

Article

# **NECESIDADES Y PROBLEMAS: IMMIGRANT LATINA VERNACULARS OF BELONGING, COALITION, & CITIZENSHIP IN SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA**

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## **Abstract**

*This essay is based on the reflections and analyses of 10 Latina immigrant grassroots community members who participated in a Chinese-Latino women's grassroots leadership development project in San Francisco in 1996. The focus of this "partial ethnography" is on what the Latina participants understood as the significance of their experiences of sustained and substantive dialogue with Chinese immigrant women in these workshops. The author argues that the language of problemas, necesidades, and convivencia that Latina participants used in describing the workshops drew on both North American and Latin American vernaculars of citizenship to produce new ideas about belonging, entitlement, and political engagement.*

## **Keywords**

cultural citizenship; gender; racialization; community organizing; California



On an unusually fogless Saturday morning in the late spring of 1996, a van loaded with seven women and small children circled a busy block in San Francisco's Chinatown, failing to find a coveted on-street parking spot. The neighborhood was bustling already at 9 am with Chinese American families arriving from outer city districts and suburbs to do their weekly grocery shopping and/or extended family visits. The van finally double-parked in front of the enormous concrete cube of a 1970s-era public housing complex. The passengers unloaded and the sound of their Spanish conversations soon joined the English and Cantonese already heard at high volume on the street. Arriving late after a cross-town trip from the Latino Mission District, the women moved quickly inside the complex to the housing project's community meeting room, dropping their children in an older multipurpose room where childcare was provided. More than a dozen other women were already there, sitting around a u-shaped table with headphones on, trying hard to help volunteer interpreters figure out how to broadcast Cantonese and Spanish translation to the appropriate participants. The sponsoring community organizations' staff welcomed everyone, and asked the late arrivals to introduce themselves to the group. Thus began a summer-long workshop series on cross-cultural immigrant women's organizing, as well as my own introduction to the workshop participants as their volunteer vanpool driver, Spanish-English interpreter, and anthropologist.

This essay is based on the reflections and analyses of the 10 Latina<sup>1</sup> immigrant grassroots members of *Mujeres Unidas y Activas*, the community organization who co-sponsored this leadership development program with the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA). It presents one rendition of a partial story of complex multiethnic, multilingual, and often faltering struggles to connect across ethnic and linguistic lines.<sup>2</sup> The focus of this essay is on how these participants related their experiences of sustained and substantive dialogue with their Chinese immigrant counterparts in the workshops to their own growing sense of belonging and entitlement in the US. It reflects points of resonance among the participants' individual reflections on their experiences together, as well as what they reported that this *convivencia*, or sharing of time and experiences, meant to them and to their sense of their own position and rights in the United States.

### Community leadership development and new ideas of citizenship

*Mujeres Unidas y Activas* ("Mujeres Unidas") is a grassroots women's organization that was founded in 1990 in San Francisco's Mission District (Moore, 1995). By 1996, *Mujeres Unidas* had over 200 Latin American immigrant members, principally from Mexico and Central America.<sup>3</sup> Participants from the organization in the leadership workshops ranged in age from

1 In this essay, I use the term Latina (rather than Latin American) because the women cited in this essay referred to themselves collectively as *latinas* or individually in terms of their own nationality (mexicana, salvadoreña, ecuatoriana).

2 The objective here is neither to evaluate the content or efficacy of the leadership development project, the role of philanthropic foundations in funding it, nor to reflect comparatively on the Chinese and Latina participants' experiences. The larger ethnographic pro-

ject of which this research is a part was based in the *Mujeres Unidas y Activas* organization (1996–1999). It was in the context of sustained relationships with and accountability to that organization that I developed my methods, priorities, and conclusions. A very rich analysis could result from a very different kind of comparative consideration of both groups of women’s narratives, as well as from considering the Chinese participants’ stories on their own terms.

3 The organization now also has a staffed office and women’s group in Oakland’s Fruitvale neighborhood.

4 CPA later drew on the model of these workshops to develop a community leadership program for immigrant Chinese and Latino youth jointly organized with People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights (PODER). The Common Roots youth leadership program is now in its sixth year (Gordon Mar, CPA Executive Director, personal communication, 1/26/04).

early 20s to late 40s, and had arrived anywhere from 1 to 20 years prior to their participation in these workshops. All had children and most worked at least part-time outside the home, in restaurants, hotels, garment factories, and in one case, in her family’s own small business. Participants were required to have been active participants in *Mujeres Unidas* for more than 6 months in order to participate, and they received a small stipend. CPA had a large and active membership base particularly in the areas of housing, immigrant labor, and youth organizing. It was almost two decades older as an organization than *Mujeres Unidas*, but CPA members hoped that the collaborative workshops would help develop its core of immigrant women leaders, as well as attract new women members.<sup>4</sup>

Few of the participants spoke any English, so the weekly, day-long workshops were carried out through simultaneous translation (Spanish, English and Cantonese) via headphones during the three months of workshops and the following two months of the joint campaign. All of the organizers, participants, and presenters were Chinese and Latin American immigrant women except for one Chinese-American male staff member, two US-born Latina staff, and myself, a US-born white volunteer. The initial plan was to alternate weekly meetings – one week in the Latino Mission district and the next in Chinatown – but the housing project’s meeting space proved congenial, and the group ended up meeting only twice in the Mission that summer.

In interviews following the completion of the workshops, participants from *Mujeres Unidas* spoke of the difficulties raised by the multilingual and cross-cultural nature of the workshops, and of the powerful influence of this process on their ideas about their position and rights in the US. From these interviews emerged a sense of shared citizenship – not “in spite of” their differences with one another, but rather because of a deepened understanding of both their shared and divergent interests, values and experiences and “a politics which recognizes rather than represses difference” (Young, 1990, 10)

Understood as new terms of citizenship, *convivencia*, *problemas y necesidades* were more than strategic bases for building coalition among different interest groups. These concepts broaden the domain of political belonging and entitlement from strictly institutional, political and economic realms to include the importance of human relationships, subjectivity, and feelings. This essay argues that these women’s contributions are central to understanding contemporary US citizenship theory and practice in local communities. Although none of these women were US citizens, and only two were eligible for naturalization, the ways they spoke about their sense of belonging and exclusion were grassroots expressions of “cultural citizenship” rooted in gendered experiences of encounter with difference in urban US life (Benmayor *et al.*, 1992; Pratt, 1993; Rosaldo, 1994; Flores and Benmayor, 1997).

Women expressed complex ideas about identity, coalition, and community mobilization arising from their experiences with the women they usually

referred to in the third person as *las chinas*. They emphasized the importance of *convivencia*, or getting to know one another by spending time, talking, and doing things together, as well as learning more about their shared collective concerns and experiences. In particular, *Mujeres Unidas* members spoke about shared *problemas* (problems), *necesidades* (needs), and the knowledge they had acquired about the role of race and immigration in US history. This time spent together and heightened awareness of shared historical and contemporary experiences led women to describe “interconnected histories that interact and mutually shape one another,” offering a new version of the collective national story as constituted in and between, rather than alongside, “excluded and marginalized histories” (Rosaldo, 1996, 1041).

Citizenship and immigration status continue to be primary legal and political referents in the US citizenship studies in North America and Europe since World War II which have focused largely on formal definitions and expressions of citizenship, such as how the state defines and assigns certain rights to various citizen-subjects (Marshall, 1964). However, near the end of the century, the combined effects of economic and political globalization, devolution of industrial welfare states, and post-colonial civil/human rights and feminist movements led to more processual and practice-oriented approaches to understanding citizenship (Brubaker, 1989; Taylor, 1989; Turner, 1990, 1993; Somers, 1993). Some political philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists sought out new ideas about citizenship based on the experiences of those historically excluded from either formal or substantive “first-class” status. The subject positions theorized in this literature include women (Barbalet, 1988; Pateman, 1989; Ann Shola Orloff, 1993; Walby, 1994; Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1994; Lister, 1997; Ann Orloff, 1996), people of color and diasporic communities (Hall and Held, 1990; Dagnino, 1994; Rosaldo, 1994; Ong, 1996; Flores and Benmayor, 1997; De Genova and Ramos-Zayas, 2003), lesbians and gays (Herrell, 1996; Berlant, 1997; Bell and Binnie, 2000), and transnational migrants (Brubaker, 1989; Shklar, 1991; Mouffe, 1992; Soysal, 1994; Clarke, 1996; Bhabha, 1998; Yuval-Davis, 1999; Goldring, 2001). In some cases, renewed academic concern with citizenship focused on liberal defenses of inclusion (Kymlicka, 2001), while others promised more radical challenges to global political economic systems of inequality (Lowe, 1996, 33).

As this burgeoning literature reveals, citizenship is about more than the bundle of rights and obligations to which newly arrived or emergent citizen-groups hope to gain full access. Narrow legal-juridical definitions obscure the multiplicity of ways in which many people, including Latino/as of diverse nationalities and immigration statuses, act to claim their rights as entitled political subjects in the United States. This essay offers ethnographic consideration of forms and practices of citizenship articulated by immigrant Latina grassroots activists involved in a community project in California in the

1990s. This is not intended as a “view from the margins,” but rather a recentering of thinking about citizenship based on the experiences and analyses of non-citizen women deeply concerned with issues of political, social and cultural membership in US society. In addition to individuals’ relationships to nation-states, such an approach to citizenship includes issues of tensions and difference within and between local communities, social movements, religious groups, workplaces, households, and intimate relationships.

### Xenophobia and 1990s California

The cross-cultural women’s leadership training project I observed in 1996 occurred in the midst of a powerful backlash against years of efforts by immigrants and people of color in California to claim full civil and political status as well as public benefits of social citizenship (Marshall, 1950; Hall and Held, 1990). The 1990s were characterized by dismantling of welfare states and tightened immigrant controls in the north along with structural adjustment policies that shrank worker and peasant economic opportunity as well as governmental services in the south. Global social and structural tensions played out in what were particularly virulent anti-immigrant and anti-Latino terms in California. Anti-immigrant political forces gained momentum when voters passed three statewide ballot initiatives aimed at marginalizing immigrants and people of color in the state. Proposition 187, the “Save our State Initiative” passed in 1994, blamed and punished undocumented immigrants for the state’s economic and political problems. By blocking access to public health, education, and social services for “suspected” undocumented immigrants, Proposition 187 supporters argued, the proposition could stem the tide of Latin American immigration altogether.<sup>5</sup> In one “Letter to the Editor” in *The New York Times*, the campaign media director for Proposition 187 promoted their agenda on the national stage, declaring California on the verge of a *reconquista* from the south.

5 Inda (2002) has analyzed the particular significance of Mexican immigrant women and their reproductive health in the xenophobic discourse of this period in California.

Proposition 187 is...a logical step toward saving California from economic ruin. Illegal aliens collect welfare payments through post office boxes in San Ysidro, just a 15 minute walk from Mexico. They receive free medical care and flood schools with non-English speaking students. By flooding the state with 2 million illegal aliens to date, and increasing that figure each of the following 10 years, Mexicans in California would number 15 million to 20 million by 2004. During those 10 years about 5 million to 8 million Californians would have emigrated to other states. If these trends continued, a Mexico-controlled California could vote to establish Spanish as the sole language of California, 10 million more English-speaking Californians could flee, and there could be a statewide vote to leave the Union and annex California to Mexico (Hayes, 1994).

Proposition 187 was enjoined by the courts and never took effect, but it did set the political tone for the rest of the decade, when additional regressive ballot initiatives were passed and enforced at the state level. At the same time, national welfare and immigration “reforms” sought further to exclude poor people and immigrants from basic entitlements at the national level. This amplified the immigrants’ usual anxieties about claiming rights and services, while additional anti-immigrant ballot initiatives were also passed and enforced. In 1996, supporters of Proposition 209 challenged the social, educational, and economic claims for equity of Latinos, African Americans, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders, including many immigrants. Proposition 209 eliminated state governmental affirmative action programs and overturned affirmative action at the University of California, the country’s largest public university system.<sup>6</sup> In 1998, Silicon Valley entrepreneur Ron Unz, with no previous interest or experience in educational issues, bankrolled the successful Proposition 227 that eliminated bilingual education in many public school districts.

According to the women I worked with in this research, the impact of these measures on immigrant lives and subjectivity was profound. In the words of one *Mujeres Unidas* member, “It is a psychological war against immigrants.”<sup>7</sup> Community groups were among the few spaces where many felt safe speaking out about the political climate. The 63% of Latino voters in California who opposed Proposition 227 recognized the attacks on bilingual education as more than a civil disagreement over how to best educate immigrant children. Proposition 227 was really “about re-institutionalizing discrimination and legalizing the deprivation of knowledge and educational opportunity. This proposition sanctions the rejection of Latino culture and our language in society and in the public schools” (Andrade, 1998).<sup>8</sup> These various California ballot initiatives and campaigns were widely perceived as direct attacks on Latino, immigrant, and non-white cultural, political, and social citizenship.

### ***Conviviendo en el barrio chino: the immigrant women’s leadership project***

It was in this highly fraught and tense context that *Mujeres Unidas* and CPA initiated a joint project to build the leadership skills of rank and file immigrant women members of their respective organizations.<sup>9</sup> The focus on the working class, cross-racial concerns of immigrant women, and on the centrality of collective political struggle, signaled the uniquely ambitious character of this project. The two community groups hoped to develop women’s organizational and political skills and to carry out joint community outreach and educational campaigns on topics the participants identified as personal and community priorities. This group of women wanted to understand the welfare and immigration reform legislation that was being considered in Congress that summer. They hoped to learn to both explain the new policies to other affected

6 The sponsor of Proposition 209, University of California regent Ward Connerly, sponsored yet another initiative campaign in 2003, “The Racial Privacy Initiative,” to eliminate all governmental data collection or monitoring based on race.

7 “Es una guerra psicológica en contra de los inmigrantes.”

8 Since California’s initiative passed, similar Unz-initiatives have passed in Arizona and Massachusetts, and one was defeated in Colorado.

9 All participants are referred to here by pseudonyms, but the organizations are referred to by their actual names.

community members, and also to mitigate as much as possible the local impact by gaining commitments of support from local officials and service providers.

The main point of the leadership training was to facilitate exchange between immigrant women across the significant divides of language, culture, age, immigration status, economic, and educational backgrounds. In the spirit of coalition-building for direct, joint political action around issues of shared concern, the participants had already spent time prior to the start of the summer workshops considering themes such as domestic and youth violence, education, and housing. They had agreed that they wanted the sessions to help them understand pending federal immigration and welfare reform legislation.

Each week's session covered a particular topic or issue related to the facts of the immigration and welfare reform legislation and community organizing. One week the activities and discussion focused on getting to know one another, with each woman designing, drawing, and presenting a graphic representation of herself, her nationality, her family, and her immigration experience with the group. Local school district officials and service agency staff people were invited to speak about their work. Labor organizers and community educators led sessions on the basics of grassroots organizing, and how welfare and immigration "reform" legislation worked its way through local, state and federal levels of government. One week a community agency's psychologist led a discussion on "self-esteem" and what it meant for the participants to have, develop, or project a positive sense of themselves. In another session, a community educator offered a full-day workshop covering American ethnic/immigration/racial history from conquest, annexation of Mexico, slavery, 19th and 20th century immigration waves, and the African American civil rights movement. These sessions on self-esteem, immigration, and civil rights history stood out in women's later reflections on their experiences in the workshops.

### ***Necesidades: dignity, coalition and citizenship***

The experience of working together in these workshops taught women about immigration history, legislation, and one another's families and life stories. Many women cited this new knowledge and experience as prompting them to strengthen their claims for social belonging and membership in the US. They based these claims on the notion that marginalization, organization and activism for inclusion are experiences shared by many current US citizens or their ancestors. *Mujeres Unidas* members cited the process of struggle for citizenship rights itself as the basis for claims for their rightful place in US society. They spoke of the importance of learning about US immigration history as well as getting to know women whom they had previously deemed totally different from themselves in reformulating their sense of their position and rights in this country.

Caridad Ríos was a 40-year-old native of Lake Chapala in Jalisco, Mexico who had lived in the US for more than 20 years at the time of the leadership training. She had worked as a unionized hotel room cleaner and in the garment industry in San Francisco during most of these years and had three children whom she was raising alone. Reflecting on her experiences after the final workshop of the summer, Caridad said she had been impressed by how much the two groups of women had in common. She volunteered that, prior to this experience, she had had little contact with Chinese people, and had ridiculed their language when she heard it. After the workshops, she instead focuses on what they have in common.<sup>10</sup>

One knows that, well, we have almost the same needs and worries. They also have children, work a lot, and want the best for their children, like us. They are mothers with families, as are we. Like us, they are hardworking and honest people.

Caridad's emphasis on the women's shared *necesidades* (needs) was a significant and common theme throughout the narratives of the Latina participants. These needs included quality education, healthcare, and housing for their children and themselves, as well as equality of opportunity for their own economic survival and a political voice for themselves, their families, and other community members. The discourse of *necesidades*, instrumental support, and public services also reflected Latin American popular discourses about citizenship and human dignity (Díaz-Barriga, 1996, 2000). Although Caridad had not participated in organizing in Mexico, she came to the US with a consciousness of the traditions of Mexican urban popular movements' demands of the state for basic social and infrastructural services such as pavement, water, and electricity. These are among the most common and powerful of grassroots expressions of citizenship and constitute political arenas in which women play prominent roles.<sup>11</sup> None of the women I interviewed reported participating in such urban movements themselves in their countries of origin. However, they apparently agreed with the idea that there is a significant relationship between self-respect, having one's dignity recognized by others, both privately and publicly, and state accountability for providing all people living under its authority basic human services.

In the US, where basic state-provided infrastructure such as water and pavement is more ubiquitous than in Latin America, the citizenship discourse of *necesidades* includes access to public assistance programs, quality public education, decent housing, and, perhaps most importantly, wage labor under fair conditions. While Latina needs-based formulations of citizenship contrast to North American rights-based citizenship in significant ways, the women I interviewed employed both discourses of citizenship to affirm their expectation of social benefits as supra-national entitlements, as human rights. This assertion by Latinas of their expectations of state-funded housing, health care, and

10 All interview quotes are translated from the original transcriptions in Spanish.

11 See also Andreas, 1985; Alvarez, 1990; Massolo, 1991; Jelin, 1997.

education into North American discussions about individual rights and individual obligations was a powerful political move. It was especially significant at a moment when the US government was exponentially accelerating the devolution of welfare provisions, not just for immigrants, but for all citizens.

These issues were reflected in women's public practice as well as in the workshops and our interviews. During the months following the summer workshops, I drove and interpreted for delegations of participants during visits to local officials and service providers, including members of the county board of supervisors and the head of the county human services office. They began these meetings by telling the officials about what they had learned about one another in the leadership training, focusing especially on their common needs and problems. Participants from both groups told officials their concerns about the content of the new federal welfare and immigration reform policies and how they would affect immigrants on the ground in San Francisco. They emphasized why it was important to divert other local or state monies to cover federal cuts that would disproportionately affect already vulnerable immigrant families, immigrant elders, and battered women in San Francisco.

During these visits, both *Mujeres Unidas* and CPA members provided the officials with concrete stories from each of their communities. They offered personal testimonials about how public services help immigrant families, including US-born children, and rationales for how such support strengthens the whole local community. They spoke of what they as Chinese and Latina immigrant parents, workers, and community members needed from the state in terms of instrumental public support, but also dignified and humane treatment.

While several *Mujeres Unidas* members joked among themselves after one such meeting that they felt quite comfortable in the Human Services building, having spent so much time there in waiting rooms over the years, they also stated how remarkable it was to be received with respect at the chief administrator's office, as well as at various supervisor's offices in City Hall. Officials were limited in terms of what they could promise these delegations in terms of protecting services, but they were attentive, respectful, and engaged with the political actors before them. These particular elected officials and service providers were themselves African American, Asian, or Latina women, with the exception of one gay white male official. They also included first and second generation immigrants who could speak either Spanish or Cantonese themselves. The question at stake of public resources and services was evidently urgent, material, and far more than symbolic. However, the demands for instrumental supports were bound up with interrelated issues of dignity and respect underlying groups members' formulation of the rights due them as community members.

Despite this fairly unified public performance of citizenship, participants also internally discussed and debated the issues at hand. At many points in the

workshop, participants talked over how they might best organize their communities in the face of imminent cuts in healthcare, housing, and welfare supports to immigrant families entailed by 1996 federal legislation. Conversations over lunch and in the car en route to and from meetings revealed diverse views about using public services and what constitutes a “worthy” citizen-subject. These issues sometimes became explicit points of contention among *Mujeres Unidas*’ membership, though they were not shared with their Chinese peers nor staff during formal workshop time. This revealed that even the public language of *necesidades* still allowed for complicated cleavages among *Mujeres Unidas* members in terms of class and race politics.

It was cash benefits, referred to always in English as “welfare,” that were the most contentious issue in these side discussions among *Mujeres Unidas* members. There seemed to be general agreement that the government had the responsibility to provide housing, healthcare, nutritional, and educational services to all people who needed these, without regard to income or personal industry. These types of supports, as opposed to cash, corresponded with the language of *necesidades* and seemed more congruent with Latin American governmental policy and popular claims for social citizenship benefits.

Esperanza Solorzano had the fewest years of formal education of the Latina participants, but was the only homeowner and small businesswoman among these participants. She now in her late 30s, had emigrated more than 15 years before from Mexico City, and struggled with alcohol and violence in her family. Esperanza frequently expressed both her desire to leave her husband and her fear that she could not support her children on her own. She was highly critical of families who relied on cash benefits for economic subsistence, which constituted the most extreme position on economic independence and good citizenship of the women I interviewed.

Esperanza preferred to emphasize the inherent industriousness and worthiness of immigrant families based on their capacity for self-reliance and economic contributions to the US. She criticized immigrants for receiving government benefits, but reserved particular ire for African American and US-born Latinos whose unemployment she could not understand since they had legal permission to work. In contrast, Alejandra Ocampo worked in an electronics manufacturing plant but had the most years of formal education in the group, having completed some college prior to emigrating from Colombia. She lived with her lover, Isabel Monreal, and their three children from previous relationships in public housing. She bristled at the implication that she or her mainly African-American neighbors were somehow less worthy or contributed less to this country because they needed government subsidies to make ends meet.

When I interviewed Marta Rodríguez in September, she was excited about the workshops that she had just completed, and was animated and enthusiastic about her experiences in the project. At first I thought that her discussion of

shared needs and problems seemed to gloss all differences in a *sentimental* assertion of sameness.

I learned a lot from them. I had never had anything to do with them before. They are really emotional, just like us. They have many problems. Although ours are such different cultures and such different countries, we are the same in our feelings and way of thinking. Like us, they suffer a lot from racism in this country.

Her first comments about the experience of “*convivencia*” (spending time together, literally, living with) with Chinese immigrant women in the workshops and subsequent efforts seemed straightforward. Marta’s direct reference to racism, however, was a signal that hers was no romantic, idealized view. Instead she rooted her sense of solidarity and identification with her Chinese co-participants not only in the life experiences they shared and discussed in the workshop, but also in a sense of shared history that developed from learning more about immigration, race and citizenship in the US.

The extent to which participants sought out commonalities of experience and other ways of learning more about each other was particularly clear in the importance they placed on what they had learned about US history in the workshops. Marta spoke with particular emotion about the session devoted to immigration history, in which a community organizer gave a down to earth summary of US conquest and expansion, slavery, and immigration. For most of the Latina participants, this was the first time they had heard a version of the US national story in which they could locate themselves or their experiences. When I asked Marta if she had been particularly impressed by anything during the summer, she replied that yes, some information had really taken her aback.

For example, the workshop that they gave on immigration...it was the one that I liked the most. Because I learned things that I never imagined could exist. For example, the...these people that they brought from Africa...the slaves...it seemed so inhuman to me, so unjust. In that moment, I got to thinking that today we are suffering from so much discrimination but we don’t think about how back then they lived in such inhumane conditions, so unjustly were they treated...I began to reflect on why people are so, so bad that they treat other humans like animals.

Marta reported that prior to this workshop, she had never before heard of African slavery or the 19th century xenophobia against European and Asian immigrants. It was the first time she had considered how she might write herself into this national citizenship story. Rather than eliding differences in the experiences of Chinese, Mexicans, and Africans in the US, in learning more about these distinct histories, Marta identified (but did not generalize) her own experiences of discrimination with those of other people of color, especially African Americans.

Despite her ambivalent attitudes towards poor Blacks and US-born Latinos, Esperanza also reported that the popular history education about immigration, race, and ethnicity in the US was one of the “best things” about the entire leadership training experience. Like Marta, she was moved personally and politically by the history of African American slavery in particular, as explained in the workshop by the popular educator and organizer “Maricarmen.”

I learned about history. What disturbs me a lot and was always something I wondered about, was the history of black folks, of the laws that enslaved them, taking away even their names, that their children were not citizens. It was one of the classes which affected me the most and I had my hand in the air the whole time with more questions, until Rosa said to go read some book, I don't remember which....she even gave us the name of the book. The whole history's there. Because we were so enthusiastic learning about this subject that we kept getting more and more excited asking questions of Maricarmen.

Sometimes the language of *necesidades* referred not to instrumental needs, but emotional bonds and relationships stressed by migration. Caridad Ríos had legalized her status under the 1986 IRCA Amnesty provisions. After 5 years of residency, Caridad was eligible for naturalization; she even attended informational sessions on naturalization sponsored by a non-profit legal services group. She reported having wanted to naturalize, and had the list of questions in English and Spanish to study, but feared both the content of the test and the language requirement. Several years later, she remained fearful of the legal process of naturalization, but feels quite settled in the US. At first she justified her plan to remain in the US permanently in terms of her children's *necesidades*, their need for their mother's physical proximity.

I don't believe I'll ever return to my country, because of them. Because how could I leave them? For better or worse they need their mother here, even if they're grown....(I'll leave) only if Clinton runs me out of the country!...I have now gotten used to living here. I'd like to go (to Mexico) for a week, at the most, two, because I'm such a clown (fool) now that I get sick to my stomach!

The summer leadership training workshops helped her articulate a legitimate place for herself in the US. Caridad offered an expansive and inclusive, if somewhat primordialist, notion of American citizenship that contrasted with the exclusivity of classic formulations of who legally belongs in this country.

This country is made up of immigrants. From the earliest times, immigrants came...Since the very first people arrived, across the Bering Straits from Asia, starting in Alaska, they were immigrants. This country belongs to the whole world...I have worked, now I am receiving food stamps but who cares? I have worked, I have contributed here...Well, during the training, like I told you, everything was very good, because through drawings, talks, writing, cartoons

and everything, they made us understand a lot of things that we didn't know...the rights that we all have, as human beings, as immigrants, as hard-working people, everything. I did not know a lot of that.

As Caridad's words made clear, this process of claiming a legitimate place for oneself, one's children, and community in an inhospitable nation-state can lead to conflicting or contradictory discursive strategies to define one's own status. Even though Caridad at first based her own desire to remain in the US on her children's need for their mother, it is clear that she herself does not imagine returning to live permanently in Mexico. She was more than sheepish about this, calling herself a "clown" for embodying the outsider subject-position in her hometown, symbolized by her physical inability to "stomach" life in Mexico anymore. Although she is now qualified to naturalize, she still referred to her own sense of insecurity with respect to the state – embodied by then-President Clinton – that might try to run her out of the country. Caridad claimed her rightful place in the US by linking her own decades of contributions as a worker to the history of immigration and the invaluable contributions of other immigrants over time to the US.

### ***Problemas: productive problems and encounters with difference***

Women's narratives specifically linked personal changes in their sense of self to the transformation of their ideas about their political identities, roles, and rights in the US. Intimate needs and problems were not only fodder for solidarity and identification with other women in the leadership training workshops, but the quest for solutions to such problems motivated these women to political engagement as well. For example, Adela remembered the moment during the training, after it had been underway several weeks, when she finally felt herself personally engaged in the project and interested in the workshop at hand. This workshop dealt with the concept of self-esteem (*autoestima*), what the women thought it meant, and how it related to how they felt about themselves, individually and as immigrant women. Although Adela had heard this concept discussed in meetings with the Latina women's group, she cited the power of this experience for her as lying in what she learned about the Chinese women in this discussion.

The first time that I really got interested, I think was in the third session (of the workshop), when it was about self-esteem....that I began to notice, I said yes, they also feel bad, they also have problems. They also go through what I'm going through, so, Adela, what are you complaining about? ... It was when I began to pay more attention to them. Because I said, I have to learn from them. I have to learn a lot from all my *compañeras*, but even more from them (the Chinese women). First of all, because they are another, they have

another nationality, they have other customs, they have another language...And maybe the nicest thing they made me learn was just that, that I realized that there are people, of whatever origin or whatever nationality who will help you, will motivate you. And you know whose example I really learned from? From Lily, she's the one in the wheelchair, right? I said, 'She's here. Why, if she's here, doing things for her people, and I'm perfectly fine – Can't I do something for mine? Can't I also do something for myself?' So she helped me a lot.

Adela formulated self-esteem issues as collective ones that could be shared among women of very different backgrounds and whose solutions lay not in individual life changes but collective action for social transformation. Adela did not assert that she had to “get herself together” before she could help her community, but rather that both processes needed to occur together in mutually supportive ways.

Iris Marion Young asserts that the daily experience of diverse urban life reframes the very definition of citizenship, leading away from an insistence on a homogeneous, assimilating polity to a “politics of difference” that emphasizes social differentiation without exclusion (Young, 1990). It was in part through such engagement with difference in structured and sustained multiethnic and multilingual encounters that the women I interviewed reported coming to see themselves as occupying legitimate, significant social roles in the US as immigrants, mothers, workers, and political agents. For the women I interviewed, the most powerful discursive shift in their own sense of belonging in the US came with increased personal identification with US immigration and ethnic history, and with the legacy of African American struggle in particular. Women credited the history lessons they received as part of the workshop series, but also what they had learned in the course of life in the US and in fellowship with one another in their weekly *Mujeres Unidas* meetings.

Adela Aguirre's interview seemed to consider life in San Francisco as well as these workshops as productive sites for encountering and working through issues of difference. She spoke of how, with the right mindset, just living in the United States provided her with multiple opportunities to “open your mind” (“te abre la mente”) to different concerns, histories, and people who were different from herself. As an example, she cited her own feelings when she watched a television program about Martin Luther King, Jr. and the March on Washington. “If they could do it, why can't we?” she remembered asking herself at the time, without resentment or anger, but rather with some surprise at her own identification with African Americans and a civil rights movement she had never before heard about.

This shift in mindset, however, entailed a whole new kind of resistance at the household level for Adela. She described a constant struggle to overcome the influence of her US-born Mexican-American husband's racism on herself and her

son, while also trying to understand how he could hold these attitudes despite having grown up in the diverse Bay Area rather than “a little town in Mexico.”

I believe that most of all it was from him that I learned what the word ‘racism’ means....(In the US) you are more open-minded, you have more opportunities for everything, and you can learn about more things. So you can’t have that mentality. You can’t.

Adela repeatedly interrogated the contradictory nature of US pluralism and democracy. According to her thinking, the chance to interact with diverse peoples is one of many opportunities (including educational and economic opportunities) available to members of US society that should preclude the kind of derogatory attitudes her husband espoused. Yet even though she insists that “you can’t” think these things, she knows her husband absolutely *does* have “that mentality.” Then she shared stories of her own experiences of poor treatment at the hands of white Americans simply because she was Latina, and at the hands of some middle-class Latino service providers because she was poor and an immigrant. In other words, Adela was not all that surprised at her husband’s prejudices, because his attitudes are more normal than exceptional in the US.

Adela struggled with both the promise of equality and the reality of racism and discrimination that characterize US national experience. Like Marta in her interview, Adela rather gently and indirectly addressed my own subjectivity with respect to middle-class, non-immigrant American racism. In Marta’s case, she did this by abstract references to third person “others,” and in Adela’s case, through the example of her own US-born husband. In general, I am sure that my own identity softened the language that women used in interviews to describe their experiences and critiques of American racism, though they still found these indirect third person strategies to make their points while trying to avoid putting me personally in a defensive position.

Adela’s narratives of her husband’s *racismo* towards other groups were intertwined with stories of his abusive attitude towards her. This politicized her personal resistance to him in her stories, signaling that “private” arguments between husband and wife can also be part of women’s process of claiming cultural citizenship. Adela explained that without any provocation, he would launch into a litany of stereotypes or generalizations about other groups, but always beginning with her as a point of departure. Since he considers her to be from Mexico City, he would begin by targeting her, saying “*Chilangos* are like this”<sup>12</sup> and then expand with more comments such as “Los salvadoreños son así”/“Salvadorans are like this.” Adela did not dwell on the particularities of his comments, but on their overgeneralizing and dehumanizing nature. Resisting his prejudices with the strength garnered from information and experience thus became part of her resistance of the emotional abuse he directed against her as well.

12 “Chilangos son así.” (Chilangos are people from Mexico City).

She reported being surprised and impressed by how many people in the *Mujeres Unidas* group were from different countries, including Central and South Americans. “Since we all spoke Spanish, I thought we were all from Mexico!” she said, laughing a little. “I felt so good to be spending time with people from so many different places.” Participating in the *Mujeres Unidas* women’s group gave her a position of strength from which she could not only resist her husband’s prejudices, but argue back at him with authority. Now, she says, when her husband starts insulting Salvadorans or Nicaraguans, “I tell him that the women in the group (from other countries) speak better Spanish than he does.” She feels that sharing information and personal experiences with diverse women has provided her strength to resist her husband’s hateful comments about her and others.

But then I said, how strange that one says, why does this only happen to me? And why me? And one makes themselves the sufferer, and one makes oneself out to be the martyr, and one says, ‘Oh, God, only me, only to me, only to me,’ and ‘This and that only happens to me’ and ‘Why does this only happen to me?’ But that’s not the truth. One always, like me in the group, I saw that, regardless of nationality, we are women and we all have the same problems. As much as in marriage as in society as sometimes spiritually as well. That’s the truth.

Adela’s stories of coming to identify with other Latinas and the experiences of people of color in the US were, of course, complex and multi-layered, shaped by her own national identity, political views, and domestic life. In addition to addressing the gender solidarity and common experiences as women, she discussed the importance of recognizing the cultural differences that were invisible to her until she got to know other immigrant women better. Adela assumed no global or even ethnic sisterhood or solidarity, as she indicated in her discussions of class and cultural diversity among Latinas, as well as between Latinas and other immigrant women. However, her ability to appreciate differences without either trivializing or reifying them positioned her to respond positively to the chance to participate in the leadership training project with Chinese women.

Most of the women I interviewed subsequent to these training workshops either asserted directly or alluded to holding strong prejudices about Chinese people prior to this experience. In describing her own attitudes towards Asian people, Adela reflected a deep ambivalence about some of her own views, at one point seeming to ascribe them to a third party, and another time speculating about which attitudes she may have brought with her from Mexico, rather than learned in the US. This ambivalence may have been part of coming to terms with the US “model minority myth” – a set of attitudes that may seem complementary on the surface but signals underlying attitudes of distrust or hostility towards Asian Americans – or may have reflected a familiarity with the

historic prejudices against Asians in Mexico that led to violent attacks on immigrants and subsequent large-scale Chinese exodus from Mexico in the early 20th century.

The following passage from her interview conveys the struggle Adela faced trying to articulate her ideas on this topic. The fact that this otherwise eloquent woman's speech became disjointed reflected the genuine difficulty she had articulating her conflicting feelings about Chinese people. She traced the logic and genealogy of her prejudices as she sought to reject them after the experience of *convivencia*, or sharing experiences, with actual Chinese women. She also linked these views to her own adjustment to the idea of national and other differences among Latinas, as well as between differently racialized immigrant communities.

Another one of the things which really surprised me, because I tell you that in the beginning when I saw people here from Guatemala, from El Salvador, from Honduras, from Nicaragua, I said 'Oh! How can this be possible, no?' Imagine how nice it was for me to know that I could work with Asian people, I never could have imagined that. I had never really had much of an impression, neither good nor bad, of them... for me they were simply another group, another class of people, that's about it, just with other customs, another language...But even on this I say, how can it be possible that I had the idea that, there's always someone saying that, 'No, if you pay attention, (you'll see that) the Chinese are really united.' They, if something happens to one of them, they are all there, and I had not ever seen that until now. I had never seen evidence, that it was true that they are so united, but I had observed living in Mexico was that they are so intelligent and that's why they do so well in all the businesses, and I always said that they were rich. Think of that! Or at least, if not rich, that they lacked nothing...And wouldn't you know, what a surprise to find out that that's not true. It is like with our races, there are people who struggle, who get ahead, who are united. But that's not to say that they all are...That was one thing that I really liked a lot.

Like Adela, Isabel Monreal also spoke of the unique opportunity the training provided in the US to speak across divides of race and language. Although she lived in a public housing project which she described as 75% African American and 25% Latino, she had not had such a chance to spend time with and communicate with non-Latinos in the way she was able to in the training workshops. When I asked what she liked best about the workshop experience, she returned to the notion of *convivencia*.

Number one, the experience of spending time with two different races, because in this country we Latinos are always separate, the Chinese are separate, the Black people are separate, and all the ethnic groups are separated, divided and what I liked is that for the first time we are, we took a

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training with different races, with different languages, even though it was really difficult because of the translations...but it still turned out nicely...because we know that Latinas just like any other race have the same problems, the same discrimination in this country and that is something that helps us, makes it possible to unite. And when the Chinese have a protest, we Latinos can go support it and when the African Americans protest, we can unite with them and say ‘we are supporting them’ and not because they are a different color or race that they must be protesting for another thing and that’s what I learned the most from this group. That we all have the same problems in this country.

This strong sense of identification with Chinese and African Americans seemed remarkable in a woman who literally lives in a predominantly African-American housing project, but reported being afraid to speak to any of her neighbors, Black or Latino. Isabel explained that the hostile atmosphere of her public housing development undermined friendships among neighbors in general, but this has not affected her ability to politically identify with African American civil rights struggles and the racism she knows to be directed against all people of color in the US, also affecting relations between communities of color like Latinos and Blacks.

I pretty much don’t start friendships because I don’t know them and am afraid, because I don’t know how they might be. Because they are always tarred by the fact that people says that blacks are really bad-hearted, and that’s really not true, there are many good people too, but because of this same fear, I try not to make friends there (in public housing).

Isabel regarded her African-American neighbors with a mixture of fear and solidarity. She knew that Latinos and Blacks are both “tarred” by negative stereotypes. At the same time, there was crime in the housing projects where she lived, her family was the only lesbian family and the only non-African American one she knew there, she did not speak English, and she did feel anxiety. She desired *convivencia* – the opportunity to spend time with and get to know other people of color in particular, but there seemed to be many obstacles to real *convivencia* with others in her daily experience of urban American life.

### **Challenges to *convivencia***

These women’s stories reflect how, even in the most diverse American cities, racial and ethnic groups can live alongside one another yet find very little opportunity to interact in meaningful ways or get to know one another well. What is striking in these interviews is this particular group of women’s evident interest in bridging these parallel social worlds, and how few opportunities they have found to do so in day-to-day life. Many of the evaluative comments on the workshop experience used the term “*convivencia*” to describe both the unique

opportunity they had to get to know the Chinese women and their issues and concerns, and also in terms of the real barriers to forging deeper personal and political connections that remained after the workshops concluded. Language stood in for the multiple barriers to sustained communication and personal connection that women faced in their work together. As Adela Aguirre put it, her enthusiasm about the workshops was diminished somewhat by the fact that the dialogue was mediated entirely through third parties.

Yes, that was a really big problem, the languages, because I would have really liked to have been able to talk personally with a Chinese woman and tell her what I feel and how I would have expressed myself with her and it was something that I couldn't do because it's so different with translation, but that was something I wish it could change....What I would like to improve is to give us the chance to spend more time together.

In the face of a project that emphasized speaking across the Chinese-Latino divide, the language of *convivencia* and its emphasis on getting to know one another on a more personal, individual level reflected participants' attempts to avoid reinscribing racial differences in ways that would potentially have been destructive to the fragile coalition the women were forging. One of the CPA participants in particular embodied the slippery nature of "ethnic" identity as a coalitional mobilizing tool and category of social analysis. An outgoing and personable woman in her sixties, Wei-Ying "Alicia" Chu spoke both Spanish and Cantonese fluently, was retired, and lived alone. She was born in Panama and lived there continuously before returning to China at age 16 with her family. Alicia's personal social location was a clear marker of the flexibility and the social constructedness of ethnic and national boundaries.

The fact that Alicia's own capacity to move socially between the two groups did not actually lead to sustained relationships between her and *Mujeres Unidas* members revealed some of the internal contradictions of a project that promoted equality without sameness without addressing thornier issues of other obstacles to more egalitarian social relations. Racism and prejudice against immigrants were discussed only in the US context. It would have taken far longer to achieve the level of mutual trust necessary to consider other attitudes that might have originated in Asia or Latin America.

*Convivencia* was a positive ideal, but also a profoundly difficult one to achieve outside the structured setting. Even in the workshops, where interpretation was readily available, women rarely tried to engage someone from the other group in conversation during breaks or lunch times. In fact, as *Mujeres Unidas* members pointed out, it was difficult to make real connections through an interpreter (particularly a nonprofessional volunteer interpreter) at all.

The project succeeded marvelously when grassroots organizational members and staff could create the opportunity to make connections across and through

difference. Women were able to develop new tools for understanding social divisions and potentials for solidarity outside of the protected realm of the workshops as well. However, the moments of stress and disagreement among at least the Latina participants reflect some of the very real global, institutional challenges that exist to extending these ideas of belonging and citizenship from the community meeting space out into mainstream US political and social life.

### **Minding the gaps in citizenship theory**

In the US, the phrase “coalition-building” evokes images of understanding across boundaries defined by political interest, class, race, language, gender, disability, and/or sexuality. These categories are among the most salient in defining categories of citizenship identities around which political subjectivity and collective agency emerge in contemporary liberal democratic politics (Hall and Held, 1990; Rosaldo, 1994). While the formulation of a “Chinese-Latina women’s leadership training” project itself reinscribed US racial boundaries, the women also surfaced and discussed their own diversity along national lines, immigrant generation, level of education, family structure, physical disability, and sexual preference. While the constant trilingual translation continually marked certain kinds of difference, as the women I interviewed described, the content of the discussions and their own analysis of their structural location led them to focus on the commonalities of their needs and experiences across ethnic and racial lines.

The experience of working together as *latinas*, rather than in groups defined by Latin American nationality, contributed to the women’s analyses of their position and rights in the US. Yet the identity they articulated as *latina* citizen-subjects was not a homogenized vision of a uniform community, politics, or experience. Their sense of place and rights was defined out of a new idea of historic relationships to non-*latinas* and people of color, with their divergent experiences of struggle against racial, sexual, and national oppression. The workshops structured a multilingual and multiracial “contact zone” in which women could develop analyses of “how differences and hierarchies are produced *in and through contact* across such lines” (Pratt, 1993, 88).

These women offer a striking comparison to popular American notions of immigrants coming to feel a part of the US over time through an increasing identification with the state, dominant cultural practices, and social groups. Instead these women reported a greater sense of belonging in this society as they learned that their experiences of exclusion in fact related them to more insurgent versions of US citizenship. The emergent discourses of Latina immigrant citizenship in women’s stories of comparison and contrast with *las chinas* are products of the specific process of dialogue and exchange they experienced with this particular group of women. In this urban landscape,

whether or not they ever manage more sustained *convivencia* with one another, they remain related through public institutions like the public health care and education systems, and through a post-industrial service and manufacturing economy dependent on immigrant workers. They also refused to privilege home or family concerns over social or national ones in their understanding of what constituted interests they shared with other immigrant women.

*Mujeres Unidas* members articulated their claims for belonging and entitlement in the US relative not only to codified rights and political institutions, but in more expansive and processual terms that also encompassed experiences of emotion, personal relationships, racial oppression, and social movements. In interviews and in the workshops, they shared stories of the intersections between their struggles to gain voice outside the domestic sphere and those to gain influence and control over their personal lives as well. These narratives indicated that women acted to claim their rights and define their own subjectivity, sometimes alternately and other times simultaneously on individual, familial, community, and national levels. Herein lies the power of the new models of citizenship suggested in these encounters. They occupy multiple positions and offer perspectives that have been excluded from normative definitions of US citizenship as low-income, sometimes undocumented, often non-English speaking women of color. Yet in discussing, defining, and asserting their common *necesidades* and *problemas* as mothers, immigrants, and women in ways which are politically and personally empowering for them, they revealed the resilient artifice of the public-private dichotomy embedded in Western ideas of citizenship.

Taken as vernacular expressions of citizenship, *problemas*, *necesidades*, and a more problematized understanding of *convivencia* constitute bases for coalitions among new citizen-subjects and link the discourses of both Latin American and North American popular movements, especially African-American and Asian-American liberation traditions. Grassroots social analysts like these women suggest that not only is a new, more multifaceted and inclusive citizenship theoretically possible, but that the processes of building upon and changing the terms of belonging and entitlement in the US are already well underway.

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