Arrival Survival and Adaptation:
The Quest for Gender Identity Among Female Mexican Immigrants

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As an undergraduate student of anthropology, there is only so much one can do to go beyond reading ethnographies and textbooks and delve into the study of a culture. Taking part in an ethnographic fieldschool and undergoing ethnographic research as a student has privileged my anthropology education. In conducting this research, I knew I was limited by my lack of experience in anthropology, but I felt that I could learn so much more by delving into the practice of the discipline. By participating in the Ronald E. McNair Post baccalaureate Program, I have gained tremendous advantages never thought possible. My background as a McNair scholar and my time spent observing Mexican society both prepared me for my attempt at researching the immigrant community in Denton, Texas.

Through a study I was conducting my first year as a McNair scholar on Latino educational attainment, I met a young immigrant high school student on the verge of graduation. We developed a friendship as I tried to help her with college options and she helped me understand the dynamics of adaptation and negotiation in the life of a young Mexican female in the United States. Through this friendship, I met her family, specifically her mother and aunt who owned and operated an establishment that specialized in *comida corrida*, which translates roughly to a small take out only restaurant. Both women operated the restaurant with daughters and nieces coming in periodically to help out. Only rarely did I see any of their husbands work the restaurant. The fact that these women, neither having been in the United States very long, had become successful intrigued me.

My relationship with these women was interrupted as I took an opportunity to go on an ethnographic fieldschool in Chetumal, Mexico. My research focus in Mexico
revolved around the trans-regional populations in Chetumal, Quintana Roo. Due to the success of tourist attractions like Cancun, and the states other successful economic industries, Chetumal had experienced massive migration from the rest of Mexico. It was in Chetumal where I began exploring the effects of internal migration and adaptation involving people from other Mexican states. While I interviewed both men and women, the women in my study truly redefined my views on gender and female identity in Mexico. I discovered that some of the women’s lives challenged what I know recognize as ethnocentric views on Mexican women. First there was the young single female professor who migrated from Veracruz and found that the small city of Chetumal constantly challenged her authority and ability to take care of herself. Then there was the young divorced single mother who I lived with and witnessed her struggles to adjust without a husband. Many times she admitted to me her want to be “normal,” to have a happy marriage and a good father for her daughter. Her female neighbor and friend was also single, never married, and owned her own home. Finally there was the mother, wife, and co-owner of her family’s bakery. This woman woke up at 5:00 am to feed her family, helped her husband in the bakery, completed her household chores, and still managed to run the bakery’s finances. These women made viewing Mexican female roles more complex, I could no longer consider Mexican women as being condemned to rigid domestic spheres.

When I returned from Mexico I knew that my senior research project was to cover the same topics of arrival, survival and adaptation that I researched among the trans-regional communities in Mexico. Given my new perspective on Mexican females I wanted to concentrate on the complex role of women in this migratory process. I spoke to
Dr. Alicia Re Cruz, who had done research on Mexican women in Denton, and we discussed the options available to me. We found a means of conducting research, and I quickly began a literary search on existing research done on this topic. Given my status as a semi-native (Mexican American) female, I felt that prior to interviewing and analyzing any findings I had to be aware of the status and methods of used by native anthropologists to offset possible drawbacks of doing native scholarship. As a history minor, I felt I needed to research historic aspects of both Mexican women and native anthropology. The following is a synopsis of my experiences in conducting ethnographic research, I hope my work will contribute to the understanding of female Mexican immigrants as well as prove a need to encourage further research projects such as these among future anthropology undergraduates.

Native Anthropology

Anthropology has long studied other cultures through a variety of epistemological backgrounds, theories, and methodologies. A major factor of this anthropological analysis has always been objectivity, or the ability to distance oneself from the culture in order not to impose ethnocentric or biased views on the analysis. Historically this approach has been aided by studying the exotic other and drawing a clear distinction between the culture and the objective observer. It was through this type of anthropology that a forum was built where European and American anthropologists attempted to create a bridge to non-Western societies as they tried to tell the “Other’s” story. The early twentieth century encompassed a new approach to anthropology, one that blurred the
distinction between observers and the communities; the natives spoke back and began to
tell their own stories. By observing the peculiarities of other exotic cultures,
anthropologists had always observed themselves and their native culture in relation to this
different society, but an intentional study of one’s culture had not been considered in
anthropology. Anthropology from a native perspective began to gain more attention and
with it plenty of controversy. As the discipline became more available to native scholars
of previously studied communities, they became trained in anthropology and began
conducting their own observations within their own populations, thus creating the much
needed dialogue between native and non-native observers. And while the native
perspective is valued, the discipline of anthropology may not truly be ready for natives to
scientifically analyze their own community. Ruth Behar writes, “Anthropologists have
been waiting for the natives to talk back, to write their own ethnographies — you know for
the Nuer to just let us have it” (1993: 84). This portrayal of native anthropology as a
challenge to previous analysis seems severe, but Behar is only exposing the critique that
native scholars contribute by contesting previous studies. Currently there exists many
advantages and equal disadvantages surrounding the discipline of native anthropology; a
native anthropologist should be aware of both and foster communication with others in
their areas of interests.

A Chicana conducting research among the Mexican community presents an
interesting dynamic to this native anthropology conversation. As a daughter of Mexican
immigrants, how could I, having only visited Mexico sporadically, presume to consider
myself a native scholar? I don’t consider myself a native scholar to Mexican culture but
given my personal history with the immigrant environment how could my relationship to
this community be considered one of an objective outsider. My place of living within, but not being of, the community presents a unique addition to native anthropology, presenting advantages as well as challenges. By understanding and being conscious of the issues of being a semi-native scholar, I grew to understand my delicate role in the research gathering and analyzing phase. I had to acknowledge my own biases in order to overcome the limitations presented by my place in the research. I began by researching the history and controversy of conducting native anthropology. Doing this prior to conducting interviews was incredibly helpful because it prepared me for the theoretical challenges I would be facing as a semi-native scholar.

American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942), at the turn of the twentieth century, led the move to shift away from researching the exotic other, to understanding the cultural self. At a time when Eugenics was gaining popularity Boas arose on the scene and aimed to prove the racial inferiority/superiority dichotomy wrong. Through his students, Boas hoped to “cultivate a ‘genius for pure objectivity,’ [...] and let the evidence prove the absurdity of racial prejudice” (Garfield 1991: 147). Boas recognized a benefit to having natives conduct anthropological research within their communities because they had the advantage of capturing details that non-natives could not. Margaret Mead (1901-1978), one of Boas’ more known students, developed her research of the “other” into a form of native anthropology. Mead’s research in Samoa directly and indirectly attempted to observe American society. Regardless of the controversy regarding the accuracy of Mead’s research, her attempts to conduct cross-cultural analysis with female adolescence in the United States proved more valuable than her questionable findings. Besides work done by Boas and his students on Native American
cultures, this was the first attempt to recognize the value of understanding other cultures and understanding one’s own.

Ella Daloria (1889-1971), a member of the Yankston Sioux of South Dakota (Finn 1993), conducted research on the Dakota under the guide of Boas. He encouraged her to conduct what came to be known as native anthropology. While Deloria welcomed Boas’ input, disagreements did arise between Boas’ emphasis on objectivity and Deloria’s view as a native scholar. Deloria recognized the difficulties of gathering cultural information as a native anthropologist and attempted to communicate them to Boas. Deloria explained that her cultural advantage to anthropological research would be inhibited if done by white male standards: “to go at it like a white man for me, and Indian, is to throw up an immediate barrier between myself and the people” (Finn 1993: 343). Boas was puzzled as to why his methodology wasn’t working. He stressed an objective methodology previously designed and practiced by white males, but as a native Deloria knew such methods were not appropriate for the culture.

One noted situation where Boas and Deloria disagreed involved a Sun Dance Ceremony. Boas wanted Deloria to research accounts of this ceremony. This project proved to be ethically challenging for Deloria as she involved her family and put them in a position to disclose information that would otherwise be hidden from non-kin (Finn 1993: 341). As a native Deloria knew there was a thin line between exploitation and anthropology. Even though she was able to get more accounts of the Sun Dance, Deloria found that each account still varied. Boas stressed objectivity and verification while Deloria felt the variations expressed more about the culture than the description of the dance; the many explanations revealed the social locations and relations of different
people. As Janet L. Finn writes in her article “Ella Cara Deloria and Mourning Dove: Writing for cultures, writing against the grain,”

Their continuing dialogue about the Sun Dance ceremony points to Boas’ concern with verification and documentation of an ‘objective’ truth, while Deloria saw the diverse accounts as true for the informants, reflecting the perspectives of their particular social locations and relations. (1993: 341)

Boas was more interested in true descriptions of the Sun Dance while Deloria wanted to observe why and how the diverse perspectives could explain the culture. Deloria’s reluctance and disagreement with Boas’ methodology explains the importance of having native perspectives in dialogue with non-native analysis in order to further aid attempts at gathering cultural information.

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), was another student of Boas who was encouraged to conduct native anthropology. Hurston returned to her hometown of Eatonville, Florida to gather black narratives and folklore. Hurston was given this assignment under the assumption that she would have a connection with the black community in the South that may not have been available to white scholars during this time. As Gail Garfield explains, “It was the ‘habitual movements in telling tales, or in ordinary conversation’ that Boas thought could only be captured by a member of the same race” (1991:148). Hurston was also thought to have an advantage because she knew where and who to ask, but the methodology taught to her by Boas limited her native advantage. When Hurston arrived speaking academically and overemphasizing the objective perspective, she was not widely accepted by the locals. She was a native, but unlike Deloria, Hurston did put up a social wall and did not use the advantages of being a
cultural native. She writes about having this objective distant perspective in her introduction to Mules and Men:

It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings that I could see myself like somebody else and stand of and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spyglass of Anthropology to look through at that. (Hurston 1935: 1)

But anthropology cannot be successful if it only sees people as objects within the spyglass; an anthropologist that works according to this analogy has the danger of misrepresenting the text as they “occupy space in the field as a colonizer” (Hernandez 1993: 360). Hurston’s analysis shows the true problems with researching with a spyglass and detaching rather than distancing from the community. As Graciela Hernandez points, Zora Neale Hurston’s most powerful contribution to anthropology could be her ability to allow the spyglass to fall aside, revealing the struggle for power between the ethnographer and the subject in which both vie to define the field and the possibility of representation. (1993: 361)

Hurston also had certain expectations of Eatonville that frustrated and delayed her work. Eventually she improved her methodology and was able to gather information. Hurston had to be both insider and outsider in order to receive the valuable information that non-natives found difficult to obtain.

Given that these scholars attempted to revolutionize the discipline of anthropology over fifty years ago, one would expect that native anthropology should have developed into common practice. Unfortunately Deloria and Hurston’s work, like many native scholars since them, has gone unrecognized and unappreciated in the
anthropological mainstream. Monica Russel y Rodriguez in “Confronting Anthropology’s Silencing Praxis: Speaking of from a Chicana Consciousness” explains that anthropology does not think of its natives as the reading audience and denies the native a role as “knowers” or theorists of their own culture. As Russel y Rodriguez demonstrates, scholars of color are “tolerated at best, feared at worst” (1997: 23). Ethnographies are often written by non-natives for non-natives, this often leads to questionable approaches of the ethnographer to exclude the native from their own culture. Chicana feminist Ana Castillo did not include anthropological discourse in her analysis of Chicana/o culture for exactly this reason (Russel y Rodriquez 1997:20). Validating only the etic anthropology ignores the valuable insight found in the emic perspective. There is disturbing gap between studying “Other” cultures and acknowledging the voices of those scholars from those other cultures. Anthropology presents itself as multicultural and open to cultural diversity but it remains “entrenched in a masculinist, heterosexist, and Eurocentric practice” (Russel y Rodriquez 1997: 24).

Franz Boas appreciated Deloria’s assistance but he often valued her role as an informant over her role as a native anthropologists (Finn 1993: 341). Among certain anthropologists, only non-natives can gather an objective, and therefore “true,” account of a community. Their “un-biased” perspective allows them to delve deeper and acquire an acute insight into the inner workings of a community. Emiko Ohnuki Tierney suggests that it is arrogant to believe that in their short stays in the communities anthropologists become accepted as a part of the culture; in reality, the people of the community could be performing for the anthropologists, as is thought to be the case in Margaret Mead’s Samoan observations – the non-native aspect of her study. Native anthropologists are
more apt to being accepted and fit into the community in order to gather the real behaviors of culture and not performed "negotiated realit[ies]" (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984: 585). Not only should the behavior of the community be questioned, but an anthropologist's supposed objectivity should also be suspect. Postmodern linguist Derrida has put into question the very idea that objectivity could be reached. As McGee and Warms state,

He argued that all cultures construct autonomous self-contained worlds of meaning. Thus ethnographic descriptions distort native understandings by forcing them into our own society's ways of conceptualizing the world. In other words, meaning can never be accurately translated. (2000: 517)

Thus Derrida suggests that complete objectivity is impossible given that everyone is conditioned to think a certain way by his or her culture. Sonia Ryang highlights how ridiculous it is to discount native anthropology on the basis of objectivity because "no text escapes the angles of cultural and ideological lenses worn by the author" (Ryang 1997: 31). Regardless of cultural status, the anthropologist always carries his/her epistemological background with them to the field. The level of cultural relativism and objectivity can only be determined by the ethnographer's awareness of their own cultural bias. Given this new perspective on objectivity, native scholars, because they too are taught scientific analysis and methodology, would have to acknowledge their native cultural bias in order to reach similar semi-objectivity. Complete objectivity is not an applicable term for anthropology scholars, be that native or non. Instead of judging others on the bias of objectivity, anthropologists should collaborate on issues dealing with the ever-present role of subjectivity as an influential factor in all anthropological analysis.
Having a native scholar scientifically trained in the methods of gathering and analyzing anthropological data can only help our understanding of the culture. Native scholars offer unique perspectives that might be overlooked or not understood by non-natives. The point at which native anthropologists are recognized for what they can contribute to the field of anthropology will mark the next stage of the discipline, the shedding of yet another layer of cultural understanding.

While native anthropologists offer tremendous advantages to cultural studies, challenges and drawbacks do exist for the anthropologists conducting research in their own community. Merely being from the community does not give the anthropologist authority over this region. As a native scholar, it can be difficult to detach individual ideology so that it is not projected onto the community. The rest of the culture may not always share individual beliefs. Another difficulty in conducting native anthropology is what is often called “going native” or becoming so attached to the community that one develops extreme subjectivity. Maintaining enough distance from the community is imperative to conducting social science research. As Ohnuki-Tierney explains, “if ‘distancing’ is critical for this endeavor, then it follows that native anthropologists face an even more difficult task in creating enough distance between themselves and their own cultures” (1984: 584). Zora Neale Hurston “was unable to put a critical distance between herself and black folk culture;” eventually, this led to an attachment to the culture that did not allow her to create semi-objective analysis of her findings (Garfield 1991: 148). Native anthropologists are in danger of connecting with shared instances or cultural intricacies that later pose a problem in analyzing these experiences as social scientists. Native scholars may also encounter the dangers of assumptions in gathering and
understanding cultural narratives. At times native anthropologists may assume rather than seek further answers for clarity; they can “obscure what ought to be questioned” (Chock 1986: 87). Native scholars may misread stories or information without consciously being aware of their own limitations or presumptions of “knowing” the culture.

Cultural interpretations are always problematic whether they come from the native or non-native perspective; issues arise on both ends for the anthropological spectrum. One should not disregard native anthropology without recognizing its advantages, while at the same time supporters of native scholarship need to confront the difficulties present in conducting such research. Acknowledging both advantages and drawbacks of native anthropology allows for productive dialogue among all scholars. The native versus non-native controversy has long been present but put in terms of emic versus etic where, “Emic data, in anthropology, deal with distinctions that are real and significant to natives of the culture, while etic statements depend on distinctions judged appropriate by scientific observer” (Warner 1999: 117). Before the lines were clearly drawn between the emic non-scientific, non-academic participant of the culture and the etic distant objective observer; now those lines have been blurred and the emic and etic are able to communicate in the scientific sphere. The Emic versus Etic debate should be retired and replaced with an Emic/Etic collaboration. With the advent of native anthropology a dialogue can be created with both kinds of scholars thus producing a more complete analysis of cultural studies.

Being aware of this conversation prepared me for my own attempt at semi-native anthropology. Having known the issues surrounding native anthropology, I was armed with the tools to help me avoid the problems faced by Zora Neale Hurston, Ella Deloria,
and native anthropologists after them. Having a heightened sense of awareness of my own bias made objectivity, to the extent that it was possible in this situation, an available asset. I found that being a native scholar offered advantages and disadvantages to my study. The relationships developed through this research illustrated both positive and negative aspects to the semi-native approach. Actual interviews and participant observations were conducted within a semester, a semester where I was taking fourteen course hours and attempting to graduate. So fieldwork in the true sense of the word was not a possibility. As an undergraduate student my “field” experience, included visits to homes during agreed upon times and brief observations around the town of Denton. The normal time allotted for rapport building in true anthropological field studies was truncated tremendously. This is where my status as a semi-native gave me an advantage; I was able to talk to these women in their native language, relate to them stories about my parents’ migration and my own experience similar to those of their children. My status as a semi-native scholar led to the possibility of relationship building in a brief period of time. I also recognized that these relationships had the potential of producing an attachment that could have inhibited the analysis. I had to constantly reevaluate my role and my observations; only then did I feel that I could accurately research this population. The constant self-evaluations taught me to be conscious as a scholar not just a semi-native. As a student of anthropology, this experience taught me to be aware of, and careful with the benefits and the weakness of conducting research in a familiar community.
In preparing for this project, I began by reading Pierette Hodagnu-Sotelo’s *Gender Transitions* (1994). Hodagnu-Sotelo like Howell (1999), Re Cruz (1998), and Del Castillo (1996) attributed female agency the lack of male presence. The impact that immigration has had on Mexican females has historically focused on the women left behind in Mexico. Once men leave, women bear the responsibilities of both genders, thus reshaping the role of women in society. This reshaping of gender identity results in a rise of female agency. Women learned to balance both gender roles in the absence of a father, brother, or husband. This new empowerment contributes to a change in Mexican gender roles and creates a dynamic that should not be ignored when researching Mexican women and the rise of female agency. Male migration to the United States and the economic downfall of Mexico created an environment in Mexico ripe for ideological challenges to once traditional rigid female roles. Mexican women entered the Mexican workforce to supplement their husband’s earnings or replace men fleeing for work in the United States. This new access to the workforce created a change in gender roles because women were no longer confined to their domestic spheres.

Hodagnu-Sotelo and Jayne Howell suggest that this shift in Mexican society promoted female access to the United States and allowed for an easier transition to the new set of gender roles of the American society. Hodagnu-Sotelo takes into account the developing *maquiladora* industry in the northern border areas of Mexico as a means of attracting single women as workers and contributing to the change in gender dynamics (1994: 31). Howell examines how education and labor of females in rural Oaxaca has
caused a shift in traditional gender roles. They both attribute Mexico’s economy during the 1980s and 1990s as a major influence in the presence of women in the workforce. As a result, the patriarchal tradition in Mexico began to undergo a slow transition. While most gender roles were not challenged, the very fact that women had to work to help their families survive offered a new option for women to provide for the family and home. In this sense women could be accepted as wage earners as long as the economic situation deemed it necessary for the survival of the family. Thus, females that eventually moved to the United States found working a natural step in survival.

Historically Mexican women have encountered other attempts at seeking equality. Perhaps one of the most known of these attempts were the soldaderas or Adelitas that took part in the Mexican Revolution during the early twentieth century. While women were involved in Mexico’s revolution “for the most part, women maintained their traditional roles [...] their age-old role as service providers: cooks, launderers, and concubines” (Tunon Pablos 1987: 88). While some soldaderas did participate in combat, shortly after the revolution cultural patriarchy determined the gender sphere women returned to. Julia Tunon Pablos explains in her book Women in Mexico: A Past Unveiled, “feminism had emerged only recently, whereas the ideological conditioning was ancestral” (1987: 94). But as feminist ideology grew in Mexico and females migrated to an environment that no longer held such fixed gender roles, women began to react by considering their presence in society and within this new milieu.

My research study focused on the cultural and ideological dynamics that women encounter as they are transplanted into new societies. Traditionally the study of Mexican immigration to the United States has focused on the seasonal presence of men. The
Mexican revolution and later Bracero programs stimulated a male exodus in search of stability and prosperity. Mexican men seeking new opportunities were attracted to a job market aimed at them in the United States, thus creating a disproportionate amount of men in the immigrant population. It is then no surprise that research has focused on the camaraderie, labor, identity, survival, and return migration of Mexican men. While it is necessary to understand the male perspective on immigration, the female dynamics of crossing the border should not be overlooked. Although male seasonal migration is still occurring, a steady rise in female immigrants has shifted the dynamics of Mexican immigration to the United States. Leo Chavez and Rebbecca G. Martinez (1996) discuss the new dynamics of immigration post Bracero movements. Included in their analysis is the rising presence of female immigrants, “Currently, many more Mexican women are crossing the border [...] women made up 43.9 percent of legal immigrants from Mexico in 1988” (1996: 29). While male and female immigrants may share a home and perhaps a voyage to the United States, they do not share the same experiences. This rise in the presence of immigrant women demands further research in documenting their narratives, the female voice should be further documented and heard in immigrant, gender, and anthropological literature.

**Importance of Location**

Immigrant literature tends to focus on the U.S./Mexico border regions or those containing a high propensity of immigrant populations. Many times these areas receive such high immigration populations because of personal preference to migrate to already established neighborhoods that offer easy access to Mexico. Such was the case in Elisa
Bastida’s (2001) study in South Texas where women mentioned Dallas, Texas as too far North to survive because it presented too much distance for kinship ties in Mexico.

Denton, Texas presented an excellent opportunity to research Mexican immigration in a town lacking an immense immigrant population but still connected to heavily populated immigrant communities in Fort Worth and Dallas.

As seen through this map, Denton’s nearest borders are those of Oklahoma and Louisiana. While Denton does not run alongside Mexico the existence of a borderland is evident. A border exists between 11:00 am mass at Immaculate Conception and la misa de 12:30 en la Immaculada Concepcion. There is a border between the immigrant buying tomatillos, queso cotija, and choriso at the local Sac-N-Save and the college student searching for cheap beer. I have discovered there is even a border between the female Mexican immigrant who works outside the home, and she who does not and feels enserada and closed off from the community. These dichotomies exist throughout border regions all over the United States and vary extensively according to location. It is precisely this reason why immigrant research in once thought marginal areas to border studies should be conducted. As the border moves further away from the southwest the importance of conducting research outside these saturated areas may become more relevant to regions like the Midwest where a wave of Mexican immigration has recently emerged.

Adaptation and Agency

The female presence is established not just in immigration but in adaptation as well. As immigrants settle into a new environment they encounter a shift in socio-cultural
surroundings. Men and women, although from the same country, experience different challenges in arriving, surviving, and adapting to this new environment. The acculturation process varies from age, sex, and social class. Acculturation in this sense does not assume assimilation, for assimilation requires a complete loss of traditional culture. What I propose allows for immigrants to retain cultural traits from Mexico while at the same time acknowledging how they fit within the new society. Measuring these levels of acculturation and assigning value to them would be problematic. Jacquelyn H. Flaskerud and Gwen Uman in their article “Acculturation and its effect on self-esteem among immigrant Latina women” measured acculturation in terms of mental health. Flakerud and Uman “reported an improvement in psychological well-being related to increased levels of acculturation” (1996: 130). The measured levels of acculturation were based on “language use, preferred media language, and ethnic social relationships” (Flaskerud and Uman 1996:127). This type of analysis could be viewed as antagonistic to immigrant studies as it places high levels of acculturation in a positive light while leaving the positive aspects of cultural retention out of the study. Historically, female Mexican immigrants have experienced cultural rape as American social programs influenced by ethnocentric attempts to assimilate and “help” their status in the United States. George Sanchez in “Go After the Woman: Americanization and the Mexican Immigrant woman, 1915-1929” exposes American historical programs that like Flaskerud and Uman’s study, saw acculturation as a needed process to improve the immigrant’s lifestyle. Sanchez states, “One reaction to Mexican immigration to the United States in the early twentieth century was the establishment of programs aimed at Mexican women explicitly for the purpose of changing their cultural values” (Sanchez 1990: 250). Sanchez’s historic
analysis of these assimilation programs describes the danger in assigning value to acculturation. He explains how research, like that of Flakerud and Uman, could be misused in order to support attempts of cultural annihilation. When dealing with issues of culture and adaptation it is imperative that phenomena be observed and not judged.

Often times comparing Anglo ideals to Mexican can be problematic and too simplistically stated, but recognizing the influential relationship of one to the other could bring about further understanding of the Mexican experience and adaptation phase to the United States. Vicki L. Ruiz in her research on female cannery workers, explains the importance of the canning industry to the female labor market and their rise in agency through this employment. Ruiz acknowledges the white woman’s influence on this newfound agency, “While most young Mexicans maintained their cultural identity, many yearned for more independence, particularly after noticing the more liberal life styles of self-supporting Anglo workers” (Ruiz 1990:265). In this new case Ruiz recognized the Anglo presence in the lives of young Mexican women, but although one method that Mexican women gain agency is through contact with Anglo women, their new identity is certainly not feminists as defined in Anglo terms.

Beatrice M. Pesquera and Denise A. Sigua (1990) discuss the cultural implications present in Chicana feminism. As daughters of Mexican immigrants these Chicanas have a deep-rooted cultural heritage that determines the syncretic nature of their feminist ideology. Pesquera and Segura argue that feminism is appropriated differently in different cultures, as Tunon Pablos pointed out the “ideological conditioning” of different cultures reflects the degree and form in which feminism is adopted. If Chicana feminists are influenced by their cultural heritage, it would follow that Mexican immigrants would
heavily consider their own Mexican cultural identity when constructing their definition of femaleness. Alicia Re Cruz (1998), in her study on migrant women who physically cross cultural borders, examined change among rural women in Cancun, Mexico and Mexican women in Denton, Texas; these women, regardless of what nation they lived in, encountered a sense of empowerment in their new lives. Their female agency came in the form of reacting to their controlling husbands. Re Cruz's subjects, both in Mexico and the United States, found their own female empowerment and adopted it to fit their circumstances. Re Cruz's study reveals that to identify feminism as an Anglo constructed ideology would be too simplistic; instead feminism should be viewed in terms of a spectrum that allows for female cultural adaptations from around the world. When studying Mexican women in the United States it is important to keep this feminist spectrum in perspective; however, Ruiz' recognition of external influence should also be taken into account. As Re Cruz pointed out, "Maya immigrant women in Cancun and Mexican immigrant women in Denton activate a cultural brokerage as a mechanism to adapt to the new institutional and social context" (1998: 92). In the United States, and more so in regions not saturated by immigration, the Anglo community predominantly influences the institutional social context, but does the Anglo community necessarily determine the lives of Mexican immigrants? According to Hondagnu-Sotelo (1994), "Changes in Mexican immigrant families' gender relations do not result from any 'modernizing' Anglo influences or acculturation process" (1994: 195). Hondagnu-Sotelo's study, conducted in Northern California, found that immigrant families have no direct contact to the Anglo community and are thus not influenced and do not encounter any acculturation or social change form them. While gender constructs are not solely
changed by Anglo feminists acculturation, contact does exist in the very fact that immigrants no longer live within their country. Regardless if a community is heavily populated by an immigrant group, indirect contact exists in the form of friends, employer’s, children and the media; these sources must not be discounted in this type of analysis. In fact in an article later published by Hondagnu-Sotelo (1999), she cites other studies that focus on “how children and youth are variously involved in migration projects, and they do so with an eye on gender” (Hondagnu-Sotelo 1999: 572). She recognized the child’s role in both migration and gender, and wouldn’t the children at some point during their education, have contact with Anglo students and Anglo educators. It seems that Hondagnu-Sotelo was reacting against acculturation studies, like those of Flaskerud and Uman, that value acculturation and dismiss traditional cultural contributions to identity of an individual. Another issue exists with the way feminist ideology is defined in association with Anglo women only. My research aims at redefining feminism by understanding the roles of Mexican women through their own perspective of femaleness within Greater Mexico as well as identifying any perceived ideological changes in crossing that cultural border.

The Inductive Deductive Paradox

Approaching social sciences with a predetermined agenda can prove problematic to the gathering and analysis of research. In general anthropologists use inductive reasoning in their cultural research. This allows the anthropologist to distance their
Hondagnu-Sotelo’s claims of non-Anglo contact in the immigrant community. My focus was moving away from researching female Mexican immigrants and moving toward proving Hondagnu-Sotelo wrong. With the help of my thesis committee I grew to understand that I had to release my personal opinions and allow the community to speak for itself.

### Female Mexican Immigrants in Denton, Texas

Denton, Texas lies just North of the cities of Dallas and Fort Worth, connecting to these two cities through interstate 35 West and East. The map shows the distribution of the participants with the red stars signifying the location of the women in the study and the housing dynamics of certain clusters of residents. The first cluster, Northwest Denton, is known to residents of Denton as cement city due to the amount of apartment complexes in the area. The second cluster lies in South Denton, which contains many low-income families as well as the city’s cemetery. The third cluster, Southeast Denton, represents the mobile home communities well hidden in the periphery of the city. One family lived on the far Northeast side of Denton in the ranch bungalow rented out to ranch hands. These areas present the social and economic stratification of the city but as well as show how some of these clusters foster seclusion and anonymity from the rest of the city’s residents.

Research was conducted by contacts made with an educational program aimed at giving lower income mothers weekly teaching lessons to aid in the mental development
of their preschool aged children. I began my observations by visiting homes with
Adriana, the woman who taught the mothers their weekly lessons. I went on one to two
lessons with her in order to allow the women to get to know me in the presence of
Adriana, a person they trusted and knew for at least a year. I kept a journal to document
my initial observations, kinship maps, Adriana’s commentary, and the maps of the homes
I visited. I was introduced to the women as a friend of Adriana’s who was conducting
research on the female of identity of Mexican women in the United States. Although all
these women had husbands or live in boyfriends I decided to concentrate only on the
female narratives. Hondagnu-Sotelo(1999) suggests that, “The ‘immigrant woman only’
approach has also retarded our understanding of how gender as a social system
contextualizes migration process for all immigrants” (1999: 565). Under the confines of
my research including the male’s perspective would have to high of an endeavor to
undertake. With the limited time allotted for the research it was already difficult enough
to build relationships with the females to foster candid responses, even then hesitance did
occur. My role as young, single, Chicana proved to be a disadvantage at times as older
women felt awkward speaking to me as their peer. This same awkwardness would have
been heightened when speaking to men. Out of all the women interviewed only one of
their husband ever had a conversation with me. I would greet the men and attempt at
making conversation but they would immediately ignore my attempts. I recognized my
limitations as a female researcher and did not push the cultural boundaries.

After initial contact I waited a week to call them and make sure they were still
willing to be interviewed, we then set up a time when they would be available for my
visit. The first interview consisted of questions were structured to reveal a basic
introduction to their lives. I began by asking them about their age, marital status, family, and length of time spent in the United States. I then asked them to elaborate on their life in Mexico, their rural or urban background, family life prior to and after marriage and children, initial reasons for migration, and their life since moving to the United States. The second interviews focused more on women’s specific views on how they negotiated femaleness through work, family, and individual activity. I sought specific clarifications on the life stories from their first interview as well as asked them new questions about their lives in the United States. I began by asking them to elaborate on their family life prior to marriage to explain source of the initial formation of gender roles. Then I sought specifics about the surrounding society to understand how their environment could have influenced their gender identity. I wanted to understand how both family and society affected their female identity. I felt I had to understand their past in Mexico in order to understand their present personalities in the United States. I followed by asking them about their employment both in Mexico and here, who they worked for, what they did, length of time working, and what they perceived as the social/familial implications of working, what they did with their money and who managed the household income. The last topic covered in the second interviews focused on possibility of a perceived change in moving to and living in the United States and whether they perceived a difference in their ideology.

I should mention that while I initially had a population of twelve women to interview that number dwindled to nine for the first interviews and fell to five for the second interviews. Adriana had warned me that she constantly had these women cancel lessons, I unfortunately encountered the same problem. These cancellations became a
major problem because I only had three months to gather information. Hondagnu-Sotelo (1993) relates some of the same issues in her own research, “the qualitative methods I chose, in-depth interviews and participant-observation, are especially intrusive and disruptive” (1993: 56). Anthropological research is defined by this “intrusive” participant observation and although I had studied the importance of conducting research in this fashion I was not prepared for the rejection. I continued to reschedule interviews only for them to be canceled over and over again. Eventually I decided to focus on the five who had remained consistent with their availability. Of those five only one was not able to make the final third interview, which consisted of me spending at least half the day with them, observing their daily routines, having conversations rather than structured interviews and taking pictures. In the following analysis I’ve decided to include those five who routinely welcomed me into their homes and allowed me to scratch the service of conducting anthropological research.

Marisela was originally from Zelaya, Guanajuato, an urban city in the midsection of Mexico. Her mother, having grown up in a very traditional gender fixed household, made sure Marisela and her brother grew up equally. From a young age Marisela’s brother was taught to have the same household responsibilities as his sister; however, this egalitarianism as the children got older and Marisela was influenced to get married and her brother was expected to work. This pressure to marry resulted in Marisela’s abusive relationships with her husband. She eventually left him and attempted to work and raise her children as a single mother in Mexico. While she attempted to succeed without her husband he still harassed both her and her children, fear of her husband ultimately led to
her migration to the United States. I asked her to elaborate on being married and overcoming an abusive relationship, she said,

[In Mexico] you get married, you choose him and you stick it out. If you get I divorced [...] people think you just wanted liberty and not matrimony or safety. I feared him, there is no worse submission than fear. Fear is worse than economic dependence. That’s why Mexico is so atrasado (behind), because no one questions unfair traditions. I’ve learned to not support someone mistreating me and not to depend on a man economically or for happiness. Women are made to dream of the white dress not the career or the profession but getting married [...] marriage defines who you are.

Upon arrival to the United States she lived with an Anglo woman who taught her English and helped her adapt. Marisela worked as a domestic worker in this home but to her this was not a job but a friendship, she offered her home to her and Marisela would clean up on occasion. When I asked Marisela if there were any differences in the way women were treated here Marisela responded with,

Mexican society judges you too much. Depending on dress and makeup you might be compared to a prostitute. Men that come from [Mexico] will disrespect women on the street but the women here don’t put up with it. It is different here, a female is worth something, you have to respect her. Some will change and say “Donde llegas has lo que veas” (which translates roughly to when in Rome do as the Romans). But sometimes both women and men come here with their ideas from over there and they don’t accept it, they continue believing that the woman was born to obey the husband.
Currently Marisela lives with the father of her infant daughter. She stated feeling guilty for not spending enough time with her children in Mexico so now she looks after her friends' children in her home in order to earn money and stay home with her children. She owns her own car and keeps the money that she earns. She said that she maintains financial independence from her boyfriend because she never wants to depend on a man again. The last question of the last interview dealt with her views on feminism, “Feminists believe they can do anything as good as a man, that they have the same derechos (rights) that men do.” I asker her if she considered herself a feminist, she seemed hesitant at first and then said, “Well I believe all those things and have since Mexico.” I wondered if these would be the responses I would get from other women so I asked Marisela if she believed her views were common in Mexico, she clarified and said no, that perhaps it was living through an abusive husband that made her this way but she knew that her feminist ideology was not shared among most Mexican women.

My next participant was Carmen. She received her degree in accounting in San Luis Potosi, Mexico. In fact while she was in school she lived in a dorm type atmosphere away from her parents but her brother lived in the adjoining men’s dorms. She worked in her career before and after getting married but she quit when her children were born. Her and her husband came here because even though both had degrees Mexico’s economy did not offer much opportunity for either of them, now Carmen is a domestic worker in an Anglo home. The family offsets their income by belonging to what they call a “business investment” but in actuality is a
pyramid organization. A positive aspect of this "business" is that it offers an excellent support group for Carmen and her family. In the business she has learned to keep a positive aspect and not just imagine her dreams but visualize. Her poster is titled "Our dreams" and depicts the family's dreams for the future. It includes money, cars, a home.

Prior to getting the home they live in now they lived in apartments where their neighbors were all Anglo. She said she even felt it was easier to make friends with people that were different, like Anglos as oppose to Latinos. She said the majority of Latinos that migrate are from small towns and have so much here that they change, but she was a professional and was used to living this way. According to Carmen Latinos are very negative people, she prefers to visit with the Latinos from her business because they are positive about their economic future. It is clear that Carmen's urban, middle class, college educated background has influenced her experiences in the United States.

At home Carmen creates a shift in gender roles. "Do it for the picture" she tells her husband. On my visits she said her husband helps around the house if he wants to, he never wants to. So when I was taking pictures she was half joking and half serious when she asked him to do the dishes. We all had a good laugh when I actually took the picture. When I asked Carmen about being a woman in Mexico she said:

It's easy to be a woman because you can acquire anything, there's never been a problem. Limits, I don't think so. Although they say we are the weaker
sex, but that's not true. The whole world says we're weak perhaps because we cry, were sentimental but as workers as fighters we can do it.

Carmen did not feel that her status as women impeded her in anyway, nor did it for any other women in Mexico. Carmen was one of the participants I was closest to; I babysat her children a few times and went with her to one of the “business” meetings. I noticed that Carmen had a unique perspective to life as a woman. She had higher access to education in Mexico and living in a two-income household allowed her to have similar luxuries to those offered here in the United States. Carmen also had the opportunity to visit the United States several times before moving, her sister was already living in the area and she had some uncles in Chicago. Although Carmen had one of the best opportunities to become acculturated and gain higher “psychological well being” according to the Flaskerud and Uman study, she still worried tremendously about her children and availability of employment.

Rosa had a completely different perspective than Carmen. Originally from Ciudad Hidalgo, Michoacan, a rural area in Mexico, Rosa did not have the opportunity to study to the extent that Carmen did which affected her perception of the United States. Her husband had been working in the U.S. for six months when he asked Rosa to come with the kids. At first she was very afraid of migrating, and once arriving wanted to return. Now that she has grown accustomed to her new life in the United States she fears returning: “I have gained a lot here, I have learned to be a better mother to help educate my children and have an active role in their lives. In Mexico you’re not taught how to help your children develop.” She values the organizations that have helped her with school supplies, Christmas presents, and doctor visits for her children, “Here people want to see
you succeed, in Mexico your all alone, no one cares if you need help, over there everyone
only cares about themselves.”

Rosa wants to work and earn money by doing cross-stitch and crochet. She hopes
to save money on her own so that she could stay if husband wants to leave. I asked her
about being a woman in Mexico and she said:

Being a woman is hard because there are
so many things you want to do but cant
because being a woman they wont give
you the opportunity. You have to stay in
the work assigned to women like domestic
work or restaurants, as long as you don’t challenge domestic routine. And then
even if you work people think your working just for fun not for necessity.

I followed by asking her what life was like for women in the United States:

You learn here to define yourself, open your eyes. To know that you don’t have to
do everything he says, that’s where the marriage problems come from. For men
they say that one changes a lot but in reality we just learn to value other things. If
it’s a sacrifice it’s a sacrifice to improve.

Rosa attempted to negotiate her place as a female in the family. She mentioned not giving
the money she would earn to her husband because she, like Marisela, craved
independence. She had just seen her cousin leave his wife with and eight children
penniless and feared the same would happen to her. She knows that she has more of an
opportunity to survive as a single mother here
than in Mexico. Rosa had worked outside the
home while still in Mexico but she doesn’t consider that a viable answer now, “I sometimes want to work but my husband tells me that my children will change and in that regard I agree [...] my point of view is that other people won’t take care of my children the way I would, so why should I work and take the time from being with my boys.” Rosa’s role as a mother is extremely important to her. I asked her if once children were born would she like to work and she thought it would be impossible without knowing the language. To Rosa her only choice right now is to attempt to sell her cross-stitch and needle point, eventually she would like to learn English and give her children an opportunity at a better life in the United States.

Elvia also came from a rural background, Sauses, Zacatecas, but had a completely different experience in her small ranch town. Her father was a school teacher, he had lost his mother at a young age and handled both gender responsibilities at a young age. Given their father’s background all of Elvia’s siblings were taught to exist in both gender spheres, the boys did the dishes and Elvia handled feeding the animals and plowing the small plot of land they owned. Elvia recalled that unlike the other girls in her town who had to be chaperoned, her father emphasized trust and taught them to be responsible for themselves. Elvia’s brother was the first to move to the United States, she followed shortly while she was still single and worked two jobs while also attending school. When she married her husband did not approve of her working. I asked her how she felt about this and she said, “Before getting married I worked two jobs, he told me to stop. He was
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he jealous kind and was educated differently.” She eventually convinced her husband to allow her to work, by explaining to him that she could work the help him, that it wasn’t fare to carry the burden on his own. So she began working at night after her husband arrives from work, but during the day Elvia, like Marisela, watches children. She takes care of her niece and nephew, her own two children, and sometimes other friends drop off their children while they go to work. Taking care of these children in the day and working at night leaves Elvia hardly any time for herself. Her days begin at seven in the morning as the children are dropped off and ends at ten at night when she gets home from cleaning office buildings. Eating, playing, and getting ready for school is all done in shifts in Elvia’s home. In her spare time Elvia also cooks pasteles de tres leches (a delicious moist cake) to make some extra money. She said that baking is more like a hobby to her and she loves making them.

Elvia said she wouldn’t know what to do with the time if she didn’t work. She had been working since she finished secundaria (junior high school) to help her family, as the second oldest it was her and her brother’s responsibility to help their other siblings have a better life. She is very proud of her younger brother and sister who are working on the bachelor’s degree in Mexico and says that she would rather sacrifice her own education to give her other siblings the opportunities she didn’t have. Because she has worked most her life Elvia did not see a problem with balancing children with work. When I asked her
about feminism she wasn’t sure what I meant by the term, rather than feed her answers I
decided to forego the question altogether.

Finally there is Adriana, the woman who introduced me and helped me
tremendously with my research. She grew up in the city where Carmen went away to
school, San Luis Potosi. She got her degree and
had career as a chemist before getting married and
moving to the United States. Once arriving in the
United States and having her two children she
taught herself how to drive and got heavily
involved in church to occupy her time. Her involvement in the local Catholic Church
brought about the first child care and English classes for the Spanish speaking
congregation. Through her job as instructor for the education program that all the women
in my study participate in she recognized the social class differences in living and
adapting to the United States, and unlike Carmen, Adriana understood the struggle
migrants from lower socio-economic backgrounds face in the United States. I asked her
about her experience in balancing her present career with family,

I think it is possible to have a balance but it will cost some sacrifices. Like I
educated my old man. Francisco when he got married he [had] a machista
backward Mexican ideology that made him believe that the women stays at home
and does what the man tells her, she doesn’t challenge him. The sacrifice has been
to educate him. I did by having the tenacity to never give up and through love and
carino. It’s the only way of making him change through lots of love, patience, and
education so he knows that what your doing is right and not a tantrum. It has been hard.

Given that Adriana had a career in Mexico and was planning to return to school to receive a degree in social work I was curious to what she had to say about feminism. I was not disappointed.,

In Mexico feminists are women who get left behind because they are so feminist that no one gets near them and they stay single supposedly. But for me the feminist idea is like me that I’m who I am, the first thing is to develop as a person then as a woman. Mexico thinks feminism means you insult men and tell them off, well for me that’s not feminism. In Mexico they think of feminists as those who don’t put up with men, don’t let men manipulate them, govern them, they want their rights but if you don’t win them fairly you’ll never have them. Being a feminist is not to go against the current or go against men, it’s to accept your own personality to achieve your goals on your own, to say I’m going to work in this and I’m going to accomplish it. In a company if there has never been a female boss then there will be because I’m capable of doing it, to demand respect of oneself.

Conducting this research has put in an interesting position to evaluate my position and definition as a feminist. The more I delved into these interviews the more my definitions became blurred. It was fitting that Adriana was my last interview, her definition of feminist ideology did what I had been struggling to do since the onset of this research. Adriana put into words not just my feelings toward feminism but she somehow found a way to define each female in my study in those terms. Feminism can and should be
thought of as that short phrase, “to demand respect of oneself.” In that sense the feminist agenda could be viewed all over the world, in regions with or without Anglo contact.

**Results of the Research**

I observed some common themes among the woman in the study that should be noted. As far as employment is concerned, those women that did work did so during a time that did not interfere to what they perceived as their role as mother. As domestic workers they worked during the time their children were in school. Some women rearranged their work schedule to correlate with when their husband would be home to take care of the children. As noted by Marisela and Elvia, and Rosa some women opted to work out of their homes so they didn’t leave their children.

Immigrants risk their lives and futures by coming to this country and they do in the name of progress; immigrants arrive seeking opportunity, they already belief that they can and will improve their lives. The women that took part in this educational program aimed at improving the education of their children. This gave them an active role in their children’s education. The women gained a different type of power in this arrangement; they knew that by educating their children they were educating themselves. This opportunity to be actively involved in their child’s education gave them a sense of worth that complimented their role as mother and wife. The aspiration to apply and continue their dedication in the program shows their own desire to enrich their lives and the lives of their children.
These women all shared a personality trait that fostered change and improvement regardless of Anglo contact; however, whether this personality trait would have been fostered some place other than the United States still remains a question. Would have Rosa encountered the self worth and confidence to survive without her husband in the restrictive rural area they lived in, we may never know. What can be answered is that Anglo contact and subsequent change varies with regard to where research is conducted. Some immigrants come with feminist ideals already emplaced while others perhaps adapt here or find that their sense of worth is more accepted here. The difference depends on what borderland is being studied and where the immigrant population is migrating from.
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