences of my participants.

This project has proved to be a rewarding one, and I am anxious and motivated in continuing the process. I left each of the eight interviews feeling more mature as a student and as a person. The interviewees were incredibly gracious and transparent in their responses and for that I am truly grateful. I continue to keep in touch with these women, updating them on my location in the thesis-writing process. Listening to the interviews again for this proposal I remember the feelings of excitement. I felt like a true researcher. I also remember the very memorable experiences of getting to know each woman one by one as I attempted to make myself just as vulnerable as perhaps they felt. I can only hope that I have done justice to the voices of the women interviewed by helping facilitate an open space already created, but perhaps shadowed by dominant discourses.

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