

LESBIANAS IN THE BORDERLANDS

Shifting Identities and Imagined Communities

KATIE L. ACOSTA

University of Connecticut

This article explores the experiences of Latina lesbian migrants living in the United States. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 15 Latina lesbian migrants, I argue that Latinas' sexual, racial, and class identities are continuously shifting as the process of migration repositions them in a new system of racial inequality. Their sexual identities are altered as migrants often silence their lesbian existence when negotiating relationships with families of origin. Lesbianas establish borderland spaces for themselves where they gain sexual autonomy but where their identities are in flux. These spaces are "imagined communities" because while lesbianas envision them to provide solidarity, in practice the borderlands are riddled with inequalities and tensions. Despite this, the borderlands allow lesbianas to develop a mestiza consciousness.

Keywords: *migration; sexuality; gender; latina/o; racialization*

INTRODUCTION

For Anzaldúa (1999), la mestiza is a "torn" woman who straddles multiple cultures and negotiates contradictory identities (p. 100) and is constantly receiving and reconciling opposing messages. La mestiza lives in the borderlands, a space that serves as home to the marginalized. In this article, I extend Anzaldúa's theoretical model to explore the bifurcation that Latina lesbians experience as migrants in the United States. I argue that their racial, class, and sexual identities are situational—shifting across geographic location due to familial control, the process of migration, and the establishment of borderland spaces.

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Research on gender and migration has explored women migrants' experiences with employment, divided families, and asserting autonomy (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 2001; Segura and Zavella 2007; Gonzalez-Lopez 2005). With very few exceptions (Espín 1997, 1999; Zavella 2003a), however, this work has focused on heterosexual women. Though some scholars have begun to explore the experiences of gay male migrants (Cantú 2001; Carrillo 2002; Peña 2005), few have focused on the experiences of lesbians. In this article, I analyze the ways racial inequalities and homophobia shape lesbianas' experiences in both their home and host countries. In doing so, I move away from previous scholarly models that have dichotomized the racial discrimination lesbianas experience in the United States and the homophobia they experience in their countries of origin (Espín 1997).

The goals of this article are two-fold. First, I address how the migration process shapes identity construction. I argue that lesbiana migrants develop a "mestiza consciousness" from the multiple challenges associated with entering the borderlands. For Anzaldúa, (1999), mestiza consciousness is a synthesis of Mexican women's negotiation of situated and plural identities. Mexican women are metaphorically and geographically "torn" from the bosom of the mother country and thrust into a complex social arena that both provokes self-doubt and inspires new agentic constructions of the "Self" to maximize survival in the borderlands. The second goal of this article is to lend greater specificity to borderlands, by describing how lesbianas create these spaces for themselves and the inequalities within them. By distancing themselves from their families of origin, lesbianas construct a borderland space to express their sexuality. Outside of this borderland space, these migrants hide their lesbian existence out of fear that their families will discover this unacceptable part of the Self. Anzaldúa calls this unacceptable part the "Shadow-Beast," which is the rebellious Self that "refuses to take orders from outside authorities" (p. 38). For Anzaldúa, lesbian existence is her "Shadow-Beast" because it is the ultimate rebellion or cultural defiance (p. 41). In this article, I use "Shadow-Beast" to describe the lesbiana Self that resists heteronormativity. The Shadow Beast is the Self that remains in the borderlands away from respondents' families. Lesbianas build borderland spaces by creating families of choice apart from their families of origin. I argue that for the study participants these spaces are imagined communities (Anderson 1983). They are "imagined" because lesbianas often romanticize these spaces as intertwined networks of protection and sisterhood without interrogating their hierarchical social and structural features. In the borderlands, Latina lesbians strive to give voice to the rebel-within a struggle complicated by U.S. racialization and gender systems.

THE RACIAL AND SEXUAL IDENTITIES OF LATINA IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Racial categories and their meanings are major organizing principles in the United States (Omi & Winant 1994). Given the centrality of race, how do racialized and sexualized migrants fare when facing constraining structural barriers? Scholars interested in the regulatory nature of immigration policies have often focused on the government as a disciplining structure that controls immigrant bodies across race, class, sexuality, and gender (Luibheid 2002, 2005; Stychin 2000). Immigration laws purposefully create exclusions by producing illegality and undocumented migrants (De Genova 2002). This is particularly clear in the case of sexuality. Legal stipulations excluding homosexual migrants were not explicitly removed from U.S. immigration policies until 1990. In practice, however, exclusions continue to manifest themselves in immigration practices through HIV bans, the narrow definition of family, and rigid asylum policies (Luibheid 2002). A similar dynamic holds for race. Race was historically a formal justification for exclusion of immigrants (Takaki 1990), though all such explicit provisions were removed from U.S. law in 1952. The racist effects of immigration policies prevail even today through exclusions based on nationality (Sommerville 2005), and U.S. border control employs racial profiling and directs enforcement disproportionately against particular ethnic/racial groups (Kanstroom 2007). Furthermore, citizenship for immigrants has been historically determined by how they are racialized: Whiteness is the ideal for legal and moral citizenship and is contingent upon the darkening of other immigrants (Nakano-Glenn 2002). Collectively, formal race and sexual-orientation neutral immigration policies mask the complex ways that race, gender, and sexuality affect a potential migrant's accessibility and eligibility for immigration.

In light of these structural barriers, research has addressed how Latina migrants are taken up within exclusionary systems in the United States. Scholars have highlighted the agency of Latina immigrants by moving away from the image of the disembodied immigrant worker and instead exploring the multiple intersecting dimensions that affect immigrant experience (Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 2001). By immigrating to the United States, Latinas become stabilizers of the family unit as well as preservers of transnational kinship ties in the United States (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Menjivar 2000).

Immigrating often gives Latinas economic leverage with their husbands and results in more egalitarian sexual relationships and greater autonomy in their procreative decisions (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005; Hirsch 2007). However, immigration and the economic opportunities that come with it do not always

result in greater sexual autonomy. Myriad additional factors including age, marital status, immigration status, and work place environment likely affect an immigrant's sexual independence. As Castañeda and Zavella (2007) explain, Mexicana migrant farm workers in the United States continue to struggle to negotiate safer sex practices and are often the objects of racialization and sexual harassment in the workplace after immigration.

Scholars have only recently begun to focus on Latina sexuality and the factors that shape its expression. Many emphasize the importance of virginity (Zavella 2003a,b; Gonzalez-Lopez 2005) and the lack of open dialogue in Latina households regarding sexuality (Espín 2001; Raffaelli 2001; Zavella 2003b). Virginity and sexual morality have often been described as assets for Latinas that can mitigate their oppression and/or enable them to marry (Espín 1997; Gonzalez-Lopez 2005). Gonzalez-Lopez (2005) calls this "*capital femenino*". Another important factor that influences Latina sexualities is the lack of open communication surrounding these issues in the home. Silencing does more than just repress Mexican female sexuality; silencing and hypervigilance of Mexicanas and other Latinas may drive them to rebellion and lead to their disempowerment through disparate consequences such as single parenthood, sexually transmitted diseases, or lack of preparation for the labor market (Zavella 2003b; Raffaelli 2001). Omnipresent in these analyses is the realization that immigration status and racism shape how Latina migrants experience their sexualities in the United States.

A growing body of work—both empirical and literary—in the area of Latina sexuality has explored Latina lesbian experience. This literature highlights the myriad ways that Chicana/Mexicana lesbians establish their own communities (Perez 1991, 1998), their struggles for self-identification (Trujillo 1991), and their straddling of opposing cultures (Anzaldúa 1999). Anzaldúa's work, in particular, offers a glimpse into the borderlands, a place riddled with contradictions but still a place the marginalized call home. The borderlands allow inhabitants to turn their struggle into something empowering by developing a mestiza consciousness (pp. 19, 99). These short stories and essays provide a glimpse into the experiences of Chicana/Mexicana lesbians and suggest numerous themes for further scholarly inquiry.

While scholars have advanced a gendered analysis of migrant experience and taken steps in sexualizing and racializing our understanding, the narratives of Latina lesbians are still nearly absent in social science scholarship. In this article, I begin to address this gap by providing an intersectional analysis of Latina lesbian migrant experiences. I address how race and class identities change after migration and how sexual identities are influenced by patriarchal families. Furthermore, I explore how lesbianas' fears of exposing their closeted lesbian selves lead them to create new borderland spaces.

METHODS

This study is based on 15 in-depth interviews with Latina lesbians living in the northeast who migrated from various Latin American and Caribbean countries (see Table 1). Participants for this study were obtained through snowball sampling. I started with three personal contacts and obtained three others through their referrals. In addition, I recruited four participants through general inquiries on Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (herein LGBT) listservs; the remaining participants were either referred to me by listserv members or personally recruited at LGBT events. Due in part to my recruitment method, the sample is predominately college-educated women who are frequent Internet users and who participate in LGBT events. My reliance on these methods means that I was mostly unable to reach Latinas who identify as lesbian but are not connected to the LGBT community perhaps because of citizenship status, language barriers, or a lack of knowledge that these communities exist.

I did manage to conduct seven interviews with undocumented and or non-English speaking Latinas, and I was able to do so because of my personal connections to these women or to their friends. Conducting those interviews made me very aware of how isolated from the larger LGBT community some Latina lesbians are and how difficult it is to access these women for the purpose of research. I have lived in large Latino immigrant communities both in New York and Boston. When I conducted these interviews, I was often legitimated to the respondents or to those who referred me as the granddaughter, friend, or former neighbor of someone they knew.

I am a dark skinned, Dominican woman and I do not identify as a lesbian. This, coupled with the fact that I have lived the majority of my life in the United States, made participants interested in my experiences. My sexual orientation came up numerous times during interviews as participants wanted to know why I chose to conduct this type of research. I tried to mitigate the power dynamics inherent in my position as researcher over research subjects by allowing the participants to ask as many questions of me as they wished. Therefore, the interviews were not one-sided, as participants often asked me questions about my love relationships, my family background, and my ties to the Dominican Republic. My own position as a researcher, as someone in a heterosexual relationship, and as someone raised in the United States shaped what participants were willing to share, which set the parameters for data collection and analysis.

I conducted interviews from February of 2005 through September of 2007. They took place in a variety of settings including participants'

TABLE 1: Participants (N = 15)

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Country of Origin</i>	<i>Immigration Status</i>	<i>Current Age</i>	<i>Years in US</i>
Manuela	Guatemala	US Citizen	29	6
Carmen	Dominican Republic	US Citizen	44	20
Cassandra	Dominican Republic	Undocumented	38	10
Francesca	Dominican Republic	Undocumented	37	4
Yanira	Puerto Rico	US Citizen	38	11
Elena	Puerto Rico	US Citizen	47	28
Innocenia	Puerto Rico	US Citizen	43	21
Suzy	Peru	Undocumented	27	8
Alejandra	Mexico	US Citizen	28	5
Cynthia	Peru	Undocumented	33	4
Yolanda	Dominican Republic	Undocumented	37	13
Josefina	Dominican Republic	Undocumented	40	2
Aurora	Chile	Undocumented	39	10
Marta	Puerto Rico	Citizen	41	19
Lucy	Mexico	Undocumented	37	4

kitchens while they cooked dinner, cafés during their lunch hours, LGBT centers before participants' ESL classes, or even park benches as we watched our children play. The interviews were conducted in English or Spanish with respondents sometimes using both languages interchangeably. Throughout this article, I have provided English translations for all of the direct quotes used. I have, however, retained a few phrases in Spanish in order to preserve their meaning. In these few instances, I have provided the English translation alongside the Spanish.

Approximately half of the study participants reported an upper middle class lifestyle in their countries of origin. These Latinas were mostly college-educated women whose prestigious families afforded them a relatively comfortable standard. The rest of the participants reported growing up in lower middle class households, many with single parents. All but two of these Latinas were also college-educated and many had college-educated parents. Their lower middle class status can be attributed to the financial burdens of a one-income household and not to their parents' lack of professional employment.

As is often the case with recently arrived migrants, the majority of the study participants are currently working in the service sector or in factories. This is due to a number of factors, from a lack of citizenship status, an inability to transfer their professional degrees from their countries of origin to U.S. labor markets, or inadequate English language skills. Puerto

Rican migrants were the exception to these trends among my respondents because they are U.S. citizens. While some reported struggling with the English language after migrating to the United States, they fared relatively better because they were often able to obtain work in their chosen professions. All of the participants came to the United States of their own accord as adults.

SHIFTING RACE AND CLASS IDENTITIES

All migrants to the United States are subject to a new system of racial hierarchy; however, migrants of color in particular stand to face racial discrimination and vilification to which they may not have been subject in their countries of origin (Benson 2006). How migrants are racialized ultimately determines their level of incorporation into U.S. society.

Racial hierarchies in Latin American and Caribbean countries cannot be understood through a U.S. lens of systemic racism or racial discrimination. Latin American countries are characterized by very distinct and complex systems of racial inequality that are inextricably linked to their histories of colonization (Saldana-Portillo 2003). Racial inequalities and race-based social hierarchies are prevalent in many Latin American countries, resulting in economic and social disparities for Black and indigenous peoples as compared to whites (Dulitzky 2005; Wade 1993). Improving one's social status is often correlated with a process of social whitening or "*blanqueamiento*" where geographic relocations, higher education, and intermarriage can result in an elevation of one's social status (Wade 1993). It is common for Latinos to adhere to the ideology of "*mejorando la raza*" [improving the race], which is accomplished through marrying individuals who are fairer skinned so as to elevate one's own social position.

None of the participants in this study racially identified as Black or Afro-Latina. They often saw these identifications as stigmatizing, negative, and associated with the poor people in their countries. This ideology is indicative of the participants' realities living in countries with extensive histories of erasing Blackness and denying African roots (Torres-Saillant 2003; Torres 1998). These study participants are products of the racial hierarchies in their countries of origin that privilege whiteness and associate it with prestige, good manners, and education. As is often the case in Latin American countries, skin pigmentation is a strong determinant of class (Dulitzky 2005) and "money whitens" (Oboler 2005). The participants' relatively lighter skin tones as well as their middle class status made them members of the elite economic class in their countries of origin.

Migration introduced these Latinas to a new racial hierarchy. They become “people of color,” regardless of what their prior experiences had been. These Latinas develop a mestiza consciousness after immigration, the result of internal contradiction of their original racial/ethnic identities. They are racialized into a U.S. system in which they become “minorities” and are lumped together under the pan-ethnic category of “Latino.” The result is a fragmentation of the Self. Marta, a Puerto Rican migrant, explains her inner turmoil:

I am against saying that I am a woman of color. I do not feel like a woman of color. Rachel and I do not feel like we are in an interracial relationship. We could say a bicultural relationship. But that whole interracial thing is an absurdity. Because I was raised being a white woman in Puerto Rico.

Marta explains the contradiction within her as a woman who was raised with all of the privileges of whiteness just to have it taken from her in the United States. She cannot recount a history of racial discrimination or injustice against her and therefore she aligns her experiences with those of her Anglo partner. She goes on to say,

But when I first got to the U.S., I met this guy in school. He told me he was white and I was Latin. I told this guy “Excuse me you are white/Caucasian but I am white/Latina” and he said “No you are just Latin.” I said “No I am white.” But then with time, reality set in because I realized yes he was right, I was a Latina woman. I was just a woman of color and I was very angry. I am still angry.

For Marta the fragmentation of the Self begins after she migrates to the United States, where she is categorized as a member of a racially oppressed group. She comes to experience racialization from the position of an oppressed person, in contrast to her previous reality of witnessing racial inequality from a position of privilege. She, like many other Latinas who participated in this study, holds multiple racial identities: In the United States they are Latina but in their countries of origin they identify with their national identities and enjoy their privileges of whiteness.

SHIFTING SEXUAL IDENTITIES AND NEGOTIATING FAMILY

In my study, lesbianas’ fragmentations of the Self extend beyond racial/class identity to include disjunctures in their sexual identities as well. Their sexual identities are situational depending on circumstances

and geographic location. When among their “families of choice” they are lesbianas, but among their families of origin they often are not.

Half of the lesbianas in this study were not “out” to their families at the time I interviewed them. They maintain two separate worlds: one that they share in the borderlands with their partners and another that they nurture through transnational ties with their families of origin. Cynthia, for example, has lived in the United States for four years and still has not “come out” to her parents. She has been in a relationship with Mallory, an Anglo woman in the United States for two years. Here she describes her conversations with her mother:

It’s funny because before all the time she [Cynthia’s mother] was like “Do you have a boyfriend? Do you have a date?” And I was always like “NO NO NO.” And I think about one and a half years ago after I met Mallory I told my mom, “Mom please don’t ask me if I have boyfriend. I am happy. I have my friends and that’s it. Please don’t ask me any more questions.” Now she doesn’t tell me or ask me anything about a boyfriend or a relationship, but she told me, “You would make me more happy if you gave me a grandchild.” She didn’t say anything about me getting married or anything. No, she’s talking about kids right now.

Cynthia did not have her first relationship with a woman until after immigrating to the United States. She has learned to nurture two sexual identities—one in the United States with Mallory and another transnationally with her family of origin. In addition to negotiating the new racial identity imposed on her through immigration and the decline in social status associated with being undocumented, Cynthia must also negotiate the shifting of her sexual identity across borders. Cynthia’s lesbiana Self is often repressed in her efforts to maintain a relationship with her family.

However, not all of the lesbianas in this study were “in the closet” with their families. Eight had directly spoken to their parents about their lesbian existence. In these instances, parents knew of their daughters’ sexual identities but they avoided the topic or asked them to not share this information with anyone else. These complex familial dynamics felt injurious to lesbianas as they experienced the contradictions of the erasure of their sexual Selves coupled with deep desires to maintain relationships with their families of origin. Here, Marta describes her confrontation with her mother:

I told her “Mom I am a lesbian, I am with a woman” and she said to me “Oh Marta!” And I said to her “Mom or I would be with a woman or I would kill myself.” And then she said to me “No! how can that be?” I cried, she cried. She told me that it was okay. That there was no problem. Supposedly she

accepted it... But up until last week I can tell you I found out she had not told her sisters yet that I am a lesbian because she is embarrassed. That, in my book is wrong. She is embarrassed of me! In other words, she "accepted" me but really she didn't.

What Marta describes here is a familial dynamic lesbians often report experiencing. Those who spoke openly and directly to their families about their sexualities, as Marta did, still felt silenced.

Lesbians' narratives were similar to those of many U.S. lesbians who also report sacrificing an "out" identity for the sake of maintaining family relationships. Lesbians' narratives are complex, illustrating their desire to maintain close binational family ties while developing sexual identities that their families perceive undermine solidarity. Prior to migrating, and due in part to the patriarchal structures of many Latin American countries, these lesbians were dependent on their parents for economic support, housing, and other indispensable resources. Even those with professional occupations often did not live separately from their families. Thus, in addition to being raised in homes where family was very important, these lesbians also lacked the economic independence to assert their lesbian existence.

Francesca for example had a live-in relationship with her partner after her parents moved away and temporarily left her in the family home alone. For three years, they lived together in her mother's home without ever telling the family of their relationship. Their arrangement was compromised when Francesca's mother returned to visit.

She came to visit for 15 days. And my partner left the house for a week. That was the lie of all my life. My mother did not want that here. And later I left for the United States.

Francesca and her partner did not have the resources to live on their own in the Dominican Republic, so they were forced to repress their relationship in the presence of family. This lack of autonomy resulted in Francesca's ongoing repression of her identity and compartmentalizing her lesbian existence. More than half of the lesbians in this study reported similar compromises. Their expressions of sexual identities are situational and continuously shaped by their environments.

Lesbians who did not directly talk to their parents about their sexuality but chose to live with their partners as couples also experienced similar kinds of avoidance. Manuela describes the protocol of silence in her own family:

I remember the way my parents took it when I moved in with Gloria [her partner]. I never told them that I was WITH her. And they didn't want to interpret anything else either. It stayed that way. So they didn't ask me about the relationship but my father stopped talking to me for a long time. There was complete silence about the issue, as much in my family as in hers.

Manuela took the bold step of choosing to live with her partner in Guatemala and she did so for several years without her family ever openly addressing the nature of their relationship. Eventually, Gloria left Guatemala, frustrated by the invisibility of her lesbian existence. Manuela explains her mother's reaction to her loss.

I remember that my mother understood that there was a loss in my life at that time. But she couldn't tell me she was sorry. It was like "Oh what a pity. *Pero que bueno, que tu quemaste esa estapa*" [But its good that you burned that phase]. We never talked about which phase I'd burned.

The complexities of silence are evident in Manuela's description. Her mother recognizes that Manuela is in pain but she cannot bring herself to address the root cause of this pain. In this way, the silence continues between them. All but one of the lesbianas in this study had experiences similar to Manuela's. They all talked about their family's investment in "*de eso no se habla*" [of that we do not speak]. The silence symbolizes for lesbianas their parent's inability to deal with their daughters' choices as well as their preference to remain in denial. Lesbianas saw this as not only a denial of their life choices but as a denial of them as daughters.

In some Latino countries, expressions of deep affection between female friends and family are often not seen as out of the ordinary (Zavella 2003b; Espín 1997). This does not mean that lesbianism is more culturally acceptable in Latino cultures, however. On the contrary, some of the lesbianas report their family's rejections of lesbianism with phrases such as "*Mejor puta que pata*" [better a whore than a lesbian]. These varying levels of acceptable intimacies help us to understand how the invisibility of lesbian desire occurs. Because many Latino families view deep intimacies among two women through a heteronormative lens, lesbianism is erased.

Chavez-Leyva (1998) calls for scholars to stop looking at silence as an absence and begin to listen to what is held within this silence. She argues that there are multiple facets to silence: "*It is the wall that confines us and the space that protects us*" (p. 429). This calls for interpreting silence as not only about fear but also about protection and even power. Josefina, like Manuela, has never directly told her family she identifies as a lesbian.

Here she recounts to me a conversation with her aunt regarding her sexuality that demonstrates how much of her Self she is comfortable disclosing to her family.

I know that my father knows because my aunt has indirectly brought up the subject several times. The last thing she said to me was that my father was very sad because he understood that I was never going to get married but that he wanted me to have a baby. Because since all I have are brothers, at the end of my days I am going to be all alone. So I say to my aunt: "When is he going to get tired of this same topic? Because ever since I was 11 or 12 years old, I did not like boys because they impede me in everything I want to do. So this is a decision that I made and I know that I will pay the consequences later." She said, "I told him that he has to accept you as you are." And I said, wait a minute, I am not falling for this trap ... and I changed the subject.

Here, silence serves as protection and power for Josefina. She begins to speak very candidly with her aunt about her lack of interest in boys but she stops herself when she begins to feel too exposed. Josefina's silence plays a role that is more complex than fear. Silence is the extra layer of clothing that keeps Josefina from being bare.

THE MESTIZA LESBIANA'S BORDERLANDS: IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

In Puerto Rico there are no issues, because I'm Puerto Rican. There is nothing wrong with that ... but being a lesbian is a terrible obstacle to happiness. In the United States, I can be a lesbian but being a Puerto Rican is an obstacle. Now I can be a lesbian but at a price.

—Elena

Elena's assertion captures the multiple and shifting nature of racial and sexual identities in the borderlands. Many lesbianas were like Elena, unable to establish a lesbian space for themselves in their countries of origin. Still others succeeded in creating those spaces. In this section, I describe the borderland spaces that these lesbianas build for themselves and the difficulties that arise within them.

The study participants repeatedly mentioned lack of anonymity in their home countries as an impediment to their happiness. Here Elena describes this feeling:

Puerto Rico can become very small. You know, *chisme chisme chisme*, [gossip, gossip, gossip]. It's a very, very small island. In Boston I can be sort of anonymous.

Elena perceives Puerto Rico to be so small that her sexual/romantic experiences would become common knowledge to the members in her community. She fears the shame and dishonor that would come to her family if the community learned she was a lesbian. Ten of the 15 participants in this study held these perceptions about their countries of origin. These beliefs often served as control mechanisms, deterring Latinas from nurturing their same-sex desires for fear of exposing their “Shadow Beast” (Anzaldúa 1999).

Manuela, an immigrant from Guatemala, describes her feeling about the lack of privacy she experienced there:

I always felt very monitored by everyone. I was in a place where 50 people from your family are always paying attention to you. I think that I became a little paranoid. Actually for a very long time I thought that whatever I did everyone would find out. It is the perception with which you are raised there. Everything you do, the whole town knows.

For those lesbianas who saw their countries of origin as places where they remained under constant vigilance, migrating to the United States became an ideal way to create anonymity. The lesbianas I interviewed expressed concerns about not wanting to disrespect or embarrass their families with their life choices. As Yanira, a Puerto Rican migrant explains:

I had a fear of speaking to my mother. I had an eternal anxiety just thinking about the pain and the embarrassment that I would cause my family.

For respondents like Yanira, Manuela, and Elena who feared disgracing their families, finding anonymous spaces was crucial to the development of their lesbian identities.

Lesbianas did this by establishing lesbian-identified borderland spaces. For Anzaldúa (1999) the borderland is a space that enables *la mestiza* to create a new consciousness. “Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (p. 19). The borderlands are full of contradictions; however, lesbianas “imagine” them to be places of fellowship and solidarity. They emphasize their common language, shared sexual identities, and similar narratives of migration within these spaces. For the participants in this study, borderlands are imagined communities (Anderson 1983) because lesbianas idealize them as protective spaces even while they are riddled with inequalities. Study participants often stress that borderlands provide them with a sense of family as they distance themselves from their families of

origin. Lesbianas are still marginalized within these spaces, however. Nonetheless, since the borderlands is home to the marginalized, participants “imagine” themselves to be less isolated in these spaces.

The first step to creating such a space in their countries of origin is for lesbianas to locate *un ambiente*² for themselves. In the United States, the first step is often to join Latina/o LGBT support groups. Six of the study participants were active members in the LGBT community and or gay movement in their countries of origin. Lucy describes her involvement with the gay movement in Mexico:

Later I became involved with the gay movement. The culmination of that experience was in 2000 when a candidate, the second most powerful lesbian in Mexico, recruited us ... the year 2000 was a good experience because we worked for a political campaign. That's where I met my first female partner ... because she worked for the party that supported the gay community.

Lucy used the LGBT movement in Mexico to create her own *ambiente*. She was able to do this in part after the death of her mother. She met her first partner in Mexico and only moved to the United States after this relationship ended. When she immigrated to the United States she recreated a borderland space. Participating in *ambientes* such as these allowed lesbianas to meet other lesbianas and begin forming their families of choice.

These borderlands are not entirely egalitarian spaces; they are shaped by inequalities that stem from age disparities, differences in immigration status, differences in lesbianas' abilities to maneuver the English language, or the prevalence of some nationalities over others. Manuela describes some of the difficulties that arose in a lesbian artists' group she joined while attending college in Guatemala:

The only place that I found where [being a lesbian] didn't matter was in artists' groups, those interested in literature, feminists. We would get together a lot. Many of the women were older in these groups. To some degree they would protect me. They protect you but at the same time you are all underground. So because you are underground you are susceptible to a lot of abuse. So I had friends who were with other women that abused them.

Manuela attributes the abuse she witnessed in her *ambiente* to the marginalized nature of this group, which robbed its participants of outside resources. While Manuela admits that this lesbiana artist group had its problems, she was drawn to the protection and acceptance she received within this space. It is clear nonetheless that the protection was relative.

Sometimes, the inequalities that exist in these borderlands are not based on physically abusive relationships but on tensions involving divergent nationalities. In these spaces a Latina whose nationality is underrepresented may sense a lack of unity. For example, Lucy describes feeling marginalized among Latinas of different nationalities within her borderland in the United States:

I have become aware that Mexican women are seen as different. As if we were the new ones, we are the “little poor girls who do not speak English.” In the lesbiana groups this exists. It is not spoken, but when there are events, the Dominicans get together, the Colombians get together, and the Mexican and Ecuadorians are always drifting. There isn’t that integration.

The Latina lesbian groups in which Lucy participates are predominantly made up of Dominican, Puerto Rican, Columbian, and Peruvian Latinas, a fact that has created some tensions for her because her nationality is often underrepresented. Furthermore, Lucy is an undocumented immigrant who is still not confident in her English language abilities. These limitations present barriers in her efforts to establish connections with other Latinas. While lesbianas sometimes imagine the borderlands to be unifying and to promote sisterhood, Lucy’s experiences demonstrate these depictions of the borderlands are relative and oversimplified. Despite the tensions, borderlands are essential for the participants in this study because these spaces foster the development of a mestiza consciousness. It is this consciousness that allows participants to contend with their feelings of marginalization.

Many participants rely on the borderlands to alleviate their sense of isolation, imagining them as refuges from a hostile outside world. This is undoubtedly true to some degree. Although Latina/o LGBT groups were stratified by nationality, language ability, and age, respondents preferred them over white LGBT groups. In describing these settings, participants were more vocal about their feelings of marginalization. Inocencia is a lesbiana from Puerto Rico who shared her experiences joining LGBT groups in New York:

Getting involved with [LGBT groups] has been an eye opener because I used to be more with the Latino groups. Now we [Inocencia and her Anglo partner] have the Latino events but we also have other groups and it has been surprising sometimes to see the differences and even to see the discrimination within the community when you are not like the others, when you have an accent, when you are not white enough.

Inocencia and other study participants, do not speak fondly of all LGBT groups because while they are protected from homophobia in these groups, they continue to be “othered” on account of race/ethnic identification. Lesbianas prefer Latina LGBT groups because they imagine themselves to be less “othered” in these spaces.

The borderland begins to free lesbianas of the suffocation they endure via familial control, but this also comes at a cost. The trade-off is the fear of exposure, the fear that Anzaldúa argues drives lesbianas to “conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows, which leaves only one fear that we will be found out and that the “Shadow-Beast” will break free from its cage” (Anzaldúa 1999, 42). Manuela shares her anxiety over her parents’ plans to invade her borderland and the potential revelation of her secret, rebellious Self:

Because it has become like now here I have my territory. So I feel sick when my parents say they will come to visit me in June. They say we have a lot to talk about. I say well we can talk in Guatemala. I don’t know if they are going to be comfortable with what they are going to find here.

Manuela has had a live-in girlfriend for more than a year who her parents believe is her roommate. Manuela fears losing the respect and love of her parents if they discover her lesbianism. She is afraid of losing her protective cover. Her parents’ plans to visit would mean an invasion of her space and an exposure of her lesbian Self.

The respondents in this study migrated in order to be freed of the constraints placed on them by their families and friends. They were able to create borderland spaces in the United States because their parents remained home and they could be anonymous to the larger community. When parents visited their daughters’ borderlands, lesbianas devised elaborate plans to suppress knowledge of their lesbian existence. Cynthia’s parents have never met her partner Mallory; they believe she is Cynthia’s “American friend.” Cynthia described to me how she planned to keep their relationship secret from her parents when they come to visit:

My family is supposed to be here in October. I’m going to enjoy my father and mother and introduce them to Mallory of course. Mallory is supposed to drive us around while they are here. So they can see the city and see what’s going on with my life.

Cynthia’s parents have often heard her talk about her friend Mallory but they do not know of their relationship even though they have been dating

for a year and a half. Cynthia plans to use the excuse that she cannot drive as a reason for why Mallory will be participating in their family excursions. In this way, she rationalizes this ruse will not alienate Mallory and will allow her to spend quality time with her parents. Participants like Cynthia negotiate creative ways of merging their worlds when their families visit. In doing so, they repress their lesbian existence, but they attempt the merger nonetheless in an effort to make themselves whole.

For the Latina lesbians I interviewed, the borderland is an imagined community that has elements of harmony and tension. This contradiction fosters the development of mestiza consciousness. Migrating to the United States and or creating borderland spaces do not alleviate the split these women experience. They are constantly renegotiating their identities even from within the borderlands. Lesbianas continue to struggle to affirm their sexual identities post migration as well as maintain familial ties.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I expand Anzaldúa's concept, mestiza consciousness, to explore Latina lesbian migrants' plural and contradictory identities. I emphasize the fluidity of their racial, class, and sexual identity constructions and the inner turmoil they experience from negotiating their identities in different systems of inequality. I call attention to the uncertainty these lesbianas feel as they go from being at the top of the racial hierarchies in their countries of origin to becoming people of color post migration. In the United States, these lesbianas forfeit their race and class privileges but gain sexual autonomy because in the borderlands they create distance from their families of origin and gain anonymity from their communities. I argue that lesbianas create borderland spaces out of the fear of the betrayal that the "Shadow-Beast" would evoke in their families. The "Shadow-Beast" symbolizes the rebellious Self that is resistant to authority and defies familial values. Clearly, these lesbianas articulate a mestiza consciousness that reconciles competing urgencies and their own agency.

This study extends Anzaldúa's borderlands theory by further fleshing out the contradictions of this space. I illustrate the ways that lesbianas draw strength from their struggle by transforming their obstacles in the borderlands into a new consciousness. To borderland theory, I offer an analysis of how lesbianas imagine these spaces, images that are crucial to how they ultimately negotiate their identities within them. By imagining borderlands as fostering sisterhood, lesbianas are able to alleviate their sense of isolation.

This article advances the discourse on lesbianas and migration by centering racial identities as crucial to their overall experience. Furthermore, in describing lesbianas' struggles with their families of origin, the dominant society in the United States, and even with other borderland members, I provide a multidimensional analysis of their lives. I highlight the relationships lesbianas nurture with their partners in the borderlands despite the tensions arising from competing cultural dynamics. Finally, I add an account of the very real struggles of the family and emphasize the extent to which lesbianas sacrifice themselves for the sake of gaining familial approval. This not only speaks to the homophobia within the family but to the family as a contributor to lesbianas' fragmented selves. Furthermore, I move away from the argument that lesbianas negotiate racism after migrating to the United States and sexism in their countries of origin. Instead, I suggest that racism and sexism are systemic inequalities that exist in both home and host countries and the process of migration only serves to change lesbianas' position within these systems.

Though these are important steps, a more thorough analysis of the oppression arising from holding a migrant identity is needed, one that would address the disadvantages the undocumented face and how this in itself reshapes their identities and social status in the United States. We also need to know more about Latinas' sexualities in all their complexities, both those who identify as lesbians and those who do not but still have relationships with other women. Future scholarly work should address the pleasures and desires of Latina lesbians and explore the quality and stability of the relationships they nurture in the borderlands.

NOTES

1. "*Quemaste esa etapa*" is a figure of speech, often used in Spanish to refer to a stage in life through which willful teenagers sometimes go in their quest toward adulthood. It is considered a less than ideal phase that falls outside of familial norm and expectations.

2. "*Ambiente*" literally means environment or atmosphere. However, informally it has taken on a different meaning. It is often used to describe the Latino gay male scene or community in any given space. I use it here to refer specifically to lesbianas' spaces and communities.

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Katie L. Acosta is a doctoral student in the sociology department at the University of Connecticut. Her areas of interest include latina/o studies, sexuality, gender studies, and immigration. She is currently conducting research on the experiences of lesbian, bisexual, and queer Latinas living in the United States.