

Beyond Mexico's Woman: Negotiating Gender and Race In Dominant Narratives of Nation

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IN HIS SEARCH FOR HOME, RUBÉN MARTÍNEZ (1993: 5) WRITES: "...I MUST BE MUCH MORE than two. I must be North and South in the North and in the South." In doing so, he reveals one of the dichotomies under which he lives, yet the statement suggests also that his location cannot be so neatly packaged. Martínez realizes, for example, that representations of both North and South operate concurrently, and that the two are not always distinct categories.

Attached to the geopolitical border that divides the United States from Mexico — North from South — are hegemonic representations of each nation and the people that occupy them. Such representations collide with the lived experiences of marginalized people and serve as the foundation on which racial, gender, and other forms of oppression operate. This collision is key to understanding that narratives of the nation and individual and group identities are not rigid and static, but rather, interrelated processes that allow for constant renegotiation and rearticulation. With global economic and demographic shifts, the people that cross national borders bring with them experiences and perspectives that call into question their own identities as gendered and racialized members of communities and nations. The ways they negotiate these identities have further implications for the manner in which nations themselves are configured — the ways that power is distributed in and among nations and the degree to which nationalisms are salient forces in shaping people's decisions and practices. In this article, I examine the narrative of a young Mexican immigrant woman who confronts this collision along the lines of gender and race. Her experiences, like those of Martínez, indicate that dichotomous constructions such as North/South or U.S./Mexico are ill-equipped to represent the complexity of identity in the context of global movements of capital and people. As such movements continue, recognizing national narratives and identity as complex, entangled processes becomes increasingly significant for possibilities of shared struggles against multiple hegemonies.

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Mother-Country: Gender in Nation-Building Projects

National narratives — dominant notions of what “America” means, for example — are generally based on a linear historicism that relies on the idea of a “pregiven...historical origin or event” (Bhabha, 1990: 257). Although women’s voices are often silenced in the authority of national narratives, women themselves serve an important function in nation-building projects and nationalistic perspectives. Woman as Mother, for example, is often taken up as both the representation and bearer of the nation and its character. Thus, national discourse often takes on female overtones as in references to the “Mother country” and the “Mother tongue.” Similarly, women themselves are often portrayed as the bearers of the national culture, not only by giving birth to future citizens, but also by rearing children and providing homes in accordance with the ideals of patriotism and nationalism.

During periods of national crisis such as wars or revolutions, women are often called upon to participate more fully in the nation-building project, either at home in the labor force, or on the front lines of combat. Such calls to patriotic duty are often articulated to implied assurances of women’s full citizenship and participation in the nation. After the crisis, however, too often these same projects seek to return women to their subservient domestic roles. In the U.S., this was most explicitly illustrated by women workers who filled the labor vacuum during World War II, but who, after the war, were discouraged from continuing their careers and pushed back into their domestic roles. This phenomenon is not unique to the U.S., however; in fact, women throughout the world experience it in numerous ways, depending on their specific historical and contemporary locations within (or outside) the nation (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1993; Kandiyoti, 1994; McKinley, 1996). Such specificity of location is critical in understanding the persistence and flexibility of patriarchy as it intersects with other forms of domination. For example, although World War II opened up the U.S labor market for the first time for many white middle-class women, most women of color had long, often difficult histories in the lowest paid, most exploitative segments of the U.S. labor market. Thus, although patriarchy affected all women during this period, it operated unevenly as the hierarchical racial narrative of the U.S. mediated the opportunities made available to white women and women of color.

This flexibility of patriarchy, however, generally ensures that when it comes to actually defining national ideals, women continue to be silenced. Thus, the role of the “Virginal Mother” is ultimately the only legitimized role for women in most national narratives. Those women who do not meet this ideal are said to occupy the other side of the dichotomy of Womanhood: that of whore. The Virgin/Whore binary is not unique to any particular nation, however. In the national narrative of Mexico, it is explicitly invoked in the images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Malinche.

Salvation and Betrayal in Mexican Womanhood

The Virgin of Guadalupe appeared in a vision around 1531 at Tepayac, the site of worship of the indigenous goddess of the earth, Tonantzin. A dark-skinned figure, Guadalupe was embraced by the new *mestizo* people and ultimately “emerged triumphant as the national patroness of Mexico, and her banner was often carried into battle” (Alarcón, 1994: 110). Moreover, she represents the salvation and legitimation of the Mexican nation — the nurturer, the protector, the idealized Virginal Mother. This image is evoked not only in struggles that legitimate the nation and encourage patriotism, but also as the ideal to which women themselves are often summoned to embody.

Represented in popular discourse as Guadalupe’s “monstrous double” is Malinche,¹ the Indian slave given to the Spanish conqueror Cortés. She became Cortés’ translator and bore his children — roles that would respectively come to symbolize the conquest of Mexico and the birth of the *mestizo* race. Her representation is monstrous because she is thought to have sold out and betrayed her people to the conqueror. Her language skills and her role as Cortés’ translator earned her the title “traitor,” while her role as Cortés’ mistress represented the rape of all Mexico, and the subsequent emasculation of Mexican men. Like Guadalupe, her image is invoked in popular discourse; anyone who steps outside the traditional parameters of Mexican culture is deemed a *malinchista*, or a sellout. For women who do not follow rigid gender roles, this has the negative effect of proclaiming them traitors to the race, and daughters of Malinche. Though these two archetypes of Mexican womanhood are often portrayed as incompatible, polar opposites, and real women are given the dictum to emulate Guadalupe and to destroy any trace of *Malinchisma*, some contemporary analyses show that they actually emerge from the same myths and that “Guadalupe and Malinche [are] two sides of the same coin” (Bartra, 1992: 112). These two images became the cornerstones on which an essentialized Mexican female identity developed: “She is both tender and violated, a protectress and a bawd, sweet and treacherous, a maternal virgin and a woman of Babylon” (*Ibid.*: 158).

Several writers have reinterpreted the figure of Malinche outside the simplistic version of treacherous translator and mistress. For example, Paz (1985) attempts to portray Malinche as a victim — as a raped mother. In effect, he removes the blame from Malinche and recasts her as a victim. As the mother of the *mestizo* race, her offspring, too, become victims of conquest and rape. Several Chicana writers, in their own search for subjectivity, have vindicated and revised Malinche by representing her not as merely a sexualized victim, but as a speaking subject, an intentional actor in the formation of a new race and nation, and a redemptress of her contemporary daughters (Del Castillo, 1977; Gugliotta, 1989; see also Alarcón, 1994). Despite such reinterpretations, she remains, in popular contemporary discourse, the traitor by which Mexican women are often judged.

The representation of the Mexican woman according to the virgin/whore binary does not stop at the geopolitical border that separates the U.S. from Mexico. Rather, the representations permeate the border and establish themselves in the U.S., as do people, taking on a significance that makes its way into popular and political discourse. Moreover, representations of the Mexican woman have significant implications for the male-gendered Mexican national narrative.

The Mexican as Omission: A (Male) National Narrative of Mexico

In Mexico, the dominant national narrative takes on a specifically male gendered form, thereby legitimizing and reinforcing patriarchy. In addition, by subjugating the “common” Mexican, such a narrative serves to justify the power and status of the privileged and elite of Mexico. “Mexicanness,” for example, is characterized by Octavio Paz as a dissimulated Nobody,

the blankness in our looks, the pauses in our conversations, the reserve in our silences. *He* is the name we always and inevitably forget, the eternal absentee, the guest we never invite, the emptiness we can never fill. *He* is an omission, and yet he is forever present. *He* is our secret, our crime, and our remorse (Paz, 1985: 45, emphasis added).

Paz’ depiction follows from his characterization of Malinche as victim. In his view, Malinche’s rape symbolized the emasculation of all Mexican men and therefore their status as “Nobody.” Similarly, Roger Bartra, in *The Cage of Melancholy* (1992), argues that the characteristic of melancholy is common to all depictions of Mexicans. Moreover, he states that the Mexican national character is an imaginary construct that merely serves to legitimate the oppression of Mexicans by the modern nation-state. Thus, he identifies the stooping *pelado* — “a kind of urban peasant..., half-asphyxiated by the city, who has lost the rural paradise and has not found the promised land” (Bartra, 1992: 33) — as the symbol of Mexicanness. Importantly, however, he recognizes that such depictions deny Mexican subjectivity — the Mexican is always defined by someone else’s myths, thereby converging with Paz’ portrayal of the Mexican as “omission.” These images send the message to the non-elite majority that they are incapable of making the important national decisions and therefore must leave such activity to the elite, who are, “by nature” distinct from the masses and their characteristics.

Challenging the Nation

Mexican immigrant women living in California must contend with a complex and flexible system of subordination that weaves together narratives of Americanness, Mexicanness, American Womanhood, and Mexican Womanhood (among other hegemonic narratives). Although increasing numbers of women are migrating from Mexico to the U.S., their migration clearly does not ensure their

release from the vice grip of dominant characterizations of Mexican womanhood (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). These characterizations are taken up by a racialized American narrative that confines people of color to the lower rungs of the racial hierarchy and is used as the counterpoint to define the U.S. as a nation. They are also often embraced by patriarchy in the U.S. — both Mexican and American — thereby ensuring the persistence of male domination. For example, current anti-immigration sentiment — focused primarily on Mexican migration to California — has ushered in a time when these representations are blatantly taken up and embraced by the nation-state to justify the (mis)treatment and scapegoating of Latinos in California. The flow of U.S. capital into Mexico and elsewhere in the world precipitates a depressed U.S. job market, declining wages, and a restructuring of the labor market, but it is the flow of people from Mexico to the U.S. that is targeted as the force threatening a stable American middle-class identity. Importantly, it is this use of the Mexican character as Other that helps to define U.S. national identity. In this case, the Mexican serves as an imagined, yet threatening, counterpoint against which the American can identify *himself*. Because of the long historical overlap between Mexico and the U.S., the Mexican national character plays an important role in contributing to the American national character.

Although each of these national discourses justifies the power of the elites, in each nation the experiences of the disenfranchised disrupt the master narratives. Thus, one's status outside the elite ranks is often determined by group affiliation — by gender, race, ethnicity, etc. For example, feminist movements, the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, and the Chiapas Rebellion in Mexico all challenge(d) the very legitimacy of the elites that the master narratives work to maintain. However, such challenges often do not simply demolish dominant narratives, but rather rearticulate them to make room for the consideration of different positions. Indeed, an important issue for such movements is whether the desired outcome is increased, leading to equitable representation within the existing system, or a radical alteration or destruction of the system altogether through such means as revolution.

Thus, national, gender, and racial identities become linked to national narratives in the event of unequal power relationships, where the marginalized are assigned identities consistent with the needs of elites to legitimize their power. Yet the lived experiences of the marginalized often interrupt dominant narratives and call them into question. Therefore, we must come to view national narratives and identity as intimately linked phenomena and *processes* that take on a necessary flexibility in struggles over power and social justice.

Mothers, *Machistas*, and Monsters: Negotiating Gender, Race, and Nation

The linked nature of these processes is illustrated in the narrative of Celia Morales, a young Mexican immigrant woman living in Oakland, California, who

proudly claims a “pure one hundred percent” Mexican identity at the same time that she exclaims that she “ain’t Mexican!” when it comes to Mexican womanhood. With few exceptions, the traditional body of scholarly discourse on immigration tends to view it as a linear, developmental progression toward assimilation (Park, 1950; Sowell, 1981; Murguía, 1989), while current official and popular discourses tend to represent immigrants as a threat to the nation’s economic and social stability (see, for example, Hernandez, 1996; La Ganga, 1996; *The New York Times*, June 22, 1996). Implicit in each body of discourse is the assumption that identities are for the most part fixed and stable. Thus, an identity that is at once “Mexican” and “not Mexican” does not sit well with logic and reason. However, none of these discourses consider either the complexity and multiplicity of forces with which young immigrants must contend as they negotiate their own national identities, or the extent to which this negotiation renders characterizations of the nation-state ambiguous. As such, while these struggles over meaning are played out in Celia’s own life, narratives of the nation — what it means to be “American” or “Mexican” — get rewritten, rearticulated, and reiterated based on her experiences at the crossroads of multiple locations within national culture(s).

Between her 16th through 19th years, Celia was a research participant in a large study of young people of color in the fast food labor market. The in-depth, life history interviews I conducted with her during this time provided the groundwork for this analysis. During the research, Celia lived in a small house with her parents, three brothers, and two sisters. The household supported itself through the labor of Celia and her mother in fast food jobs and of her father, who laid asphalt and held a nighttime janitor’s job during the rainy season. Several years after her father’s arrival in the U.S., Celia, her mother, and two brothers (her other siblings were born in the U.S.) joined him in Oakland after what Celia, then five years old, remembers as a long, tiring, and dangerous trek across the Mexican and Southern California landscapes.

In Oakland, a strong sense of (Mexican) nationalism, and, in particular, strong (Mexican) state pride exists within the Mexican immigrant community. Although these immigrants might participate in an informal rivalry based on state of origin, when it comes to a *national* identity, they often remain loyal to the idea of *mexicanismo* (a specifically male gendered ideology). Likewise, Celia insists with great pride that she is “Mexican” and will never be “American.” Her place of birth and her subsequent departure from it serve to highlight an idealized national identity performed from afar. Yet her experiences with immigration also serve to question the *mexicanismo* she insists on celebrating. Her immigration to the U.S. has allowed her to interact with a variety of cultures and to pursue her education, thereby allowing her to question oppressive gender and racial ideologies. Thus, immigration both strengthens and challenges Celia’s Mexican national identity, depending on the particular configuration of issues cross-cutting it. Similarly, this

influence operates unevenly and incompletely. Although, for example, gender issues challenge Celia's national identity, they do not go so far as to encourage an "American" identity.

Celia implicitly recognizes the hegemonic national messages she receives through the media, political discourse, public policy, and education. She is not, however, a passive receptacle that idly takes in these messages. On the contrary, she takes *on* these messages in a critical and insightful way. As she confronts them, she is refashioning the discourse on nationhood — sometimes in complete opposition, and sometimes not, but always rearticulating the elements of dominant narratives of "the nation." By examining these elements in light of her own life, she is, in a sense, sorting and resorting them according to whether they speak or fail to speak to her experiences, and thereby disrupting official versions of national identity.

Celia's views on womanhood have been shaped by the nationalistic dichotomy of Guadalupe/Malinche and by her own sense of class and geographic differences. She describes the Mexican women she knows — virtually all from poor rural areas in Mexico — as submissive, timid women with downcast eyes, a representation consistent with that of Guadalupe. Beyond this rather simplistic characterization, however, she recognizes the circumscribed role assigned to women and the patriarchal power dynamics embedded in it:

all the Mexicans...are *machistas*.... They think that...they're the ones with the pants and we [women] can't be superior to them.... And they think of us as just mothers, you know. That's it, you can't be anything else...because if we do, then we're gonna think more than them, and we might get over their heads. And they don't like that.

The idea that she "can't be anything else" besides a mother has been problematic for Celia from very early on, however. As her family made the transition from poor ranch hands in Mexico to urban workers in Oakland, they faced new opportunities and obstacles that, coupled with Celia's own assumptions about poor and/or rural Mexican women, influenced her attitudes toward women's roles. Her position as the eldest child in a family of migrants required that she take on many more roles than that of "mother." As the first in her family to enter the U.S. public school system, where she learned English, she quickly became adept at maneuvering her way through the school bureaucracy. As her siblings followed her into this system, she helped ease their ways. Similarly, even at a very young age, she became translator and liaison with U.S. culture for her parents as they built their new lives in California. These roles neatly correspond with the popular Malinche package, as do the consequences with which Celia must contend as she confronts familial responsibilities beyond those she defines as typically Mexican.

Subsequent experiences in Celia's life further complicated the role Celia would be designated in her community. At the age of 15, Celia left her parents'

home to live with her (Mexican) boyfriend and his family. Although they were not officially married, she nonetheless considered herself his wife and tried to live according to his expectations. Generally, this meant staying home, quitting school, and attending to his needs. When she voiced her desire to finish her high school education, he became verbally abusive. Celia describes the moment that she fully realized she would not live under these oppressive circumstances. When he saw her dancing with her male cousin at a family gathering, his abuse turned physical:

...after that hit he gave me, which was the first and the last, I hated him.... I don't know, but I was 15 and...I would do anything he would say. But after that slap, everything changed.... I guess I opened my eyes.

Since this turning point in her life, Celia is determined *not* to be the submissive woman idealized by Guadalupe. However, because the patriarchal Mexican national narrative allows women only two choices, Celia found herself defined as the treacherous *malinchista*. Although her parents accepted her back into their home, they made it clear that she had crossed the line — she was no longer to be trusted, and her actions had cast the entire family in an ill light. Similarly, after this episode, Celia refused to become romantically committed to any particular man, and she became known as a “shameless flirt” among her friends. As a result, they nicknamed her *La Player* and *La Orgullosa*,² thus placing her once again on the “wrong” side of conformist Mexican gender representations.

Celia is very aware that she is upsetting the patriarchal expectations imposed on her and she rejects these expectations just as consciously. She attributes her insight to her American education:

I'm not gonna live [the Mexican] lifestyle. Because...I'm being educated right now. And I'm being educated the American way, and I like that way. I don't like the way that my mom [or her] friends...live their life, because it's really bad. They let the guys just walk all over them — their husbands.

But if Celia refuses to identify as a Mexican woman, then she is, according to “logic” and “reason,” saying that either she is not Mexican or not a woman. She does not feel compelled to “explain” this apparent contradiction in her identity, but when pressed, she makes an important distinction between “being” something and “living” a lifestyle. Regarding issues of gender, she lives an American lifestyle, which, in her perception, illustrates more (if not completely) equitable power dynamics between the sexes. Thus, she is able to retain her identity as a Mexican woman who lives, at least partially, an American lifestyle, but who, because of her race and immigration status, will never *be* American. Such an identity is not without risk; by embracing this lifestyle, she risks being cast as a sellout or traitor to her culture.

Although part of her lifestyle is American, her identity remains squarely grounded in Mexican culture, as she proudly embraces Mexican traditions, music, dance, etc. Far from disassociating herself from Mexican culture, then, she celebrates her Mexican identity and actually takes it a step further by politicizing it. Particularly in light of immigration politics in California and across the U.S., Celia feels a desire and a responsibility not only to cling to her Mexican identity, but also to use it to join Mexicans, Latinos, and other allies in California to fight against anti-immigrant legislation and its accompanying rhetoric that sends explicit or implicit messages about who counts as full participating members of the nation. She publicly denounces this legislation and rhetoric by participating in mass demonstrations and speaking out against the anti-immigrant backlash at a school assembly. In doing so, she is inserting her own narrative into a hegemonic U.S. national narrative that on the surface embraces diversity, but in practice excludes certain people from full national subjectivity.

In the specific case of California's Proposition 187, any undocumented immigrant would, among other things, be denied public services such as health care and education. However, Celia recognizes that Latino immigrants — and Mexicans in particular — were the specific targets of this piece of legislation. As such, all Mexicans become criminalized and, according to Celia, “treated like some sort of monster...that was not allowed in a certain area.” As with gender identities, the good/bad dichotomy reappears in Celia's life, this time as American/un-American, and she, as a Mexican immigrant, is again cast to the “bad” side. Just as Malinche is cast as Guadalupe's monstrous double, this binary represents the Mexican immigrant as the American's monstrous counterpart. Thus, Celia is again caught up in a national narrative that demands she be “good” — speak English, work hard, pay taxes, etc. (all of which she does) — yet nonetheless deems her to be inherently “bad,” or “un-American” based simply on her life experiences and who she is.

Celia also recognizes that this dilemma is not new or unique to Mexicans and that social, political, and economic benefits and privileges in the U.S. have always been distributed according to race: “What they're doing right now to us, trying to take the health care and all the rest of the other stuff from us...it's what [African Americans] couldn't have when they were slaves.” Such practices and the knowledge thereof contribute to the process of racial formation as various groups become defined by the dominant group in specifically racial terms and struggle against such domination *as racial groups* (see Omi and Winant, 1986). In the case of Proposition 187, Latinos are targeted for expulsion from the nation and fight against this threat on politicized racial terms. This process opens the door for Celia and others to rally behind their racial identities to disrupt the dominant narrative of race and nation. In such struggles, racial identity itself is continually redefined as dominant forces find new ways of asserting control over disenfranchised groups and as disenfranchised groups find new ways to react against these forces and to

engage in proactive struggles that insist on new ways of articulating race and national identity.

Celia complicates matters even more by suggesting that a class analysis is integral to the issues of race, national subjectivity, immigration, and other forms of politics. She argues that:

The people...that voted are the wealthy people. The people with good jobs, with a good family, you know, and I think that that's the white people.... They don't put [themselves] in our position, right? I mean, they're elite, they're citizens, and they have everything...they need. And to them, we don't mean nothing, right? So I guess for them [Proposition 187] was like a chance...to get rid of all the other...people.

Although voting patterns indicate that people of all racial groups and social classes voted both for and against Proposition 187, statistics from the November 1994 election reveal that approximately 80% of the voters were white, 50% were college graduates, and 61% earned more than \$40,000 per year (McDonnell, 1994). Thus, Celia's analysis is telling in light of the increasing economic gap between rich and poor in the U.S., particularly because it illustrates the polarization behind racial and social class meanings and assumptions. As the shrinking middle class finds it increasingly difficult to maintain its lifestyle in the face of global economic shifts, popular discourse looks to immigrants and the poor, whom it accuses of running the nation's economic health into the ground by abusing public services, as the source of these economic difficulties. In this way, definitions of the poor, the middle class, immigrants, citizens, etc., become fashioned as us/them confrontations, while the global practices of capitalism too often remain unquestioned. The segregated social geography of Oakland, where middle- and upper-class homes in the hills are for the most part occupied by white residents, while poor inner-city flatlands are filled with people of color, highlights this polarization and exacerbates the economic and social gap between rich and poor. Thus, it is no wonder that Celia assumes that largely white middle-to-upper class people cannot relate to the plight of the largely minority urban poor. In this scenario, racialized class binaries serve to divert attention from the shifting flows of capital that precipitate such economic crises. Even while Celia implicitly acknowledges the prevailing socioeconomic crisis and the injustice of official and popular responses to it, she is complicit in perpetuating polarized divisions based on race and class because the dominant narrative has defined the debate precisely in these terms. However, by rearticulating the meanings behind the dichotomies into which she is cast, Celia imagines at least a shared understanding, and at most, a common political struggle among the poor:

I guess the people that really didn't want [Proposition 187] to pass were the Mexicans or the people that know or that live around the communities

we live in and know what people go through.... See, what I think is that a person that is low income, if their family is just getting destroyed...of course they voted against it...no matter...what race you are...; [but] if you voted...for it,...it seems like then you're...a wealthy person.

Again, voting patterns do not completely bear out Celia's analysis. However, her interpretation nonetheless illustrates the process she goes through to negotiate the terms and meanings of the hegemonic national narratives that have inscribed her within rigid binaries. Although she recognizes the pressure to conform to the "right" sides of the binaries, her responses to racial and gender oppression place her on the "wrong" sides. Rather than accepting the derogatory meanings of labels such as *malinchista* and "un-American," Celia renegotiates the meanings and resists the binaries. In other words, her nonconformance to the rigid gender roles represented by Guadalupe does not mean she is a traitor to her people. Indeed, she joins the political struggle of Mexican immigrants in California and embraces her Mexican identity all the while interjecting new meanings in the terms of the American/un-American binary. As Celia redefines "America" as a hostile place, the label "un-American" becomes something to be celebrated rather than denigrated. The way that Celia negotiates her identities in light of a California economy dependent on immigrant labor, the immigrant backlash, and patriarchal state and cultural policies and practices reminds us that although they are often multiple, identities cannot be simplistically pried apart from one another, or from the social, economic, and political forces that shape them.

Theoretical Interpretations of Identity and Nation

Celia's experiences highlight the need to find new ways of thinking about identity and its implications for the nation-state. Retheorizing identity and nations as processes that are woven together recognizes the intricacies and uncertainties of lived experiences that accompany new configurations of late 20th-century capitalism. In response to such configurations, individuals and nations expand and contract the parameters of their identities, all the while redefining themselves and each other.

Rethinking Identity

Only when we view identity as a linear, dichotomous phenomenon does Celia's insistence that she is *not* a Mexican woman become problematic. Her experiences have led her to question the dominant and dichotomous categories within which she is placed. Her status as a young person, a woman, and an immigrant makes the gateway to both U.S. and Mexican national identity fraught with obstructions. Moreover, the issue of national identity for her is not so dichotomous as American/not-American — that is, the issue is not played out within an isolated U.S. context. Rather, she must contend with *two* sets of national

narratives — that of Mexico and the U.S. — that attempt to (de-)inscribe her within or outside the reaches of nationhood, particularly in light of the two nations' historical and contemporary relations. The experience of migration has played a central role in opening up possibilities for contesting these dominant narratives.

Recent scholarship on transnationalism³ recognizes that:

By living their lives across borders, transmigrants find themselves confronted with and engaged in the nation-building processes of two or more nation-states. Their identities and practices are configured by hegemonic categories, such as race and ethnicity, that are deeply embedded in the nation-building processes of these nation-states (Basch et al., 1994: 22).

Scholars of transnationalism recognize that migrant identities are “configured” by at least two dominant national narratives and that migrants themselves build social spaces that cannot be interpreted according to rigidly bounded senses of space and place (Basch et al., 1994; Rouse, 1991 and 1992). Rather, transmigrants' identities, experiences, and practices are informed by their nation of origin as well as by any subsequent nations to which they have migrated. Thus, migrants and those they leave behind form transnational communities, which although geographically separated by national borders, remain intricately linked through continuous exchanges of goods, remittances, and information. Such flows create new social spaces that mediate migrant identities. In these spaces, hegemonic national discourses continue to influence identities, but as people, goods, and information cross national borders, identities are no longer confined by the limits of master narratives of a single nation. Celia's own narrative shows how both Mexico and the U.S. bear upon who she is and who she wants to be. It is her negotiation of this process that interrupts either or both national narratives. As a Mexican immigrant in a U.S. fraught with anti-immigrant sentiment, Celia insists on her and other migrants' rights to live here and to participate fully, thereby challenging dominant notions of what it means to be American.

But Celia's migration has provided her another opportunity to refashion national narratives. Specifically, she attributes her ability to insist upon gender equality and justice in her own life to her distinctly American education — an education she would never have received had her family remained in Mexico. As Celia notes, an educated woman does not accord with the idealized Mexican woman. Compulsory education in the U.S. collides with this notion and enables Celia to stretch intellectually and to question the gender and racial hegemonies that would forbid her to do so otherwise. Yet questioning and resisting these hegemonies is similarly contrary to the idealized Mexican woman, so Celia faces the consequences of being cast as a *malinchista* once again. The irony of schooling for Celia is that while it inspires and provides a space for her to question “common sense” assumptions of race and gender, its institutional practices are often contrary

to this spirit of social criticism. For example, Celia recounts repressive school practices, such as the omission of meaningful study of Mexican history and culture, reprimands for speaking Spanish at school, and comments such as “Go back to Mexico!” by school staff. For young Mexican immigrants who, along with their families, often significantly contribute to the national wealth by, for example, consuming goods and services, providing difficult low-wage labor, and paying taxes, such institutional practices enforce a dominant, exclusionary narrative of who counts as “American.”

As with her experience of immigration, Celia’s experience of schooling conveys the need to think about identity in very complex and nuanced ways. Transmigrants and others who negotiate more than one culture have long known that identities formed in this fashion are not fixed and stable, but rather are constantly redefined and shifting. Viewing nationalist discourse and identity as processes, particularly in light of emerging transnational theories, allows us to see possibilities for grappling with social and cultural conflicts. Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of the borderlands reveals the space of convergence of the multiple forces that shape identities. In these borderlands Anzaldúa (1987: 22) finds “the freedom to carve and chisel [her] own face” and to build “a new culture — *una cultura mestiza* — with [her] own lumber, [her] own bricks and mortar and [her] own feminist architecture.” Only through this kind of *mestiza* culture can women of color find a collective political consciousness that transcends rigidly bounded dualisms. Such a consciousness necessarily is grounded in the ability to negotiate ambiguity and supposed contradictions that emerge from the ambiguous and contradictory experiences of women of color (Mohanty, 1991). In carving out her own identity in the in-between spaces where nations, classes, genders, and races intersect, Celia politicizes her identity and often rejects hegemonic discourse that defines her according to rigid categories, at the same time that these discourses bear down upon her, her family, her peers, and the institutions within and around which she must maneuver.

Celia’s experiences highlight the entanglement of her racial and gender identities with hegemonic national discourses, but the strategies she uses to resist racial and gender hegemonies differ in their degrees of collective struggle. Although organized forms of resistance might not be the only vehicles for resisting hegemony, a sense of collective struggle is vital to overcoming far-reaching systems of domination and control. Celia participates in such a collective struggle against anti-immigrant sentiment in California. Although this participation is informed by gender issues, she does not engage in similar collective struggles against patriarchy and sexism.

Certainly, patriarchy in the U.S. continues to exert control over women through policies, practices, and discourses that curb women’s rights and opportunities; since white women and women of color in the U.S. occupy distinctly different historical and contemporary locations relative to dominant groups, their

experiences of patriarchy are also distinct. Because of their white skin privilege and their intimate relationship with white male patriarchs, white women often experienced and portrayed gender oppression in intimate, private terms. In contrast, women of color experienced a more public form of patriarchy due to their positions as servants to and workers for white male patriarchs, and to restrictive citizenship and immigration laws that denied them access to official opportunities for national belonging.

Today, women of color in the U.S. are disproportionately affected by poverty and discrimination and are most often the targets of repressive state policies that attempt to control women's health, reproductive rights, economic well-being, and political participation. For example, relative to white women, Black women are 10 times more likely to face prosecution referrals for substance abuse during pregnancy (despite comparable rates of drug use among women of both races), and all women of color are more likely to face punitive birth control measures (Scott, 1992). Similarly, immigrant women face particular exploitation in the job market, where they often are paid wages well below the legal minimum and are compelled to work hours without clearly defined limits (see Carvajal, 1996).

Although Celia is relatively well versed on the structural foundations of racism in the U.S., knowledge of which creates an avenue for her participation in collective action against such structures, she does not seem to have an equivalent language toward an avenue of collective action against the structural foundations of sexism. The alienating effects of Western feminism have been felt by many women of color, who argue that this brand of feminism does not speak to their experiences. Western feminism has yet to succeed in engaging women of color to any significant degree, and fails especially at reaching out to young women of color. This dilemma points to the need for accessible works and actions, particularly by feminists of color, that articulate race and gender in collective struggles and that might serve as mobilizing agents for young women of color to engage in collective struggles that can envision possibilities and forge alliances with other struggles for social justice. In a similar vein, alliances that form around issues of, for example, immigrant rights or racism must take up issues of gender, and how they shape specific experiences of immigration and racism.

Conservative political appeals continue to define the nation and its members in narrow, dichotomous terms. At the same time, however, the very social and geopolitical borders they attempt to fortify are continually permeated, shifted, and blurred. Although these shifts affect people at the level of individual and group identity, they also emerge out of broad political and economic forces that must be challenged on a collective level. Such collectivities, however, must remain flexible and must embrace ambiguity and contradiction if they are to make significant progress in disrupting hegemonic narratives. Accordingly, individual and group identities are not the only issues at stake.

Rethinking the Nation-State

In the course of negotiating their identities, immigrants and other disenfranchised groups reframe constructions of the nation-state itself. Changing demographics that result from changing global economies bring conflicts over what constitutes “America” to the forefront of U.S. national discourse. Reactionary responses to such changes often take the form of adherence to the notion of a coherent, unified collective national identity. In the U.S., this takes the form of “America” as a white, English-speaking nation that embraces the ideologies of freedom and individualism. As Celia and other migrants bring their own interpretations of “America” and of their own countries of origin to bear on this national identity, however, the dominant narratives of the U.S. are challenged and rearticulated. To understand the complexities of such a rearticulation, new ways of thinking about the role that marginalized groups play in defining the nation-state are needed in conjunction with a retheorizing of place itself. In these new theoretical contexts, certain Mexico-U.S. relations become more lucid and illustrate how movements of people affect not only individual identities, but also nation-states themselves and international relations.

In his essay “DissemiNation,” Homi Bhabha (1990) problematizes the linear “pedagogical” national narratives that authoritatively present national development in terms of linear progress originating from a historical origin. Bhabha juxtaposes such pedagogical national narratives with “performative” narratives, which “demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as that *continual process* by which the national life is redeemed” (*Ibid.*: 297, emphasis added). Bhabha’s splitting/doubling of the national narrative into pedagogical and performative allows for intervention in and contestation of hegemonic, historicist narratives by the lived and unequal experiences of people. Such intervention challenges the authority of the pedagogical and renders national narratives processual and therefore ambiguous.

Bhabha rejects the idea that this process is purely contradictory or dialectical. In other words, the minority does not simply overturn or negate pedagogical narratives. Rather, it disrupts these narratives by:

Insinuating itself into the terms of reference of the dominant discourse, [thereby] antagoniz[ing] the implicit power to generalize.... [I]ts force lies...in the renegotiation of those times, terms, and traditions through which we turn our uncertain, passing contemporaneity into the signs of history (*Ibid.*: 306).

Thus, the “times, terms, and traditions” do not simplistically cease to exist, but are contested and renegotiated. The historic events that define critical junctures in the genesis and development of the nation remain as the markers of the national character, but are subject to reinterpretations and rearticulations based on lived

experiences and daily struggles. Bhabha, then, is interested in the “slippages” of pedagogical narratives. Those individuals and/or groups whose experiences are not consistent with the predetermined historical origin of “the nation” represent the heterogeneity of national life that nonetheless remains inscribed in a homogeneous narrative. The slippages in master narratives that Bhabha refers to, then, often emerge from these group experiences.

As Mexicans continue to migrate to the U.S., their experiences, interactions, and confrontations in the context of global capital bring new issues to bear upon the national stage. In the context of domestic economic crises, the very presence of immigrants sends waves of fear that American society is “increasingly alien (literally) and uncontrollable” (Schuck, 1995: 90). In recent years such fears have resulted in attempts to reclaim America in linear, historicist terms, such that familiar power structures — gender, racial, and class hierarchies — remain intact and restore control. Yet these efforts are unrealistic, since immigrants use their own agency to redefine the distribution of power in the U.S., thereby redefining America itself.

This struggle continues to be played out in California around Proposition 187 and subsequent national legislation that would specifically deny immigrants — documented and undocumented — the use of public services. Immigrants in turn use their agency in a number of ways: they mobilize, participate in mass political demonstrations, become U.S. citizens, and vote, among other things. In this way, they assert their own forms of power and create the slippages in hegemonic U.S. narratives that call into question the meaning of “America.”

Understanding this process is critical to understanding the specific manifestations of recent struggles over power in the U.S. Underlying this process, however, are new conceptions of place as a social construct. No longer do geographically bounded notions of place capture the complexities of inter- and intra-national relations in the context of late 20th-century capitalism. Massey retheorizes the construction of place as “a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” (Massey, 1994: 154). Thus,

Instead...of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around them, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself (*Ibid.*: 154).

In Massey’s formulation, the place identity of the U.S. becomes a node among a world of social relations. Significantly, Massey notes that place identity is not bound by the confines of geopolitical borders, but rather is composed of relations that extend beyond such borders. Massey also argues that the node is not static; it is instead changing as the relations themselves change. Just as individual identities must be seen as processes, so, too, must national (or place) identities.

By reformulating notions of place in such a way, Massey allows for new configurations of nations that confront changing demographics in a progressive manner, rather than in the reactionary manner of retreat and closure. As experiences such as Celia's that challenge dominant national narratives proliferate, and as global economic interdependence continues to soar, finding new ways to confront these struggles becomes an increasingly necessary precondition for positive social change.

New configurations of labor-providing countries in the transnational flow of capital at least partially illustrate such a reworked concept of place. Basch et al. (1994) argue that such countries have reconfigured themselves as "deterritorialized nation-states." Such nation-states are defined by the very flows of migration out of the country. In other words, individuals from such a country can "live all over the world and still not live outside the state" (*Ibid.*, 1994: 269). Migrants to the U.S. from labor-sending countries often remain an integral part of the nation they leave behind by actively participating in the economy and politics of the home country by sending remittances, voting, and sometimes returning to occupy political office. In such a configuration, leaders from the "home" country often assume a role of protector or spokesperson for those who have emigrated, often with the underlying expectation that the emigrants will use their access to resources in the U.S. to further the economic and political interests of the home country.

Two examples from recent history illustrate this kind of relationship between Mexico and the U.S. First, after passage of Proposition 187 in California, former Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari publicly denounced the legislation and rejected "'all open and undercover forms of discrimination and any xenophobic practices' against Mexicans in foreign lands" (Fineman, 1994). Second, in December 1995 Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo proposed changing the Mexican constitution to allow for dual nationality. In other words, Mexicans who adopted U.S. citizenship would still be accorded nationality rights to own property and retain a Mexican passport (Dillon, 1995). Such actions clearly illustrate the overlapping nature of Mexican and U.S. politics. In their words and actions, both presidents insist on defining the Mexican national community beyond the physical boundaries of Mexican geography. Rather, social relations, including those maintained across traditional national borders, such as those with Mexican immigrants in the U.S., come to comprise the Mexican nation-state. By defending Mexicans' rights in the U.S. and by opening up new incentives to adopt American citizenship, both presidents strategically portray themselves as defenders of the Mexican people and their political power in the U.S., implicitly suggesting a reciprocal relationship whereby Mexican-born U.S. citizens could defend Mexico's own interests in the U.S.

The other component of the deterritorialized nation-state configuration, however, is labor-*receiving* countries such as the U.S. By no means can the power dynamics in this configuration be considered equal; the domination of global

capitalist states in determining the parameters of the relationship must also be considered. As Western capital continues to permeate the world, it influences deterritorialized nation-state discourses on development and therefore influences nation-state interests. Additionally, as deterritorialized nation-states define themselves according to nonbounded notions of place, labor-receiving capitalist countries often respond by reining in any new possibilities or constructions of the nation-state. As a result, immigrants in the U.S., for example, become threatening and criminalized, thereby provoking both a figurative and literal sealing off of national borders. Such reactions not only reconfigure nation-states, but also, as shown in Celia's narrative, affect the often contentious and contradictory processes of identity formation among all people who experience the effects of shifts in global capital.

Basch et al. further contend that transmigrants and the leaders in their home countries do not always share a unified vision of economic and political interests. In the case of Mexico, many migrants flee conditions of extreme poverty, which they often recognize as the result of repressive Mexican state practices. Thus, their experiences in the U.S. might lead to critiques of the home country's leadership and structures, particularly in light of the political domination and widespread corruption of Mexico's ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party. In Celia's case, her American education allows her to critically engage Mexican forms of patriarchy, thereby rendering any unified vision of interests problematic, if not impossible.

The national narratives of Mexico and the U.S. cannot be read in isolation from one another. Indeed, the long, overlapping histories of the two nations render such attempts futile. Rather, these narratives must be read as enmeshed with one another and with the identities of the people who occupy one or both of them. Movements of people, capital, information, goods, etc., across the geopolitical border that separates the two nations simultaneously yet unevenly shape the identities of individuals and nations alike.

Conclusion

Conflicting identities such as "Mexican" and "not Mexican" that at first glance might not make sense become more lucid when viewed from the perspective of identity as a process. Ultimately, Celia does not so much wholly affirm or deny national, racial, and/or gender identities, but rather, rewrites the narrative of Mexican womanhood (in the U.S.), as her experiences cast dominant narratives in a new light. Moreover, Celia's experiences are not isolated or unique to her. Immigrants the world over confront the same kinds of issues. In these confrontations, nation-states themselves are not only implicated, but also affected as hierarchies of power become questioned, challenged, and refortified. By continuing to rely on fixed, stable notions of identity and the dominant national narratives out of which they emerge, communities — national, local, ethnic, political, etc. —

limit their abilities to form powerful coalitions that can effect radical social change. Rigidly bounded identities do not allow for imagination or dialogue that might highlight the potential intersections among a variety of hybrid nations, groups, and individuals. A discourse of the possibilities becomes limited and truncated when we do not think of identity in unstable, processual terms. For Anzaldúa (1987: 80), this kind of “massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness...could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war.” This becomes increasingly critical as U.S. capital saturates the world and precipitates the increased movement of people into and within the U.S. Policies, infrastructures, assumptions, and practices must be able to handle these migrations in a way that recognizes and respects the ambiguity in everyone, and in the very character of late 20th-century nation-states.

NOTES

1. Malinche is also known by her indigenous name Malintzin and her Christian name Doña Marina.
2. Literally translated, *orgullo* means “proud,” and in this context, it takes on a negative connotation as “too proud” or “haughty.” Celia herself translates it as “conceited.”
3. Basch et al. define transnationalism as “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (1994: 7).

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