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'Latino' and 'queer' as sites of translation: Intersections of 'race', ethnicity and sexuality

Abstract

Based on ethnographic work conducted between 2004 and 2006 with LGBT Latino community members living in the D.C. metro area, as well as summer research conducted in El Salvador during 2006¹, I will illustrate in this article that translating across "fields of power" generates new theoretical and methodological tools to better account for the privileged position of 'Western' thought. This discussion becomes more intricate when intersected within the current migration context where subjective identity understandings are constantly decentering 'space' (Gilroy 2000:122).

As my research further illustrates, U.S. identity categories such as 'queer' and 'Latino/a' are not stable categories but are constantly reinvented and politicized according to diverse constructions of race and sexuality where notions of 'queer' space (US) are blurred with narratives from the homeland. That is to say, LGBT Latinos/as' refusal to occupy a 'queer' and 'Latino' fixed identity acts as a way to contest, negotiate and re-signify a 'western' (colonial, Eurocentric) 'authority' embodied by these scripts and labels in a translation/border crossing continuous flux. I place my discussion of identities within a power/knowledge framework (as theorized by Foucault 1972, 1978, 1980) and apply it to the difficulty of translating sexual and racial borders when crossing borders that have been geographically and politically defined as the "United States of America" and "El Salvador." I will interject Gilroy's (2000:122-123) discussion on memory that suggests it is precisely on the trans-national spaces within and between the 'homeland'/'Diaspora' as well as in the 'in-betweens', where memory becomes a primary ground for a multiplicity of identities without a particular origin to emerge 'in a queer time and place' (Halberstam 2005). This research expands current discussions on the production of Latino LGBT subjects mostly carried out on the U.S. West Coast (Roque 2002) and New York by and large focusing on Chicanos/as and Caribbean LGBT communities (Rodríguez 2003; Quiroga 2000; Muñoz 1999).

Border crossing has entailed that Latinos and mostly non-white ethnicities face an institution apparatus that either denies them entrance or deports them based on their 'undocumented' condition. These conditions are aggravated by ethnic/sexual/racial/gender identity status (Luibheid and Cantú 2005). Passport controls, border checks, interviews,

¹ This article is part of my Ph.D Dissertation (2008) in Cultural Anthropology, Concentration on Race, Gender and Social Justice at American University, Washington D.C. Although I am not including direct quotes from Salvadoreans living in El Salvador in this article, I am nevertheless arguing for a geo-political continuum between the barrios of El Salvador and the barrios of D.C. I would like to acknowledge the valuable insights and testimonies shared by the Latinos/as who so willingly participated in this project. Special thanks to Dilcia Molina who believed in this research when I first knocked on the doors of the Latino grassroots organizations in Columbia Heights, Washington D.C.



interdiction, detainment, “secondary inspection”, profiling, and other tactics have served to establish or determine identities, to draw out “confessions” of who one is (Epps, Valens and Johnson 2005: 5). Some of the disciplining practices at play within the different borders are further illustrated in this article through the lives of Mexican and Central American LGBT activists living in the DC area arise from these established identities.

Introduction

Modern terms such as homosexual, lesbian and gay male presuppose a historically specific sexual and social system, one in which sexual object-choice has been the basis of a core self-definition (Seidman 2003, Foucault 1990, Massad 2002). Individuals may differ as to their social class, gendered, ‘racial’ and ethnic characteristics but they will not be able to take meaning until they have identified with those positions which the discourse constructs. Subjecting themselves to the rules of the constructs, becoming subjects of its (constructs) power/knowledge is also part of this identification. Looking attentively at these intersections, particularly those at play within queerness and Diaspora (Eng 1997) it’s possible to confront the effects of an assumed universalization of concepts around ‘gayness’ (Massad 2002; Vidal Ortiz 2005). This article engages specifically with the intersections of ‘Latino’, ‘queer’ and ‘American’ in the Latino Diaspora in the D.C. area where I conducted ethnographic work between 2004 and 2006 with LGBT Latino community members particularly from Mexico and Central America².

My ethnographic analysis shows how issues around class, race, ethnicity are directly entangled with issues of citizenship and belonging. By understanding how ‘Latino’, ‘queer’ and ‘American’ are located within particular cartographies of place, desire and belonging we are able to articulate a border-crossing ‘queer’ methodology. Such a methodology addresses the intimate relation drawn at those borders where sexual and gender ‘crossing’ becomes paramount for challenging perceptions and readings around race, ethnicity and class.

² This is the predominant population that migrated to this area particularly in the 80s as a result of the U.S.-funded war against Central American countries. The estimated Hispanic population of the United States as of July 1, 2005 is 42.7 million, making people of Hispanic origin the nation’s largest ethnic or ‘race minority,’ that is to say, 14 percent of the nation’s total population according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Methodologically and theoretically speaking, the empirical data and analysis drive our attention to the seldom addressed issue of translation in Anthropology where categories have been commonly described so as to fit within typically ‘western’ systems of classification. As such, the voices of LGBT Latinos bring up the need of categories such as ‘queer,’ ‘Latino/Latinidad’³ and ‘American’ to move across geographic, linguistic, and imaginary locations transcending standard, U.S. categorization following Rodríguez (2003) earlier work⁴.

In addition, within the theoretical traditions of the fields of Gender, LGBT and Queer Studies I illustrate the limits and constraints of current paradigms within which sexuality and gender have been commonly analyzed as they intersect with ‘race,’ ethnicity and belonging. In the process I highlight the theoretical and methodological usefulness of looking at the ‘in-between’ spaces. Finally, I use hybridity as an alternative lens to the fixed delineation of categories. Rather than claiming an ‘objective’ eye I engage in a dialogue that maps the production of these various positionalities including my own. Asking through this process, what are the effects produced by the conflation of ‘Latino’ and ‘queer’ within a transnational and border-crossing continuum are.

Latinos from the D.C. area who participated in this research study claim various levels of education: from having completed graduate school to having completed middle junior school. Their socioeconomic backgrounds are also multiple and varied, ranging from ‘urban’ to ‘rural’ areas although a great majority of them come from working classes. A particular feature shared by most of the Central American informants is their political leftist activist background initiated in their home countries and marked strongly by the war in Central America during the 80s. For many of them such as TicoV, once they arrived and settled in the United States, this militancy extended towards a struggle for LGBT rights.

TicoV is originally from a rural area in El Salvador known as San Miguel. He’s in his early 30s and had been living in the U.S. for 17 years at the time of the interview. His political

³ ‘Latinidad’ alludes to a constructed concept that encompasses geographic references (usually understood as South of the U.S. oddly displacing Mexico from its northern location) and state divisions of territories. These territories are part of stereotypical representations of Latinos (partly created and mostly reinforced by the media) based on phenotype and the idea of an imagined ‘shared’ (Latino) culture where Spanish is understood to be the official spoken language.

⁴ These movements are discussed as “anthropological locations” by Gupta and Ferguson (1997).



identity is gay although his practices could be categorized as ‘bisexual’. TicoV illustrates how different predominant- normative positionalities are tainted with a myriad of alternative, sometimes opposite, readings as universalization goes hand in hand with homogenization. The following statement illustrates TicoV’s understandings of ‘gayness’ and ‘whiteness’; that is to say, how ‘queer’ is parallel to ‘gay’ and ‘gay’ is parallel to ‘white’. This understanding, against which the Latino LGBT informants negotiate their juxtaposed subject positions, displaces the equation queer-Latino:

Mi impresión es quizás que ser blanco y gay es un poco más fácil.

I have the impression that being ‘white’ and ‘gay’ is much easier.

If, as TicoV suggests ‘queer’ is to ‘gay’ what ‘gay’ is to ‘white’, possibilities of self-identifying with the ‘queer identity’ are not only difficult but problematic. That is to say, not only are categories such as ‘gay’ or ‘white’ not trans-historical (Massad 2002) but they exceed a framework based on sexual and racial formation as has been commonly discussed within LGBT studies. In addition, this kind of evaluation of ‘queer’ as ‘white’ gets exacerbated in instances of border crossing where national borders mobilize certain types of pre-discursive identities (Epps, Valens and Johnson 2005: 5). TicoV’s statement of how it’s easier to be ‘gay’ and ‘white’ than ‘Latino’ and ‘gay’ implies that Latino representations are not parallel with ‘whiteness’ but in constant opposition.

This opposition is visible throughout immigrant’s attempts to go unchecked and unnoticed, to be regarded as not particularly worthy of being seen or, alternatively, as worthy of being seen only as a proper citizen or potential citizen (Epps, Valens and Johnson’s 2005: 5). These immigrants’ enactments act as a response to the continuous monitoring and surveillance, as further analyzed in the next sections through Estrella, Jade and Stacey’s lived stories.

This article argues that it is from the ‘inter’ – from precisely those in-between spaces where interpretations and translations collapse – where the intersections between and within race, ethnicity, sexuality and citizenship could be further illustrated. That is to say, following a



translation methodology this article looks from the inter-spaces of meaning allowing a continuum that brings forward the geo-political spaces where border crossing is the framework of reference rather than the starting point. When a theory of translation and cultural interpretation considers space as a fundamental element contextualizing landscapes as texts, various practices of contestation arise (Benko and Strohmayr 2004). These voices will then create and re-create fluid geo-social-sexual-political belongings where home/Diaspora no longer exist as either/or but as either *and* (Mafia 2003). Diaspora is redefined as not confined exclusively to geographical space following the need to reassess questions of cultural identity in relation to multi-vocal spaces producing alternative temporalities as extensively discussed by Halberstam (2005).

The concept of translation I use throughout this essay connects the concept of ‘border thinking’ to the political economy of language where words, testimonies and field notes *are* in Spanish⁵. Having the original informants’ text followed by its closest depiction in English translated by myself, provides the reader room to think in-between English and Spanish destabilizing any mechanical rendition of the texts. The notion of ‘border thinking’ constructs a concept of identity that goes beyond biological fixation, constructivist disembodiment and harmonious homogeneity. It is a space for ambiguity in constant transition that ‘translates’ the cultural baggage that seeks to define and fix it.

This article is divided in three sections. The first section illustrates, through the situated life of Estrella, how the intersections of ‘queer’ and ‘Latino’ provide windows to further expose the normalization of the ‘race/ethnicity/sexuality/citizenship’ conundrum. Estrella’s narration further depicts how ‘queerness’ and ‘Latinidad’ are in constant negotiation with the politics of ‘American’ citizenship. The second section calls for a move beyond dialectics where Estrella’s voice is joined by Stacey’s and Jade’s to confront commonsensical representations of over-sexualized ‘Latinas’. It is the translation of their ‘Latina’ ethnicity and their shared subject positions as ‘transgenders’ that disrupts any possibility of linear readings around Diasporic ‘trans’. This conversation is carried forward in section three to further account for the discrepancies of migration and border crossing where having official U.S. citizenship is not

⁵ The native language of the people that I interviewed and my native language as well (being Ecuadorian).



translated into becoming part of the ‘American’ and ‘queer’ melting pot. I close this article by further illustrating the assumed neutrality of categories such as ‘Latino’ and “queer”. The continuous negotiation around place, belonging and ethnic/racial/sexual identities are articulated in those iterative moments that mark the possibility and impossibility of identity, presence through absence (Butler 1990).

On “Latinidad”: Estrella’s story

If sexuality is not just about sex, nor is it only about sexual identity, then what is about? As Weeks (1989) explains, sexuality refers to the cultural ways of expressing our bodily desires and pleasures. Nevertheless, sexuality has been constructed as an attribute of individuals, as something attached to either gender and/or identity. Gender studies have been concerned with sexuality as one of the main axioms where inequality is perpetuated through the naturalization of masculinity and femininity.

Despite these theoretical and methodological redefinitions around gender and sexuality that speak of their malleability, it is still assumed by many that ‘queer’ and ‘Latino’ have a single meaning in the ‘West’. The discussion I bring into this chapter makes visible instead how there are a multiplicity of meanings around ‘queer’ and ‘Latino’ within and around the ‘West’. Hall (1997: 181) would probably analyze this as “one of the effects of globalization that are not evenly and equally spread throughout the world”. While this could be one side of the analysis I have chosen instead to use Estrella’s narrative to show the complexity of these multiple meanings particularly when looking at race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender in a dialectics rather than through fixed theoretical conceptualizations. In addition, ‘queer’ and ‘Latino’ bring to the surface terms such as ‘transgender’. The systems through which all these labels interact and intersect speak of an on-going cultural construction where meanings are contested, re-interpreted and re-signified. Estrella is a male to female transgender originally from Mexico, living in the U.S. with a Salvadorean male partner. Estrella could easily pass as a very attractive woman. Despite her tireless efforts to organize the Latino trans-community in the D.C. area, Estrella has

lately decided to join a cosmetic firm as an independent consultant as she felt her efforts were sometimes misinterpreted or else not acknowledge. Estrella was the first transgender that befriended me and was the first to acknowledge that the only ‘queer’ in the entire LCentro was me. We have talked, informally for hours about different topics and even started a book project together which had to be put on hold as the telling of her story brought to the surface painful and unresolved issues. She has been in the United States for ten years at the time of the interview.

When I asked Estrella, ‘Are you queer’/Eres queer? her response was: “I am a woman here and in China”. This reply not only aimed to ratify a sexual identity and gender but also set the parameters to state that categorical labels such as ‘woman’⁶ cannot be read as ‘queer’. In addition, she conveys a strong understanding of the representations around “Latinas”. In the following comments Estrella narrates how she reifies the quintessential ‘Latina identity’. These comments make reference to the particular context of finding herself working as the only Latina among other white and African-American drag queens as the following narrative illustrates:

Soy mujer aquí y en la China. Está en todo lado, en mis papeles, como me veo, como me siento. Quizás cuando me muera ahí se darán cuenta porque lo verán. Soy chilanga, apinonada. Acá soy Latina primero, tu sabes, como que tenemos mas sabor, movimiento, hablamos mas alto, y eso se ve. Transgénero? hm.. sólo para lo político.

I am a woman here and in China. It’s everywhere, in my papers, in the way I look, and how I feel. Maybe only after I die they will find out since they will see it... I am chilanga, apinonada. Here I am read as Latina first. You know, we have more flavor, more movement, we speak louder. All that can be ‘seen’. Transgender? Hmm.. only for political reasons”.

The expression “I am a woman here and in China” is a popular saying that implies that Estrella will be read as a female person no matter where she goes. A possible equivalence in English

⁶ Butler (1999:6-8) has exemplified the limits of identity politics through discussing how feminism has intended to claim an universality for the term “woman”, when it became apparent that women’s differences in terms of class, citizenship, race, ethnicity, age account for an overwhelming diversity that will radically change the experiences of ‘women’ across the world beyond the homogenous ‘woman’ initially proposed.



might be “I am woman through and through”. Estrella’s narrative also brings our attention to how ethnic identities such as *chilanga* and *apinonada* (strong nationalistic epithets) were displaced by ‘Latina’ when she crossed the Mexican border into the U.S. *Chilanga* is a very specific term used for people from the Federal District, it connotes an urban space, cosmopolitan, with all its attached representations. *Apinonada* refers to light mulato people from the urban, cosmopolitan area. Once she entered U.S. territory, these ethnical identities were pushed in the state-defined, homogenous category known as ‘Latina’. Since this category is based on place of origin as pertains to geographical location as well as phenotype, it erases the ethnicity and diversity of the people being termed as “Latino/a”.

As illustrated by Klor de Alva (1999: 172), the separation of ‘mestizos’ with the traditional sense of hybrid started to move beyond a mix of colors to mixed ancestry during the period of earliest contacts in Spanish America. It was only in the seventeenth century that the population of ‘hybrids’ grew to be identifiable. With the disappearance of most native nobilities, phenotype (physical appearances as determined genetically) became the single most important indicators of social and economic statuses. As hybrids were mostly the product of unmarried couples, ‘mestizos’ were associated with every kind of social transgression.

For Estrella as a Chilanga, mestizo becomes a synonym of indigenous (only) and rural. Based on my mestizo self-identity I asked Estrella how I would be identified in Mexico. She responded: “You are white. And didn’t you say you are ‘queer’ also whatever that is?” Estrella’s answer provides another example that illustrates the absurdity of race and ethnical classifications discursively built as ‘fixed’. In daily life, people are constantly resisting such categorizations which change when crossing borders, both internal as well as external. Definitions of who is ‘white’ and who is not vary from context to context (Small 1999: 49) and this is particularly evident in the United States within its rigid racial dichotomy white/black. Nevertheless peoples of mixed heritage already defy static categories or race and ethnicity (Butler 1993⁷, García-Canclini 1992, Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983).

⁷ Another author that explores the way in which queer theory can provide means to understand the other is African American writer Jean Toomer’s refusal to be classified as a “Negro” in Sommerville (2000). He also discusses how this disidentification could be read (or not) as a gesture of resistance.



“Latino” provides new ways of imagining nationhood, belonging and non-belonging where ‘whiteness’ proves false as it has been reduced to skin color (Ware 2001: 19). Nevertheless, Estrella’s narrative shows no references to skin color; instead, she mentions how her being ‘Latina’ could be seen for ‘having more flavor, movement, speaking louder’⁸. This apparent ‘excess’ well documented by Muñoz (2000) could have been constructed and read as such only when juxtaposed with the flatness of ‘whiteness’: lack is to ‘whiteness’ as excess is to racialized ‘Latinos/as’.

Estrella’s narrative seems to resemble U.S. media and popular culture representations and discourse about ‘Latinas’; nevertheless, Estrella doesn’t speak to the assumed visibility of her being ‘chilanga/apinonada’ in an ethnic and ‘racial’ sense to being a Latina. On the other hand, Estrella does reify ‘womanness’ when referring to the possibility of ‘being woman here and in China’. Her close resemblance to normative representations of women might act as a disclaimer while her penis is resignified into a vagina, the quintessential symbol of ‘womanness’.

I analyze Estrella’s narrative using Klor de Alva’s (1999: 175) metaphor of *mestizaje* as a cipher-like nature that could be analyzed as an empty place holder to be filled with almost any category of identity⁹. In this sense, I would argue that Estrella’s reference to her Latina reading illustrates the way she negotiates sexual readings of race and sexuality, whilst negotiating western labels and scripts. This poses a question related with the merging of ‘queer’ and ‘racial’ subjectivities as pertained to the experience of misrecognition where one stands under a sign (‘Latino/a’ and ‘queer’ for the purpose of this study) to which one does and does not belong. Estrella’s story brings out the work of queerness as her narrative bends the meaning of Latina into a new meaning that allows a trans-person identity but not a ‘queer’ identity. The translocative interplay between sexuality and its loaded representations of race and ethnicity provides a strategic way for Estrella to be and remain Latina and not become ‘queer’ or ‘loca’.

⁸ Estrella’s references to *Latinidad* are shared by many predominant Latinas such as Chicana literary writer Sandra Cisneros who discussed in an interview for *El Andar* how Latinas are ‘very sexual... it’s in our bodies... it’s in our colors... in the food... (Chávez-Silverman 2000:183). The latter reinforces not only stereotyping but the over-sexualization of ethnic bodies for market consumption.

⁹ The latter considering that hybrid Anglo-Americans have bypassed *mestizaje* as a social category all together as it becomes problematic to purists.



We see these tensions at work in the slippages the following texts provide that illustrate the tensions between ‘Latino’ and ‘queer’. I do not attempt to interpret this text in as much as I want to bring attention to those slippages that are neither in discord nor in unison with the previous one where Estrella is able to claim two separate and opposing gender identities, those of man/woman. The narrative involves Estrella and one of her former male bodied Mexican partners:

...Cuando llegamos al apartamento dejó la pistola y me dio dos cachetadas que en un hombre tan grande duelen. Yo le dije: ‘pero Miguel, no te das cuenta! Qué es lo que quieres?! Yo soy un hombre también como tú’. El me decía que no, que tú eres para mí, mi mujer. Yo le gritaba ‘soy un hombre!’. Decidí encuerarme enterita. Cuando me vio, ahí se tranquilizó. De todas formas siguió amenazándome pero no podía ponerme (mas) un dedo encima.

...When I arrived at the apartment he put the gun down and hit me on the face with the strength of a big man. I told him: ‘but Juan, don’t you realize? What do you want? I am a man just as you are!’ He then replied ‘no, you are my woman’. I shouted ‘I AM a man!’”. Then I proceeded to take my clothes off. After he saw *me* then he cool down. In any case he continued threatening me but he would never (again) lay a finger on my body

Estrella’s text calls upon the need to understand sexuality as defined by Foucault (1978): an open and complex historical system of discourse and power that produces the category of “sex” as part of a strategy to perpetuate power-relations. The physicality of Estrella’s genitals exposed on this claim for survival as a man reifies the adscription of organs to a particular sex and gender. The historical relationship based on the adscription of a subordinate status to women generally speaking has not only enabled male violence against women (particularly in intimate relations) but has also tended to naturalize it. This particular epistemology is operating through Estrella’s strategy for survival which consisted in making her maleness visible as a way to equalize the confrontation. Estrella’s text also illustrates that interrogating labels such as queer and “Latino/a” within a historically contingent understanding of race and sexuality opens spaces



to look at these categories as objects within a particular epistemological history: a history that seeks to uncover how race and sexuality operate in this particular Diaspora.

The need to think about the domain ‘queer’ and ‘gender’ as discontinuous is important if taking into account that so-called ‘subordinated’ groups struggle to contest both the hegemonic ‘center’ as well as to becoming part of it. Being part of this mobile center entails for some a ‘westernization’, ‘assimilation’ or ‘acculturation’ where American citizenship plays out notions of belonging. Becoming ‘American’ through birth or years of paperwork does not prevent further discrimination based on the actual practices of sexuality and race that are indeed reproduced in and through the queer.

Estrella’s refusal to buy into ‘queer’ is a local expression of the continuous movement and border identities LGBT Latinos need to negotiate. Adopting ‘queer’ will make Estrella not only ‘American’¹⁰ but ‘white’, a citizenship and ethnicity contested but nevertheless desired particularly for its legal and economic rewards. In other words, if you are ‘Latino’ you cannot be ‘queer’. These slippages, as framed within this research study, could also be read and analyzed as ‘uncertain’ as opposed to monolithic and predictable ‘objective’ readings. The non-neutrality of these non-monolithic possibilities is further exposed when conflated with race, ethnicity and sexuality.

Trans-conflations of Race, Ethnicity and Sexuality

The previous section illustrated ‘Latino’ as a subject position explained through ‘sabor’ and ‘movimiento’ as brought up by Estrella. Jade builds on this imagined Latinidad pushing it further to dispute on the effects of the conflation of ethnicity and sexuality: over-sexualization of ‘Latino’ bodies. Issues related with migration and sexual identity and how the imagined gay community identity is strongly racialized, genderized and marked by class have been discussed by Pichardo (2003: 23). I will add that the imagined Latino community is not only already

¹⁰ For another reading on immigration and sexuality see Espin (pg. 6) on Women Crossing Boundaries. The author discusses how becoming ‘Americanized’ is seen as almost synonymous with being sexually promiscuous in many immigrant communities (Luibheid 2004: 230)



racialized, genderized and marked by class but also and sexualized as Jade's text will subsequently illustrate.

Ser Latino desafortunadamente es ser como un símbolo sexual, significa ser una imagen de mujer bonita, desgraciadamente conectada con lo sexual. Eso siento que esta sociedad me hace sentir que Latina es sexual. Para mi ser Latina significa ser trabajadora, luchar, trabajar 3 veces mas para que alguien me escuche y me vea por el ser humano que soy, para que alguien me crea. Por los dos novios que he tenido (americanos) tengo que probarle a un americano que yo soy digna de el. ... digna para bajarte el calzón pero para llevarte a una fiesta de negocios no. (Jade)

Being Latino unfortunately implies or gives the impression of a sex symbol, it gives an image of a pretty woman, regrettably connected to a sexual stereotype. In this society I am made to feel that Latina equates to sex. From my perspective being Latina means to be hard-working, to struggle, work three thrice as hard so that someone will listen and see me as the human being I am, so that someone will believe in me. From past experiences with two (American) boyfriends I have had to prove them that I am good enough for them. I found that (they believe I am) good enough to take off my panties but not (good enough) to take me out to their business meetings.

Through Jade's narrative we learn once again how Latinos have been traditionally represented through a usually negative discourse charged with highly sexualized stereotypes that turns bodies into a natural co-relation of shapes and acts. This relates to Foucault's concept of bio-power where racism became institutionalized within the State beginning in the 20th Century. Bio-politics was the framework within which decisions on what lives and what doesn't were made creating a division between definitions of what is 'normal' from what is not. This justified the death of the 'other' (Sáez 2004: 74-75) which extends to slaves to peasants to poor to disabled to women to children to homosexuals to immigrants. An example that relates to this particular research are the death risks which undocumented LGBT (and non-LGBT) Latinos are subjected to when crossing the border by foot, poorly constructed boats, cargo trains and trucks, through has been deem as 'illegal'. These crossings risk these people's lives by exposing them to all



sorts of dangers such as starvation, diseases, rape, jail and trafficking (Lubheid and Cantú: 2005). Trafficking goes hand in hand with the representation of Latinos and Latinas as overly-sexualized (as well as Caribbean white/black mixed peoples, afro-descendants among others). The bio-politics of ‘killing’ is then situated within both a figurative as well as a symbolic sense where death risks are multiplied under the mentioned circumstances. Within the geo-politics of the signifiers ‘immigrant’, ‘illegal’, ‘alien’, non-heteronormativity becomes extensive to the body politics of these borders. Like the homosexual, the undocumented immigrant opens an epistemological gap by exercising the power to dissemble, to pass, to make problematic that which is rendered self-evident by a hegemonic ideology of representational significance (Chapin, Jessica 1997:18-19) as illustrated initially by both Estrella and Jade.

To better analyze Jade’s articulation of “Latino” and “sex symbol” it’s necessary to insert Jade’s narrative within a post-colonial framework that provides a genealogy of native bodies as represented by the conquerors mainly for the achievement of socio-political and economic supremacy objectives. As women’s studies scholar M. Jacqui Alexander (Epps, Valens and Johnson 2005: 7) points out, “colonial rule simultaneously involved racializing and sexualizing the population” in such a way that the sexuality of people of color came to the fore as deviant and dangerous against the naturalized and hence often only implicit backdrop of white heterosexuality. Stoler’s (1997:59) discussion on Foucault is particularly relevant in this discussion as ‘racism’ emerges as one of several possible domains in which technologies of sexuality are reworked out and displayed. State racism is not an effect but a tactic of the internal fission of society into binary oppositions. It is a means of creating “biologized” internal enemies, against whom society must defend itself. The latter, race as a bio-technology is exemplified dramatically by Jade’s narrative where Latina equals sex *in this society*. Bio-technology is a devise through which bio-power -a concept from Foucault’s biopolitics theory- operates by enabling us to look at the particularities around the production of the Latino bodies and sexualities in this particular research project. Bhabha’s (1994) tools for a theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity is an analysis to what Jade refers to as an equation of ‘Latina’ + sexual availability.



Sexual, ethnic, race, geographical, territorial, spatial borders: it's the 'inter' - the in-between spaces where cultural interpretation and translation converge. In addition, by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves (Bhabha 1994: 38-39). Nevertheless, will this Third Space provide Latino LGBT immigrants the possibility of becoming sexual citizens? If 'American' is tainted symbolically and materially as being Caucasian, white, male, document, heterosexual (or its ability to pass as such), the access to a 'Western' sexual citizenship might entail assimilation into U.S. culture. The questions I asked throughout this research are not meant to solve this apparent discrepancy but instead to amplify it. Eng's (1997: 37) analysis of Asian American Diasporic communities is relevant here. I fully concur with the author that immigration processes whether from Asia, Latin American or other continents, cannot be understood outside of U.S. neo-imperialism in these regions – the colonization, disciplining, an ordering of Asian, Latino and other identities that begin “over there” rather than “over here” within the domestic borders of the United States.

Jade made reference to the need as a 'Latina' “to work three times as hard so that someone will listen and see me as the human being I am”. Jade's narrative coincides with Stacey's as both address the need as 'transgender Latinas' who live in the U.S. to work harder and become educated so as to be able to further their lives as transgenders and Latinas:

Especialmente ser una mujer latina transgénero en los EEUU... hay como una doble discriminación en el término científico. Va a depender de nosotras mismas cambiar, cuando tu eres educada tienes un nombre en esta sociedad simple y sinceramente si queremos hacer un cambio debemos educarnos, nadie nos va a poner un stop por mas que tengamos una identidad diferente al resto de la sociedad.

In particular, being a transgender Latina woman in the US... there's like a double discrimination with the scientific term (transgender). (I believe) it will depend on us to change it, when one is more educated you have a name in this society and simply stated if we want to make changes we need to become educated, no one is going to stop us even though we have a different identity than the rest of the society.



Stacey and Jade's narratives allude to 'Latinas' as 'hard-workers' a term that presupposes them as advocates for change within their societies through being outspoken, hardworking and educated. If we follow Lubheid's (2004: 227) analysis where sexuality structures every aspect of immigrant experiences, 'Latinas as outspoken and hard-working' is tainted with a pre-discursivity that becomes a site of awareness *after* crossing the border. Stacey's narrative closely resembles ideas around self-individual work as a tool to succeed that might as well speak of U.S. neo-liberal discourses that range from the mythical 'American dream' to the popular saying 'pulling yourself up by your boots straps'.

Notwithstanding, Stacey's reference to 'transgender as scientific' and the double discrimination she faces could also be explained through bio-power and its ability to regulate bodies through categories. As categories become part of the 'official discourse' that is to say medicalized through science, people like Stacey and Jade are cut in an endless struggle of overcoming the contradictions of their subject positions. The pre-discursivity of categories such as that of 'transgender' are exemplified through these 'queer' 'Latinas' living in the U.S. whose choices on categories of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity become minimal prompting them to live their lives in constant negotiation and confrontation. Bio-power permeates this pre-discursivity where categories such as 'trans', 'queer' and 'Latino' are already medicalized producing the contested bodies of Tico, Jade, Stacey and TikoV. These bodies and their agency become particularly apparent in this geographical space politically demarcated as the United States.

Stacey and Jade as well as Estrella provide a meditation on their lives as migrants where El Salvador and Mexico is brought forward to the D.C. Diaspora, where their trans-bodies are resilient to give up the fight as they constantly move between sexual and racial spaces. There's no assertion toward a "Westernization" or "Americanization" of non-white, non-U.S. bodies of people, instead there's a reconfiguration of the spaces marked by the 'scientific term' as Stacey explains. The latter considering that language choice can be as arbitrary as gender choice. The trans-conflations of race, ethnicity and sexuality discussed through Stacey and Jade's texts open broader angles of discussion on cultural positionality. The difference in the process of language



is crucial to the production of meaning and ensures, at the same time, that meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent (Bhabha 1994: 36).

The discussion that I foregrounded is not about sexual variation in non-white 'queer' Diasporic cultures. It's about dismantling categories in translation, illustrating the fragmentation of 'gayness' and 'whiteness' as categories for social control. If 'Latinidad' does not presuppose neither 'gayness' nor 'whiteness', sexual citizenship in the current immigration U.S. context becomes a reification of the hegemony of citizenship. 'American' as embodied by millions of Latinos throughout the nation nevertheless resists its juridical, economic and social adscription possible only for those 'authentic Americans'. Authenticity becomes again a point of contention where 'American citizenship' is defined through a norm, a matrix reinforced through the Department of Homeland Security through the construction of material and symbolic borders, policies such as political asylum and means that reinforces the illusion of the United States of America as the melting pot as well as the land of rights 'for all'. This critical discussion is brought forward in the next section.

“I am American, I am no different than you”

Given what has been stated in previous sections, discourses favoring both assimilation and acculturation imply that in order to be 'gay' a person has to assimilate into 'whiteness' as discussed in the previous section. This has the additional implication of distancing gay from blackness and from a so-called 'effeminate' gay into a gay that could pass as 'heterosexual'. Nevertheless, not everyone can 'pass as white' and obtain those benefits ascribed to such subject positioning. In addition, cultural citizenship as framed by the US institutions goes beyond enabling assimilation to enforcing it whenever possible through the various mechanisms of power that end up as immigration policies (Ong 1999).

“I am American, I am no different than you” is how Jade closed the argument with her boss. After working for a leasing company and realizing that Latinos worked harder and received less increase in wages than their African-American colleagues she inquired from her



boss, a ‘white’ woman about this discrepancy. The woman replied ‘you don’t have rights because you were not even born in this here’. In Jade’s own words:

Yo tenía papeles pero I was not ‘American’

I had papers (U.S. passport) but I was still not ‘American’.

Jade’s reflection on the differences among race classificatory systems between the U.S. and El Salvador become a turning point for her own understandings of race and sexual identity as the following text illustrates:

La raza no me la puedo definir. No soy ni negra ni blanca y no soy Native american. En El Salv yo era salvadorena pobre. El gobierno/sistema te obliga porque la primera experiencia cuando fui a sacar mi ID en cuestiones de raza, de sexo, de identidad sexual. Comenzó por eso. En el pasaporte (Salvadoreno) no te preguntan ‘que raza eres’? acá te pedían inmigrante, latina, idioma, para el social (social security number).

I cannot define my race. I am neither black nor white nor native American. In El Salvador I was a poor Salvadorean. The government/system forces you (to classify yourself) in terms of your race, sex, and sexual identity as reflected through my first experience obtaining my ID. It started there. In the (Salvadorean) passport you are not asked “Which race are you?”, here they would ask (if you were) immigrant, Latina, the language, in order to obtain your social (social security number)

Jade’s text exemplifies governmentally supported attempts to monitor, question, identify, and “know” those who enter, or would enter, and stay, or would stay, in the country (Epps, Valens, Johnson G. 2005). Passport controls, border checks, interviews, interdiction, detainment, “secondary inspection”, profiling, and other tactics have served to establish or determine identities, to draw out “confessions” of who one is. Such controls, checks, and interviews are crucial, it seems, not only for the maintenance of national borders and to the often dubious turns



of national security but also to the plays of identity that are mobilized by, through, and as immigration (Epps, Valens, Johnson G. 2005: 5). Despite this policing, Jade's narrative resists that very act of categorization which may challenge the very epistemologies that subtend such judgments, opening up all kinds of living that resist both these epistemologies of mastery and the politics of domination that they spawn (Winnubst 2007: 88).

This section's title "I am American, I am no different than you" as brought up by Jade is contrasted by Tico who places the core of identity in the U.S. in being documented, that is to say, having U.S. citizenship that legalizes his humanity. Tico is in his late 20s, originally from Guatemala and at the time of the interview had been in the United States for less than a year. Tico has a B.A. in Architecture which places him in a different social class in his hometown, a class that would not be matched in the U.S. as constrained by issues around legality and gender identity and practices:

Primero ser documentado antes de ser gay, guatemalteco. Sin documentación no puedo ser nadie... (Los Latinos) estamos en otras luchas: pobreza, supervivencia, (luchas) más básicas, dónde vamos a comer, a trabajar.

One needs to have papers first before becoming gay or Guatemalan. Without papers I am nobody ...(Latin people) we are involved in other struggles, poverty, survival, (we have struggles) that are more essential, where are we going to eat, where are we going to work.

Tico's statement that "without papers I am nobody" not only displaces his sexual and national identity but speaks to the current 'citizenship' debate as exemplified by Balibar (1999: 327) where the immigrants, labeled as aliens by the Department of Homeland Security are denied citizenship by constitutionally showing and persuading themselves that they constitutionally 'lack' the qualities of fully fledged or normal human beings. The fluctuating characters and imprecise borders of class, gender and national belonging to his homeland mark a turning point where Tico becomes literally 'nobody' upon entering the United States. Tico's class position gained primarily through his education, together with his Guatemalan citizenship, is erased when crossing the border together with his Guatemalan citizenship. Tico's sexual identity is erased and



displaced: not only does his 'gay identity' come after his lack of U.S. citizenship but it will need to be re-enacted within a 'white gay' culture. As Balibar's (1999: 326) analysis on class racism suggests, the fusion of a socioeconomic category with an anthropological and moral category takes pseudoscientific credentials from the Darwinian theory of evolution that become invested in a network of social surveillance and control manifested in current immigration practices particularly after 9/11 when 'immigrant' became a parallel to 'terrorist'.

It can be observed in Jade's narrative the limits of Tico's desired legality where, despite her U.S. passport, she's far from occupying the subject position of 'American' and its infinite rewards. To be 'American' is then subjected not only to legal documentation as mandated by current US Immigration and Naturalization Service but by the geo-politically constructed racial/ethnic/national classifications. Tico's claim to becoming someone through becoming an 'American' in U.S. terms is corroborated by participants in the first of two focus groups I conducted around issues of citizenship, ethnicity and sexuality at LCentro. When talking about citizenship as related with migratory status versus a sexual and gender identity the group agreed that, 'el estatus migratorio es primero', 'migration status comes first'. The group also came up with an alternative term for Latino and Hispanic: *mestizoamericanos* (without a hyphen). The term illustrates the possibility of being American without implicitly dropping *mestizaje* as a hybrid possibility of confronting fixed categorizations. In this respect queers, as illustrated by Knopp (2004: 129), are keenly aware of the hybrid nature of their existences...hence their ambivalent relationships to place and identity and an affection for movement.

TicoV, Estrella, Jade, Stacey and Tico's narratives illustrate the in-between spaces brought up by the conflation of 'Latino' and 'queer' juxtaposed with 'American'. Border crossing enables a thorough analysis of this juxtaposition. I would differ with Stychin (2000: 604) who claimed that gay and lesbian immigrant communities shape a placeless and transnational community made by a world network of gay cities that have commonalities that keep a certain homogeneity. The deterritorialization the author speaks of entails precisely the homogeneity of a 'gay culture' loaded with 'white' understandings of gayness largely separated from the Latino material gay lives and meaning-making practices around sexuality constructed throughout a separate epistemology. Pressures to pass as "American" may be most intense at the



border but these persist over time and across places, effectively embroiling ethnically marked, non-white subjects, regardless of their actual citizenship status, in a peculiar coming out and/or passing game of their own (Epps, Valens, Johnson G. 2005: 5).

Conclusion

This article has problematized the assumed neutrality of categories using ‘Latino’ and ‘queer’ to look at the tension between sexuality, race and ethnicity that precludes meanings around ‘American’ in the lives of Mexican and Central American LGBT activists living in the D.C. area. To map these tensions, I have illustrated how ‘Latino’ and ‘queer’ functions in this queerness/gayness before and during the experience of the border opening up multiple possibilities to look at conventions which prescribe certain ways of talking about these topics and excluding others. Within a framework of transnational sexual citizenship, socio-political agendas usually regulated by the government are based on a universal gay identity that obscures differences of class, race and ethnicity, to name a few as Leap (2005) illustrates through his work in Cape Town, South Africa.

The ‘gayness’ tainted as ‘white’ *and* ‘American’ is enacted in the narratives of the Latino LGBT informants I have analyzed. The continuous negotiation around place, belonging and ethnic/racial/sexual identities are articulated in those iterative moments that mark the possibility and impossibility of identity, presence through absence (Butler 1990). It becomes crucial at this juncture for me to speak from a myriad of overlapping and conflicting positions as an Ecuadorian/Latina/’Native’ Anthropologist/’queer’ to further problematize the intersections of ‘race and sexuality’ based on U.S. arbitrary classifications. The production of LGBT Latino community identities against what has been constructed as a ‘western queer identity’ disables the possibility of the imitation of an ‘original’ (Bhabha 1994).

The narratives from TicoV, Jade, Stacey and Tico illustrate the various ways in which the imagined gay ‘Latino’ community identity is strongly racialized, genderized and marked by class particularly when migration and sexual identity converge (Pichardo 2003: 23) and how ‘queer’



fits uneasily in these narratives. That is to say, there's no room for 'queer' when race, ethnicity, class and sexuality converge and intersect among the LGBT Latinos in the geo-politically marked D.C. Latino Diaspora. I find relevant to close this section with a quote from Michael Warner that speaks towards 'gayness' in non-Western contexts to which I will add *and* Western contexts. Warner seems to assume in this quote a homogenous 'gay political identity' within the United States which my research proves to be not only insufficient but imprecise.

“As gay activists from non-Western contexts become more and more involved in setting political agendas, and as the rights discourse of internationalism is extended to more and more cultural contexts, Anglo-American queer theorists will have to be more alert to the globalizing – and localizing – tendencies of our theoretical languages.” (1993:xii)

Having said this, where do we draw the line between languages? Between cultures? Between peoples? (Bhabha's 1994:85). I believe we are finally analyzing these lines as not only blurred but constantly subject to change and re-signification without the illusory character of distinct and monolithic entities that occur in what has been traditionally conceptualized as 'fixed' spaces.



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