

The Role of Queer Identity Among Cross-National Latinas

Honors Research Thesis

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by

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Abstract

Latino immigrants are a fast growing population in the United States, contributing to a variety of groups, including the lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) community. Prior research indicates that many Latino men do not identify as gay or bisexual, even if having relationships with other men (Center for Disease Control [CDC], 2000; Diaz & Ayala, 2001; Almaguer, 1993); however, current research lacks focus on lesbian and bisexual women and how they view a queer identity. Given how stigmatized homosexuality is in many Latin American countries and the United States, qualitative one-on-one interviews were used to examine the assertion of a LGB identity, including what forces contribute to this proclamation -- be that preventing forces or contributing forces both in the home country and abroad. Findings show that although these women must navigate complex and sometimes conflicting expectations regarding their multiple identities, asserting queerness is still important for the maintenance of self.

Introduction

Latino immigrants are one of the fastest-growing populations in the United States, making up 5.9% of the total US population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008) and Mexicans 31% of the total foreign-born population of 2007 (Census Bureau, 2007). Their numbers contribute to the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community as well. Prior research indicates that Latino men may hesitate to identify as gay or bisexual due to stigmatization and homophobia (CDC, 1999; Diaz & Ayala, 2001), yet little research exists on migrant Latina women who have sex with women (WSW), including lesbians, bisexual women and women who choose to identify outside of these labels. While intersection theory has become more popular for examining multiple sources of oppression (Bowleg, 2008; Cuadrez, 1999; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008), only a few articles study the multidimensional identities that migrant Latina WSW must navigate (Acosta, 2008; Asencio, 2009). This highlights the empirical silence that exists in social science research surrounding a group likely to experience marginalization.

Given the strong familial ties and patriarchal values that dominate in many Latin American countries, Latinos face shifting gender and racial roles in their home countries and the United States (Acosta, 2008; Almaguer, 1993; Asencio, 2009; Diaz & Ayala, 2001; Ibañez, Marin, Flores, Millett & Diaz, 2009; Sandfort, Melendez & Diaz, 2007; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004). This paper seeks to add to the existing research by examining the reasons behind identification with queer identity amidst this state of flux. Sexuality can occupy a different space from other minority statuses, such as gender or race, in that the majority of queer individuals “are not raised in a community of similar others from whom they learn about their identity and who reinforce and support that identity. Rather, LGB individuals are often raised in communities that are either ignorant of or openly hostile toward homosexuality (Rosario et al., 2006, p. 46).”

Utilizing qualitative one-on-one interviews garnered through snowball sampling, this study examines the individual's perception of queer identity and the barriers to and supporting factors of claiming this part of self. For example, do women migrate to explore their sexualities with greater autonomy from their families? How do these women negotiate their sexual and ethnic identities?

Prior Research

Research indicates Mexican men who defy gender roles and act as the receptive partner in anal sexual intercourse are more likely to be stigmatized as homosexual. To defy the rigid ideals of masculinity is to act passive and in the role of women, a group with much less social power and autonomy than men (Carrier, 1976). This defines homosexuality in terms of active and passive roles, one coded as masculine and the other as feminine (Almaguer, 1993). Such a view intrinsically omits female homosexuality, as male homosexuality is still perceived through the lens of heterosexuality (a male and "female" partner). It could also then be posited that WSW engage in a similar violation of gender, where one partner assumes a more masculine role (Ortiz-Hernández & Granados-Cosme, 2006). However, there is little research that explores the ways in which female homosexuality is perceived and whether or not this is considered as threatening as violating male gender norms, as masculinity is often defined as simply not being feminine (Ortiz-Hernández & Granados-Cosme, 2006).

Furthermore, there are few studies on women's views of homosexuality in the Latin American community. If social science overlooks this group, implicit is the idea that queer Latina women do not experience sexuality differently than men and do not face unique challenges. It is unlikely to think this is the case, as men and women as individual groups are

socialized differently within Latin American culture (Almaguer, 1993; Comas-Diaz, 1998).

While research also examines that Latino men may hide their sexuality for fear of stigmatization or may seek asylum via migration to live out homosexual desire (Almaguer, 1993; CDC, 1999; Diaz & Ayala, 2001; Sandfort et al., 2007), research lacks focus on whether or not Latina WSW migrate to explore their sexuality or intentionally identify as heterosexual to protect from discrimination and rejection (Acosta, 2008; Asencio, 2009).

Multiple Role Strain

There are a number of factors that drive both men and women's attitudes regarding homosexuality, particularly the role of the family and the expectations of women. Families are often seen as the center of Latino life, more so than the needs of the individual, and respect for the family is viewed as equally important (Acosta, 2008; Almaguer, 1993; Asencio, 2009; Diaz & Ayala, 2001; Flores & Millstein, 1998). *El familismo*, or familism, predominates throughout Latin America, a cultural idea that stresses loyalty and solidarity among family (Sabogal et al., 1987). While strong familial attachments can have obvious benefits, such as emotional support, if one's identity is in contrast to the family, this can be a source of conflict (Acosta, 2008; Asencio, 2009). Rigid separation of gender roles also contributes to cultural views of sexuality. This perpetuates heterosexuality as the only acceptable expression of sexual identity, an extension of a desire for clear distinctions between women and men (Almaguer, 1993; Comas-Diaz, 1998). Criticism of this perception exists, however, as it does not adequately capture the variation in gender roles of Latino families (Amaro, 1998). However, there are findings that support that gender divisions play a role in partner selection and that Latino parents in the United States socialize children along gendered lines (Flores & Millstein, 1998; Raffaelli & Ontai,

2004). Fear of rejection from the family as well as the desire to not embarrass the family could contribute to Latina WSW hiding their sexuality, just as men do. It's possible that women would have more freedom to explore sexuality once having emigrated primarily due to greater autonomy from family, though this may be different or delayed for Latina WSW who immigrated to the United States already coupled with a man.

With the rise of immigration to the United States, links between family and sexual identity have become increasingly complex within the Latino community. Since the 1970s and 1980s more women from Latin America have begun to migrate to the United States, primarily as part of family groups, although the vast majority will also work. Women are now as likely as men to migrate to the United States. In her 1993 study of female Mexican migration, Donato identified that younger women with higher educational attainment, no land ownership in the home country, and who came from entrepreneurial households were more likely to migrate to the United States. Migrant women are also more concentrated in the service sector, usually isolated work with fewer opportunities for advancement than male migrants who are concentrated in construction and manual labor that puts them in contact with other men (Hagan, 1998). That women tend to migrate already coupled with men or as part of a family may affect how they view their sexuality. Employment opportunities may also prevent women from moving to areas where there is a higher concentration of GLBT networking opportunities (Asencio, 2009). However, this research omits the experience of women who migrated to the United States autonomously. It is likely that single women or women with autonomy from family would have a different perception of their ability to act on their queer desire than women under the gaze of a husband or parents.

Both Acosta (2008) and Asencio's (2009) studies focused on small samples of qualitative interviews with Latina WSW. Both studies noted a common challenge to these women with such multidimensional identities: a shift in perception of race. Because Latinos may identify among a variety of racial lines and may be more likely to identify by nationality, class-based discrimination is more common (Ibañez et al., 2009), though to note, Afro-Latinos may be more likely to identify along racial lines (Acosta, 2008). Many of the women interviewed considered themselves to be white in their home countries and thus experienced the privileges of whiteness. "Migration introduced these Latinas to a new racial hierarchy. They become 'people of color,' regardless of what their prior experiences had been (Acosta, 2008, p. 646)."

Ibañez's 2009 study of 911 Latino gay men noted that those with darker skin and more Indian features were more likely to experience racism, including within the gay community. While greater independence to explore sexuality may be an incentive for migration and self-identification, some Latina WSW must adjust to losing white privilege and navigating new racial spheres. Given that migrants tend to form ethnic enclaves to aid in the transition process (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996) and that employment opportunities may be limited for Latina migrants with limited education and English language skills, connection to GLBT networks and groups could be marginalizing or difficult to find. While these women may be able to access community to one portion of their identity, another may remain out of reach or seem unwelcoming. A woman may face alienation from the queer community due to race/ethnicity or documentation status. Alternatively, she may face the same from the family or migrant community because of sexuality. Women are then placed into the position of struggling to manage their multiple identities of nationality, womanhood, and sexuality (Acosta, 2008; Asencio, 2009).

Intersection Theory

Intersectionality examines the ways in which power dynamics build upon and interact with each other (Collins, 1998). In the past, literature has contributed to the erasure of experience of groups with multiple minority statuses by highlighting only one identity, such as gender or race, as the single most important and overriding experience (Bowleg, 2008; Collins, 1998; King, 1988). This is problematic, as the ways in which queer migrant women of color experience social realities is different than the sole experience of membership to a specific group, be it woman, person of color, immigrant or queer. In her 1988 article, Deborah K. King notes that, “The group experience of slavery and lynching for blacks, genocide for Native Americans, and military conquest for Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans is not substantively comparable to the physical abuse, social discrimination, and cultural denigration suffered by women (p. 45).” Criticism exists for an additive approach to intersectionality because it posits that the various identities experienced by individuals exist independently of each other, rather than exist simultaneously and interactively (King, 1988; Bowleg, 2008).

As a result, level of discrimination automatically becomes a mathematical equation where the more minority identities one has, the greater the discrimination one automatically faces (Bowleg, 2008). Given that class relations tend to override those of race in Latin America (Ibañez, 2009; Acosta, 2008; Asencio, 2009), an upper-middle class *mestiza* woman may have grown up in her home country viewing race as a source of privilege – though this may be experienced differently by Afro-Latinos and *los indígenas*. Additionally, given the importance of the family in Latin America (Almaguer, 1993; Comas-Diaz, 1998; Sabogal et al., 1987), a queer Latina who experiences acceptance from her family might find her experience less oppressive than a woman who experienced rejection. Considering the number of ways queer migrant Latinas

experience marginalization, attention to this group in the social sciences may contribute to the understanding of intersectionality, and thus the way we construct ideas about gender, race, migration, and sexuality. While Latina WSW must navigate multiple roles, research indicates that one has not been abandoned in favor of another, but that changing social circumstances may increase the burdens associated with the minority status in question and Latina WSW may struggle to balance these roles in the face of marginalization (Acosta, 2008; Asencio, 2009).

It is, however, beyond the scope of this study to attempt to create a theory generalizable to all queer migrant women of color, or even Latinas. Rather, this paper seeks to explore the point of view of a group typically silenced within social science research. Although it is acknowledged that one cannot examine any particular aspect of these women's lives without reviewing how one is dependent upon another, these interviews magnify why women embrace an identity that may add to their oppression, particularly an identity that is born outside of a supportive community that one might receive as a member of a particular race or gender. Additionally, analysis and clear definition of a particular identity is also an important tool in understanding how that aspect relates to other identities an individual might carry (Cuadrez & Uttal, 1999).

Most importantly, this paper attempts to prevent what is called by Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach in 2008, *intersectional invisibility*: “the general failure to fully recognize people with intersecting identities as members of their constituent groups” and “the distortion of the intersectional persons' characteristics in order to fit them into frameworks defined by prototypes of constituent identity groups (p. 381).” To narrowly define these women's experiences by the framework of membership to only one group is to deny that migrant Latinas might experience queerness differently than Chicana women, white women or even men. That is to say, narrowly

defining the marginalization of queer individuals as a universal experience that can be measured linearly despite other circumstances such as gender, race/ethnicity and migration status does a disservice to the unique perspective of varied groups. Rather, the ways in which queer migrant Latinas experience their identity must be examined in its entirety and from their point of view.

Methodology

As this study focuses on how queer migrant Latinas view their queer identity as well as their changing social roles, qualitative methodology was used. Given the paucity of research concerning this population, qualitative methods are suited for gaining insight on lesser-understood and more complex social processes (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 57). Because this research is focused on perception of meaning, personal interviews were chosen to allow for specific details and a more personal description of experience (Weiss, 1994).

The following is based on three personal one-on-one interviews with migrant lesbian Latinas living in central and northern Ohio. As only 2.6% of Ohio's population identifies as Latino/Hispanic (Census Bureau, 2008), conducting research within this already small population was difficult and produced a limited sample size. Contacts were obtained through snowball sampling and thus represent only young, college-educated women. All names used are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Two interviews were completed in person and a third was completed via the on-line chat and telephone service, Skype. All three were recorded and immediately uploaded onto a password-protected computer. Recordings were then transcribed and de-identified.

Participants needed to meet the following criteria for participation: to have migrated to the United States from a Latin American country at or after the age of fourteen; to be eighteen

years of age or older; and to identify as a queer woman or a woman who engages in same-sex sexual behavior. In D’Augelli’s 2002 study, queer American youth averaged self-identification between fourteen and fifteen years of age. Though this may or may not be representative of queer Latinas, it is the best estimate available of queer identity and allowed for a marker to ensure that many potential participants had experienced queerness to some degree before immigration.

Table 1 Participants (N=3)

| Pseudonym | Country of Origin | Age of Arrival to US | Current Age |
|-----------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| Ana | Mexico | 25 | 29 |
| Veronica | Honduras | 25 | 29 |
| Jada | Venezuela | 17 | 28 |

By interacting on an individual level, women were free to share the experiences that have shaped their identities. Additionally, women were able to identify modes of discrimination, examine changing social roles and explore available resources. Because women were anticipated to share experiences beyond the scope of pre-determined questions, interviews were conversational in nature and participants were encouraged to follow thoughts that were prompted by the discussion. This was effective in garnering a richer perspective from the participants, who often brought up factors they felt were most important to their experience.

La identidad queer

“I’m a strong lesbian, since I was very small. I mean, I’m a number six on the Kinsey scale.” - Ana

All three participants self-identified as lesbians and each described having inklings in early childhood. It was in their teen years they came to find language to describe feelings that

were to them, very natural. Their stories are not dissimilar to United States youth (D'Augelli, 2002), which could potentially lend credence to the idea that sexuality develops similarly across cultures.

Ana: the first time I was attracted to any type of woman was watching *The Little Mermaid*. I loved Ariel and it was very interesting that when I was five, I asked my mom to make a cape for me because if Ariel liked, um, the prince, then if I had a cape then she would want me. And my mom went ahead and made me a blue cape.

Veronica: Ever since I was five I was clinging onto an older girl, I just wanted a girl's attention. When I realized what that was, that I was gay, that I was lesbian, was probably when I was 16 years old.

When asked to explain why she identifies as a lesbian, each woman gave a similar, yet slightly different version of what being a lesbian means. This echoes the debate of queer studies scholars across the discipline; what is a lesbian and where does one draw the line (Weston, 2009)? Ana and Veronica both described an inability to feel attraction toward or a connection to men. When asked to further explain, they referred to an ability to connect emotionally only with women. Without an emotional connection, they explained, sexual relationships were not of interest to them. Jada, however, indicated sexuality exists as a fluid spectrum. Where today she identifies as a lesbian, she still finds men to be attractive and in the future she cannot definitely say she would not be with a man. Nevertheless, she's only felt love for other women.

Jada: Right now, I'm a lesbian. I love women, I love, love women, I find them fucking sexy and fucking hot. And the level of intimacy and what women, what I feel when I'm with women is way different than what I felt when I was with men. And it feels more in line with me. Not that I was ingenuine with the men, you know, but there was definitely a disconnect on some levels. Sex was different, whereas sex with women has been for the most part very true, and has felt so natural and yeah, like, that is what I was meant to do. And I feel love and I've never really fallen in love with a man.

Although all three women describe strong feelings toward other women, there are sanctions within the community and in the family that prevent them from openly identifying, both in the country of origin and in the United States. The family presents a particularly difficult body to navigate. A split seemed to emerge among the women: openness to immediate family and silence toward extended family. Ana, a bi-national Latina with roots in the U.S. Midwest and

in Mexico, described a positive and accepting reaction from her immediate family. Even with the support of her immediate family, Ana chooses not to “come out” to her extended Mexican family, only to her American family:

Ana: One big issue is, in Latin America, it’s all about the family. Everything revolves around the family. It’s family, family, family. So the fact of, I mean, I think there would have to be some sort of give or take if you want to be openly gay with your family. I’m not openly gay with my Mexican family. Interestingly, I’m openly gay with my American family.

All three women are out to their immediate families, though both Veronica and Jada experienced a much more negative reaction. Veronica, under the economic control of her father, was physically kept from a partner in Mexico when he forced her to return to Honduras. Her mother, a devout Catholic, had harsh words.

Veronica: One thing I do remember though, and when my, and this I will never forget, [...] my mom said, I would have rather you be a prostitute than a lesbian. And you can quote that! That was the most hurtful thing, ah, that someone’s ever said to me. Uh yeah, so, and that’s why it’s hard to be out in a country like that.

Jada faced reparative therapy twice, first as a child who did not present as typically female and second as a teenager who was discovered in a lesbian relationship. Though her father encouraged her to pursue her own interests, her mother and brothers held views in line with her conservative Catholic school.

Jada: When I was little they put me into some kind of therapist to teach me how to be a female and that it was wrong to play with cars and that it was wrong to kiss girls. Um, because when I was little, I was shameless! I would just line them up and be like you do this, you do that, I’m going to kiss you. [...] So I had to be in therapy again to teach me how to be straight.

Faced with the possibility of losing an opportunity to play sports on a college team in the United States, Jada presented as feminine and heterosexual in ways that contradicted her desire for self-expression. All three women described a similar need to negotiate their queer identities with the wishes of their families. Although these Latinas maintained an internal queer identity, they outwardly did not want to present, so as to avoid rejection and bringing shame to the family. Acosta noted that, “*lesbiana*’s narratives are complex, illustrating their desire to maintain close

bi-national family ties while developing sexual identities that their families perceive undermine solidarity.” For example, the give and take Ana earlier described is the perception that the community would then have of her family:

Ana: Within my family, my mother was very accepting and my father was okay about it, about accepting my sexuality, it’s actually the society around it that was very not accepting. So my inner family core was okay with it, it was actually everything outside my family.

Similar to Acosta and Asencio’s findings, all three Latinas described a manner of “keeping up appearances.” To be seen as gay not only brought consequence to a woman herself, but could potentially elicit a community backlash toward her parents. This puts women in the difficult position of asserting a queer identity or alienating the family. At times, the community challenges the family’s solidarity by placing sanctions on homosexuality. Wanting to maintain status among peers, parents and siblings must choose to align with a member who is engaging in deviant behavior or to align with community norms. This can result in backlash toward queer Latinas, who are seen as intentionally engaging in behavior that brings embarrassment to the family.

Veronica: But knowing my dad, it’s more of what people might say. You know, they’re both religious, I come from a Catholic family, I’m not Catholic at all, but that’s how I grew up and so [...] it’s based on religious beliefs, yes, but it’s also a major part what people might say. That’s a huge, huge deal, unfortunately, in my family and I hate it. And that’s one of the reasons I hate going there because everything you do is based on what people might say.

Ana describes that even among friends she faced a similar negotiation. However, it was deemed much easier to challenge a friend than the family. For Ana, respect for her identity was important enough to put a meaningful relationship on hold. These women must then pick and choose when to assert their identity and when to silence themselves.

She once said it’s disgusting. I said what’s disgusting? Two girls is disgusting but two guys is not. So then I was like, that just does not make any sense and I think you’re degrading me and who I am, and you’re supposed to be my best friend. So we didn’t talk for two years.

All three women noted that their sexuality played some role in the decision to migrate to the United States, particularly citing the consequences mentioned above. Although these Latinas primarily immigrated to pursue their educations or, in Jada's case, to also play sports, each held the notion that their sexuality would be less regulated in the U.S., and this was perceived as desirable. Even after experiencing degrees of homophobia in the U.S., all three women still hold the view that the States are more accepting. This could also be the case that Columbus, OH in particular is recognized as one of the most gay-friendly cities in the Midwest, hosting the second largest pride celebration in the region (Pride City Guide, 2011). However, in some ways, acting as a cultural outsider acted as a buffer to the U.S. brand of homophobia, particularly linguistically. For the same reason that stigma from one's family and culture elicits feelings of rejection and hurt, it is possible that homophobia in the United States carries less sting because it comes from a culture less integral to one's self.

Jada: Lacrosse players and football players in particular were absolutely annoying about it. They couldn't understand it and they would, and they thought I would be offended by terms like faggot or muff eater or uh, carpetmuncher. And I personally found all of the carpetmuncher and muff eater and all that kind of hilarious because I'm Venezuelan, because I don't know why a carpet is appealing to you, you know, it's not appealing to me and I find that the vagina is not a carpet so um you can maybe... And faggot is a word that for me as a Venezuelan is also new so I know that for Americans it carries a lot of weight, but for me it just kind of bounces off.

Queering Gender

All three women acknowledged same-sex sexuality as an affront to cultural norms of gender in Latin America. Although sexual orientation refers only to one's romantic and sexual attractions toward others, there seemed to exist a cultural confusion regarding gender identity and sexual orientation. Each mentioned the specific ways in which women were supposed to act, and to identify as a lesbian was seen as abandoning femininity to take a masculine role, particularly in the manner of appearance. They noted the way that others around them suspected that lesbians wanted to be men or even questioned them directly.

Veronica: If you're a lesbian in Honduras, I guess, you're perceived as wanting to be a man, in some respect. [...] Just because of stupid comments that I've heard, like uh, this was said to someone, saying that they look like a man with tits. Or something like that, just because they were gay. This perception of femininity, not related with being a lesbian. There's this perception that, that lesbian women wanna look more like men, I guess. I don't know how to explain it.

It quickly became clear to these women that their peers could see no clear difference between gender identity and sexual orientation. To be a lesbian meant one could not be a woman, or at the very least, a marriageable woman. A woman off the marriage market could potentially be seen as a threat to cultural expectations: a woman as a mother and caregiver, a man as virile and a good provider.

Veronica: The role of a woman in Honduras, as in any, I guess, Latin American society is to be a woman, look pretty, get married, have children. Take care of your children, take care of your husband. That is the role of a woman.

However, as Acosta noted, public displays of female closeness would not always be considered queer. Handholding and other signs of affection are seen as an acceptable part of heterosexual female expression. Although this act could be public, the meaning remains invisible. Lesbianism for the sake of the male gaze, Jada and Veronica explained, is also acceptable. The moment same-sex affection excludes this gaze, regulation of homosexuality quickly becomes gendered, particularly by men. Queer women then face the potential for sexual harassment or violence. Men can become active regulators of female sexuality through force and women may stand by, complicit.

Jada: If you were actually like ah! I'm a lesbian! Oh no no no, you know, then I will teach you how to be a woman. Because you're a lesbian because you don't like the penis and you maybe have not had a good penis so I'm going to teach you what a good penis feels like. Men in general would treat you like that.

Jada's experience highlights the interaction of the family and harshly regulated gender roles. Because it was his sister who came out as queer, her brother perceived her identity as a reflection on him. Conflict in one area of identity may lead to violence in another.

Jada: [Brother] came as though it was a reflection on him or some bullshit and he just came at me like ready to fucking kill me. [...] And it was "okay" and um, because my mother would claim that he was just

uh, “being comfortable with his masculinity, he’s experimenting.” And I’m like no, that is not okay, he is beating women of his own family.

Openly gay women and men may face harassment and abuse in the streets as well as in the home. Jada described the casual nature of violence due to the ready availability of guns in Venezuela. She noted that formal institutions, such as the police, would be unlikely to aid queer victims of harassment. Although the capacity for violence is not necessarily directed toward queer individuals, their deviant status in society makes them easy targets in an environment already predisposed toward violence.

Jada: I’ve heard awful stories, which may be people trying to scare you from being out and about, but also the groups that I knew that were lesbian, they were underground. Literally. I mean they were never out in the open, and the gay clubs that were there were often raided and I have seen that happening, so I know that you could be gay, but there are repercussions to that. [...] I’ve seen people get shot in front of me just walking around because they said something bad to the other person. So it’s a little terrifying, that kind of environment limits what you can say out in the open. It doesn’t really matter what you say because weapons are so out in your face.

Growing up in an environment that strictly regulates sex and gender roles, these Latinas found solace in distance after migrating to the United States. Although discrimination and the regulation of both sex and gender exist in the United States, it was a chance to start with a badge of anonymity. No longer seen by the community, they could not present an opportunity for *chisme*, gossip. Distance, however, does not solve all problems, but changes the dynamic one must negotiate through. For example, all three women expressed that closeness with the family would be desirable, but not at the price of their identity. In a new culture, they are forced to make new connections. As Jada discussed earlier, marginalization in the United States seemed different from rejection by a culture and family held in high regard. Queer identity becomes the proverbial elephant in the room, a perpetual state of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell.’

Veronica: It would be so wonderful to be able to share openly my personal life with my parents, at least, but if they don’t want to hear about it, I don’t really care. You know? Like, I have other people I can talk to about this now. And if they’re not willing to accept me as I am, then I’ve just stopped trying to force them. I’m miserable and they’re miserable so I’d just rather pretend that everything is fine and have my own happy life without them knowing.

With distance, acceptance by the family becomes seemingly less important, though those ties do not necessarily disappear or weaken. It has been observed that even during times of turmoil that may involve long stretches of separation, such as migration, emotional connections still remain strong among Latino families (Sabogal et al., 1987).

Jada: If my family was here, that would be a whole lot of a different story. I think the distance is crucial, you know, but what is beautiful about it also is that our strength does not rely on that vicinity. You know, we have learned to build on that continuation without having to be near each other and I prefer it that way. I still feel the pressure from being a part of that family, but the fact that you know I have my own home and my own life you know outside of the role of a daughter and a sister and a niece or whatnot, it's a lot more freeing.

Distance might help these Latinas to maintain strong connections with the family, although for those who experience rejection, the relationship may remain tense. Migration can allow queer Latinas to pursue their sexuality with more autonomy. The consequence of familial silence surrounding sexuality, however, remains. The autonomy of open identification with the queer community remains contingent upon the family's physical separation. Were the family to rejoin, the role of lesbian could potentially be usurped by the role of daughter.

It's Who I Am

Despite the number of obstacles that queer migrant Latinas face, particularly surrounding the assertion of a queer identity, all three women spoke of the importance of maintaining that identity. For Jada, the personal is indeed political; for Ana, it is a simple matter of being oneself; and for Veronica, the marginalization she has experienced has foregrounded her queer identity. As a testament to their cultural invisibility, both in the country of origin and the United States, these women at times downplay their identity in public to buffer against marginalization. At other times, queerness acts as a source of strength and freedom.

Jada: I feel I have the responsibility to keep fighting. [...] I'm not going to tell you that it gets better because it may not, but I can honestly tell you you're not alone in this.

Both Jada and Veronica express the notion of fighting discrimination, though Jada chooses to do so in an outward manner, by being as visible as possible, a potential source of knowledge for queer youth. When asked why it was important to identify as a lesbian, Veronica spoke of the marginalization she faced. She views her queerness as important to who she is, to her emotional well-being, but the rejection she faced from her family compromises this. Astutely, she notes that it is the very fact that she was instructed to hide her identity that makes her consider its role in her life.

Veronica: Peace of mind. My emotional state is the most important one and my emotions are mostly determined by the happiness I get from being with someone, like having a partner. If that part of my life is okay, then the rest will stretch in place somehow. The fact that a person that will be next to me is a woman defines me as a lesbian, I guess I am, I don't know. I, it's, I've reached a point in my life where being a lesbian means the most to me and I don't know how to explain why that is, you know? I just feel that I have to, ah, God, this is hard.

I feel because the fact that I've been in a closet my whole life, whether I've wanted it or not, it's made it so much more important and bigger than what it should've been if I would've been out all my life. [...] So now it's, it's very important for me to be identified as a lesbian because I've been hiding it for so long. [...] It was a big part of me that I had to hide for so long. [...] Just wanting to be myself.

If not for the marginalization she faced, she might not have considered her identity so much a matter of pride and peace of mind. Like the other two women, Veronica notes that her identity is an intrinsic part of who she is. Growing up in an environment where queerness was sanctioned, all three women asserted a lesbian identity. This identity may exist first internally and take years to be fully realized externally, or to the public, but perhaps most tellingly, all three women asserted that yes, a lesbian identity was important to them in the first place.

Conclusion

Migrant Latina WSW must navigate complex social identities that include their roles as women, their nationality, and their sexuality. They potentially face discrimination based on their gender, documentation status, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Prior research shows bias in

favor of migrant Latino MSM, and outside of Acosta and Asencio, little work has been done to focus on the experience of migrant Latina WSW. Research on migration has not focused on women who migrate without male partners or families, and the role of homosexuality, particularly female homosexuality, has been overlooked. Adding to the discourse, this paper draws attention to the ways in which queer migrant Latinas experience identity and navigate complex social realities that at times oppress and at others liberate them.

While the study suffers from a small sample size and the exclusion of lesser-educated, older and undocumented women, it does reinforce the findings of both Acosta and Asencio. As the women rarely spoke of race/ethnicity, it was difficult to place that identity in any meaningful context. It is not to say their perceived race/ethnicity in the United States is not important, but only that the participants themselves volunteered little information. Additionally, by incorporating all aspects of these individuals' identities, the role of queer identity becomes richer and more complex. Women must negotiate cultural misunderstandings of gender and sexual orientation that influence significantly relationships with family and peers. Migration acts as a way of gaining autonomy from the family, but may also lead to an emotional distance that separates women from the positive aspects of *el familismo*: the support of loved ones. Migrant Latinas then sculpt a new place in their adopted country and create new networks of support.

It is also argued that although queer migrant Latinas are made to be constantly aware of their sexual orientation, it is not always viewed as a source of marginalization, but an integral part of one's self. While it is necessary to assess and identify modes of discrimination that individuals face, particularly those who embody so many minority statuses, research should also focus on the ways in which marginalized identities provide strength and positive outcomes. Queerness is still an important part of self for these women, crucial for how they relate to others

and find support in various relationships. Assertion of a queer identity becomes a matter of pride, the ability to be one's self. Although oppression certainly comes with numerous obstacles, marginalized identities still exist to create the whole of an individual, and this positive aspect of identity cannot and should not be forgotten. If the social sciences do not look toward the ways in which these oppressed identities aid the individual, it would be unimaginable that these women might survive at all. Going forward, research should also focus on the ways in which multiple, intersecting identities create a positive, necessary sense of self not just in matters of resilience, but in fostering healthy aspects of society and culture.

When asked if she had any additional thoughts to add about her identity as a queer migrant Latina, Jada stated, "It fucking rules. I wouldn't change it for anything in the world. Not even, not even a billion dollars."

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