Negotiations around Citizenship, Belonging and Nationhood: The Latino population in the U.S.

Maria Amelia Viteri, Ph.D.

On April 10th and May 1st, 2006, masses of Americans took to the streets to demand immigrant rights. Multiple rallies were held around the United States and approximately one million people congregated on the National Mall in Washington D.C. during these historical marches. One of the messages conveyed by the crowd was "We are all Americans". This event made visible a struggle over the meaning of 'American' and a demand for a wider, more inclusive definition of cultural citizenship. In light of these struggles, I will discuss the multiple possibilities of belonging as framed by the Latino community in the U.S. based on ethnographic data collected in the D.C. area between 2004 and 2007, mostly among LGBT Latinos. The multiple negotiations around nationhood are made visible and used as a departing point to illustrate the conflicting definitions and understandings around assimilation and the multiple possibilities it opens for a fruitful and engaging dialogue on immigration.

'Latino' – 'Hispanic' – 'American'

Identity is not an accomplished end point of a people's history but a constant process of becoming. As such, it's never complete. (Lewellen 2002:91)

Mariposa is in his 30s and has been in the U.S. for 7 years. He's originally from Mexico and has a B.A. in Accounting. Mariposa self-identifies as Mexican and homosexual although he recalls having trouble self-identifying ethnically in the U.S. His father is indigenous and his mother 'white' and although he was born in Quintana Roo, he clarified that he is not 'Maya' as many will claim, but more of Mexican indigenous descent.

According to Mariposa, aside from stereotypical 'street' readings on his Latinidad, other times in which he felt interpolated as a 'Latino' were when he was asked to fill applications for medical insurance and asked to mark with an X the 'race' and 'ethnicity' box that best describe him. Mariposa commented that a Latino will not necessarily mark 'Hispanic' as this relates to Spain and not necessarily "Latin America"[1]:

"Llené las aplicaciones del seguro, ahí dice que especifiques que eres. La persona se puede equivocar Hispano = Español, no necesariamente Latino y no se sabe. América no es de Norte a Sur, es al revés. Si nos uniéramos mas fuera un equipo mejor, mas organizados entre Hispanos/Latinos. Nos dividimos porque Hispanos son Españoles."

"I filled out the health insurance forms; there you are told to be specific about who you are. Anyone could mistake Hispanic for meaning Spanish, not necessarily Latino, and one doesn't know. America is not from North to South but the other way around. If we were to unite we would be a better team, more organized between Hispanics/Latinos. We are divided because Hispanics are Spanish."

[1] Relevant to this conversation are the geo-politics of continental division in order to understand the way that "Latin" America would subsequently be imagined as part of the West and yet peripheral to it (Mignolo 2005:xiv-xv)

Mariposa' narrative reminds me of the first time I was in doubt about which box to mark as a recent migrant to the U.S. as the options back in 2003 where 'white', 'black', 'Asian-Pacific Islander' and 'Other'. As I was raised as 'white' in my home country Ecuador, 'white' seemed to be the closest fit. Nevertheless, my mestiza consciousness made me feel at odds with the 'white' box. My cousin saw my doubts and intervened, saying "Just mark 'white' as you are 'white'". I ended up marking 'other' and writing down 'mestiza' as part of those micro acts of resistance. In this context, what is the relevance of critically looking at categories designed as 'racial' and 'ethnical' to fit boxes where most people, like Mariposa and me, would have trouble fulfilling?

As these narratives show, the conflation of languages, discourses and spaces becomes relevant as we move between not only geographically delimited borders but between and within those borders that we daily negotiate as we craft our mobility as immigrants in some stances and citizens in others. In the past, identity was understood as coterminous with culture (Lewellen 2002:3), a description that helped reinforce ideas that equated territory and language in particular with a phenotype anchored in racist categories. Nevertheless, the forms through which Mariposa and I were asked about our race and ethnicity seem to thus far speak to this equation. Difference is limited here to creating an easy countdown of the population which in turn enables some to access services such as health care. As Latino immigrants and immigrants in general carry a myriad of identities that are not static, these identities are subject to constant negotiation before, during and after the experience of border-crossing in a non-linear process.

The 'immigration' problem is more often than not analyzed within a hetero-normative framework which assumes that most immigrants have a nuclear family of their own in their home countries or they wish to have one in the U.S. I argue that this framework entails an additional level of invisibility where gender and sexuality become subsided with 'race' and 'ethnicity'. Immigration is then formally and informally regulated through various mechanisms of surveillance where the body that crosses becomes subject of intense scrutiny. Belonging becomes a fantasy not only on the basis of legal or illegal status but also on the multiple interpretations that are at place: not only "what comes first" whether it's race, ethnicity and/or gender and/or sexuality but also how these are hierarchically positioned, interpreted and acted upon as immigrants cruise the borders, the city, the suburbs. Having said this, we could argue that the ideal way of belonging is to be granted full participation as a citizen which, as political theory and policy studies claim, is granted first by a legal status. In this particular case, Latinos becoming fully documented U.S. citizens / 'Americans'.

This discussion parallels various LGBT narratives including that of Guatemalan Tiko who self-identifies as 'gay' where he asserts that "without papers I am nobody". As I discuss elsewhere (Viteri 2009) Tiko's statement: "without papers I am nobody" not only displaces his sexual (gay) and national identity (Guatemalan) 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 'lack' the qualities of fully fledged or normal humanity. The fluctuating characters and imprecise borders of class, gender and national belonging to his homeland mark a turning point where Tiko becomes literally 'nobody' upon entering the United States as he becomes 'someone' only through the technologies of categorization, policing, criminalization.

Let's now turn our attention to the free-floating meanings around American before moving forward with this argument. Amarillo is originally from El Salvador and came to the United States when he was 7

years old. He considers himself 'urban'. Amarillo has a B.A. in Architecture. When I asked Amarillo how he defines 'American' he replied:

"Todos los que hemos nacido en este continente somos americanos. Porqué usan American solo para U.S.? Solo quieren su propio espacio o tal vez por el hecho de decir 'americano' como que 'they own America'. El hecho de haber nacido Americano es sin necesidad de ver colores, razas, idiomas. En este pais se nos conoce como extranjeros que no somos porque somos del mismo continente. Estas son buenas preguntas, es bueno hacerse estas preguntas uno mismo para que como somos, quienes, adonde vamos."

"All of us who have been born in this continent are American. Why do they use American only for the U.S.? Maybe they want their own space or maybe because saying 'American' implies that 'they own America'. The fact of being born American doesn't depend on colors, races and languages. In this country people know us as foreigners but we are not because we come from the same continent. These are good questions, it's good to ask ourselves this type of questions so that we know how we are, who we are, where we are heading."

Amarillo' and Tiko's narrative could be analyzed following Chapin's analysis (1997:18-19) where the undocumented immigrant, like the homosexual, 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 signification (18-19). Cultural citizenship -and I will add sexual 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 (Rosaldo 1989; Ong 1999).

'Difference' as currently conceptualized through immigration discourses can hardly attain anything except control based on fear and policing of various sorts where documented and undocumented alike who might appear 'different' from traditional and stereotypical constructions of 'American' could easily slip under the gaze of the police *and* the society as exemplified next by Salvadoran activist Jade. As Lewellen (2002:19) among other anthropologists remind us, the way that people understand themselves very seldom coincides with the way others perceive them.

Jade is a transgender woman from El Salvador in her 30s. She's one of the leading Latina activists in the D.C. area. Jade migrated to the United States approximately 10 years ago. After working for a leasing company and realizing that Latinos work harder and receive lower wage increases than their African-American colleagues, she inquired her boss, a 'white' U.S. woman about this difference. The woman replied, "You don't have rights because you were not even born in this country." In Jade's words:

"Yo tenía papeles pero I was not *American*".

"I had papers (U.S. passport) but I was (still) not *American*".

When reflecting on the meanings around 'American' Jade's reflection on citizenship and belonging speaks to the use of 'American' to reclaim new spaces of resistance that expand the scope of this identity: "I am American, I am no different than you" is how Jade closed the argument with her boss.

Belonging within an immigration framework is usually described as an imagined and desired citizenship. As illustrated by Jade, belonging is not determined solely by migratory status, just as 'American citizenship' does not necessarily override the hierarchical rendering of peoples within stereotypically racist and ethnocentric categorizations of peoples.

As a way of conclusion, Jade's statement as analyzed in light of the narratives from U.S. Latino-American Amarillo, Mariposa and Tiko illustrate how normative immigration discourses push people to fulfill a variety of identity positions. According to Butler (1990:11), this multiplicity of positions will produce what she calls necessary failures as when Jade's boss authenticates 'American' by place of birth and uses this as a justification for wage discrimination despite Jade's U.S. citizenship status. Because the undocumented population (estimated to be 9.3 million by the Urban Institute) cannot be counted or effectively distinguished from the population of citizens and legal residents, "illegal aliens" becomes a highly malleable signifier (Chapin 1997:19) that affects even those who have acquired 'legal' status including citizenship.

My claim is not intended to erase the significance of a 'human-oriented' immigration policy that acknowledges the right of every human being to seek the best available opportunities for his or her well-being when conditions of poverty, unemployment, war or insecurity -among others- curtail those possibilities in his/her home country. I am highlighting instead the need to re-configure how 'race' and 'ethnicity' have been historically boxed and negatively depicted in the U.S. and how these configurations intersect with those of gender and sexuality as these continue to shape 'belonging' and citizenship as translated into immigration policies. Failure to include such analysis does not affect only immigrants and foreigners but its ramifications extend to the entire population of the U.S. and the many countries it influences abroad through media, technology and the corporative world of consumerism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York: Routledge.

Chapin, Jessica. 1997. *Crossing Stories: Reflections from the U.S.-Mexico Border Bridge.* Working Paper No. 3. Latin American Studies Center: The University of Maryland, College Park

Lewellen, Ted C. 2002. *The Anthropology of Globalization, Cultural Anthropology Enters the 21st Century.* Westpor: Bergin & Garvey

Molina, Raúl Sánchez. 2008. *Modes of Incorporation, Social Exclusion, and Transnationalism: Salvadoran's Adaptation to the Washington D.C. Metropolitan Area.* In Human Organization, Society for Applied Anthropology. Vol. 67, No. 3, 2008,

Mignolo, Walter D. 2005. *The Idea of Latin America*. Blackwell Manifestos: Massachusetts, Oxford

U.S. Census Bureau http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/cenbr01-1.pdf

Passel, Jeffrey S.; Capps, Randolph; Fix, Michael E. 2004. Undocumented Immigrants: Facts and Figures. Urban Institute. http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=1000587

Viteri, María Amelia. *'Latino' And 'Queer' as Sites of Translation: Intersections of 'Race', Ethnicity and Sexuality.* Graduate Journal of Social Science (GJSS), Special Issue on Queer Studies: Methodological Approaches, Amsterdam University Press. Forthcoming Spring 2009

Viteri, María Amelia. *Out of Place: Translations of 'Race', Ethnicity, Sexuality and Citizenship in Washington, D.C and San Salvador, El Salvador*' in Out of Place: Interrogating Silences in Queerness/Raciality. Kuntsman, Adi; Miyake, Esperanza. Raw Nerve Books, Center for Women's Studies, University of York: UK