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“Yo no estoy perdida”: Immigrant Women (Re)locating Citizenship

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Substantive first-class citizenship is not simply achieved, even after formal rights are granted by the state. Citizens can be socially, politically, or economically marginalized because of race, immigrant status, gender, sexuality, social class, religion, or disability. For non-citizen immigrants, formal exclusion from citizenship makes claiming belonging and entitlement especially complex, both in regards to their nation of origin and their states of residence. Seen from these positions, citizenship includes, but is not defined by, an exclusive and powerful bundle of legal rights and relationships between individuals, groups, and states. Cultural citizenship becomes a multilayered¹ and multifaceted process of continual assertion and re-articulation of oneself and one's community as full social and political members (Flores, Rosaldo). This process is also usually contested, may be conflict-ridden, and always exists in dynamic relationship with the disciplinary forces of history and state institutions (Lowe, Ngai, Ong).

By insisting on the “cultural” aspect of citizenship and the need to theorize newly recognized collectivities of citizens such as Latinos/as, immigrants, the disabled, and gays and lesbians, scholars—including Rina Benmayor, William Flores, and Renato Rosaldo—redefine the exclusionary categories of citizenship. This understanding of cultural citizenship insists on Latina/os' place(s) in the body politic as well as on the importance, to the articulation of new citizen-subjects, of staking claims on state and society (Flores and Benmayor). Nira Yuval-Davis refers to the convergence of subjectivity, emotion, and citizenship as “the politics of belonging” (Yuval-Davis, “Gendered Citizenship”). Cultural citizenship and the politics of belonging highlight the processes and practices that incorporate dynamics of institutional

discipline and individual agency with collective issues of inequality, belonging, and rights.

The dynamic relationships between intimate and collective processes underpinning social change are difficult to identify and articulate if our analysis focuses primarily on formal statist politics and institutions. Understanding citizenship in its many valences entails analyzing how domestic lives and relationships are bound up in our experiences of—and our capacity to participate in—society and politics. Which realms of conflict, contest, and affect figure into people's sense of belonging on the ground in everyday life? Refiguring citizenship requires taking our subjects seriously as analysts of their own situation and attending to their citizenship stories in collective political and historical context (Coll, "Necesidades y problemas").

This chapter draws on ethnographic research to show how members of a group of Latin American immigrant women related developments in their political subjectivity to experiences of transgression. When confronted with disappointment and betrayal, they challenged previously imposed limits in order to participate in the collective processes of a women's community organization, while also contesting roles and relations in their families and households.² Women who were quite different in many other ways had strikingly similar stories of deception when, after fulfilling the responsibilities of their traditional roles as good wives, mothers, and in-laws still found themselves treated with disrespect, disregard, and in some cases, serious abuse at the hands of intimates. These sentiments paralleled their disappointment when, in spite of their sense of themselves as hard-working, law-abiding, social contributors in the United States, they found themselves caught in the hostility against immigrants in 1990s California.

Narratives highlight the women's ways of making sense of their life stories as more than tales of personal development. These narratives cannot be reduced to mere progress stories of female empowerment after emigration or divorce, or to liberal tales of coming to regard oneself as an autonomous, rights-bearing political subject.³ Instead, the women I met in the course of this research emphasized the centrality of—and interrelationship between—experiences of transformations in community life, friendship, and family/household relations to their coming to feel a sense of individual and collective belonging in the U.S. These stories tack back and forth, chronicling how transgression and transformation in intimate life and public practices of citizenship fed one another in a dynamic and mutually enabling fashion.

Studying with *Mujeres Unidas y Activas*

From 1996 to 1999, I participated in the meetings and community projects of a grassroots organization of Latin American immigrant women in San Francisco.⁴ The majority of the members of *Mujeres Unidas y Activas* (United and Active Women) came from Mexico and Central America, spoke only Spanish, had fewer than eight years of formal education, and struggled economically with very low household incomes in high-tech boom era San Francisco. The priorities of *Mujeres Unidas* included popular political education and collective action as Latinas, as well as work in coalition with other groups around issues of welfare reform, social service provision, and immigrant political rights. The majority of women had not previously participated in social movements in their countries of origin or in the United States. They also reported that *Mujeres Unidas* provided them with a regular opportunity to get outside of their cramped and crowded apartments, to find a break from daily work and responsibilities, and to learn both from the experiences of women with whom they shared similar backgrounds and concerns and from others whose personal and social histories greatly differed from their own.

In addition to regular peer support and informational/educational meetings on wide-ranging topics, the group organized a home-health-care/domestic work training and referral agency.⁵ More importantly in terms of numbers of members involved at any given time, the organization mobilized both women and men in the community to act collectively on issues of shared concern. Examples of such actions were as diverse as intervening with an elementary school principal on behalf of a member and her child, performing popular political theater pieces about one's rights under “immigration reform,” accompanying a newcomer to the police station to file a restraining order or to the public housing office for an application, carrying out door to door voter registration and education campaigns in immigrant neighborhoods, and traveling by the busload to the state capital to lobby for public service provision.

The group's weekly meetings and day-to-day operations, furthermore, always emphasized the importance of the emotional and personal issues facing members. One striking feature of the women's stories was how experiences of disappointment and betrayal in the family and household units formed with husbands, children, in-laws, and strangers in San Francisco provoked further transgressions and transformations in their lives. The women whose stories I relate here

had very different public personas, economic situations, and immigration statuses, yet in each of their stories, they related that unmet expectations about family life and marriage had in some way led them to the women's group. Each woman explained how her participation in *Mujeres Unidas*, with its emphasis on peer support and dialogue combined with political education, leadership development, and direct community action, had changed the way she saw herself in relationships to not only her family members but the larger community.

The venture across national boundaries as immigrants was one of many kinds of transgressions these women risked in seeking out sources of support and respect, and in finding ways to contribute socially through their own labor. They spoke of the particular importance, in the process, of finding opportunities for understanding and analyzing their situation in the company of other immigrant women. The evocative words of particular women illustrated broader themes that came up in interviews, group discussions, and informal conversations and which likely represent products of collective dialogues and experiences shared by women in this organization over extended periods of time. These themes included betrayal and disaffection with stressful or abusive family roles and dynamics, the importance of peer support in seeking out new relationships, and the value women placed on learning new skills and gaining access to good information on a variety of topics. Images of crossing feared boundaries were prominent, as women sought to maintain certain aspects of their self-image as respectable, virtuous adult women in gendered senses that might seem to preclude the kinds of major and minor changes women actually achieved in their home and work lives, and as engaged community members.

This chapter focuses on women who came to understand themselves as positive social and economic contributors in the United States, deserving and demanding of respect as individuals and collectively as Latina immigrants. This was hardly an uncontested claim for low-income, non-citizen, or non-“legal” immigrants to make at that particular moment. It was also a particularly challenging position for women in very precarious legal and economic situations to take. Their stories marked a major contrast to contemporary media representations and political configurations in California at the time in which immigrants of color were portrayed as politically, culturally, and legally marginal to U.S. society. During the mid-1990s, three statewide ballot initiatives sought to cut public services to the undocumented, to eliminate bilin-

gual education, and to end affirmative action in state institutions.⁶ The Proposition 187 “Save Our State” initiative campaign in 1994 exemplified the intensity of the political conflict in which immigrants found themselves. In one “Letter to the Editor” of *The New York Times*, the campaign media director for the so-called “Save Our State” initiative promoted their agenda on the national stage, declaring California and the United States at risk of a “*reconquista*” from the south:

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)

After voters approved the measure, Proposition 187 was enjoined by the courts and never took effect. However, it did set the political tone for the rest of the decade and paved the way for the passage of later anti-affirmative action and anti-bilingual education measures. During the same period, national welfare and immigration “reforms” sought further to exclude poor people and immigrants from basic entitlements at the national level. These policies eliminated the entitlement to economic supports for poor parents, which had been in place since the Great Depression, and shifted more than thirty years of emphasis in U.S. immigration policy on family reunification.⁷

It helps to know this context in order to understand the relevance of talking about citizenship with respect to non-citizen immigrants’ claims for belonging, for rights, and for a legitimate place in a nation-state that defines them as essentially illegitimate and therefore as non-persons. Immigrants were being attacked semiotically and politically for their physical and cultural presence and their reproductive potential. The impact of such policy and discourse on immigrant lives

and subjectivity was profound. In the words of one *Mujeres Unidas* member: “Esta es una guerra psicológica en contra de los inmigrantes” (“This is a psychological war against immigrants”). The intersections between such public assaults and the private conflicts and stressors faced by women and their families highlighted the structural issues underlying subjective experiences. For some women, participating in the women’s group and in public acts of resistance to the anti-immigrant movement engendered changes in household dynamics and division of labor. For others, conflicts and change at home provoked them to search out new social supports and tools for understanding and improving their situation.

Community groups like *Mujeres Unidas* were among the few spaces in which many people felt safe speaking out about the political climate. Women’s collective claims to belonging emerged from both peer support group discussions and larger collective political acts. In this tense moment for immigrants, women spoke movingly about how they came to claim respect, dignity, and services. They located these processes in their experiences of dialogue and activism with other women, and the resulting analyses that emerged relating to their social position as women, Latinas, immigrants, workers, and mothers. My findings from this research⁸ resonated with similar observations made earlier in the 1990s by the *El Barrio Project* in East Harlem about their mainly Puerto Rican women participants, namely that “it was the affirmation of their identity, strength, and sense of entitlement” in community with other immigrant women that formed the basis for women’s sense of their own “cultural citizenship” (Benmayor iii).

“I am not lost”: Caridad Navarro

When I interviewed Caridad Navarro in 1996, she was 41 and had lived in San Francisco for more than twenty years after immigrating with a teenage friend from their small lakeside village in Jalisco, a western state of Mexico. Before being temporarily disabled by a stress-induced illness, Caridad had been a unionized hotel housekeeper in downtown San Francisco, earning a living wage and receiving health benefits for herself and her four children. In 1994, Caridad had separated from her husband after almost twenty years of marriage. Her eldest daughter was studying and working in Los Angeles, one teenage son was living with his father, and she was sharing with her other two children a room in an apartment whose living room, one other bedroom, and back-porch entryway were occupied by seven other immigrants who also

shared the kitchen and bathroom. In early 1996, Caridad began working in a garment factory until it shut down like the majority of large textile manufacturers in San Francisco. She began cleaning houses and providing home-care for elders—intermittent work without benefits or a union salary. However, the hours did allow her to attend weekly women’s group meetings and to be home many afternoons with her elementary school-aged daughter.

Caridad, a long-term legal permanent resident, was eligible for citizenship and wanted to naturalize. She even tried to attend a citizenship course with me one day at a neighborhood branch library, but the non-profit group who offered the classes cancelled this session at the last minute without notice. Caridad feared the formal application process and the written and oral naturalization exams, and doubted her ability to memorize the answers to what seemed like hundreds of sample questions provided to applicants. We went over the questions once together, but she became even more discouraged when she realized that I myself knew few of the answers. Caridad had a few years of elementary education in rural Mexico, and spoke minimal work-related English. She remembered that she had wanted to continue her schooling as a child, but that the parish priest had warned her single mother that it was not safe for a girl to walk the long distances to the rural school.

In our interview, Caridad discussed her attitude towards everyday community organizing, and how her own views of women’s organizations like *Mujeres* had changed since she began participating in the group a few years earlier. Caridad was not a dynamic, highly visible leader, but a soft-spoken, quiet, constant presence in the group. A solid foundational member, her personal warmth, willing smile, and openness to new people and new ideas drew others to her. Caridad spoke of the multiple levels of resistance she had faced in herself and from her family about her participation in the women’s group and traced her eventual arrival at *Mujeres Unidas* to the emotional fallout following her separation from her husband.

When Caridad was 19, she moved with her young husband and his family to the Bay Area because he had found good work in construction. They had four healthy children but Caridad reported that even after their eldest daughter had entered school and she had more time during the day, her husband blocked her efforts to return to school to study English, much as her mother and priest had done when she was a child. Caridad reported that the family dynamics were even more

strained because they always lived with her husband's family, who criticized and demeaned her while her husband never came to her defense. She said that she put up with years of verbal mistreatment, but that ended the day her husband slapped her in the face because of "lies" her in-laws had told him about her. "I said, okay, I have put up with a lot of things but I will not put up with being slapped. So I dialed 9-1-1."⁹ Caridad's mother-in-law cried and called Caridad a bad woman as her son was taken away by the police. Caridad took her four children and left the next day. She rented the same room she continues to live in today. "It's not a bed of roses, but compared to that place, I am good."¹⁰

At first, Caridad did not feel so good about leaving. When she filed the police report, she sobbed so much that she could not speak. The police officer tried to convince her to speak to a psychologist. "I said, no, I don't believe in those people!"¹¹ she recalled, chuckling at her own resistance. The departmental psychologist gave her the name and address of *Mujeres Unidas* but she told them, "I don't believe in that."¹² Eventually, though, a woman friend did bring her to the group, though she stopped again outside the building, resisting entry. The group meets in a large women's community center in the overlapping territory between San Francisco's Latino Mission and gay Castro districts. By the 1990s, a visible community of lesbian households and businesses had developed in this area.

I told her, I will not go into that building, because they are perverse women. "No," she said. "The third floor belongs to the Latinas." "Hmm, well, let's see what it's about," so I came and I liked the group. They are not perverse. They are people like me, who have suffered, have had experiences. One day I told the group, you know why I didn't come? For this reason and that reason and everyone died of laughter. We all think the same thing—that we are degenerates, that we are women who do drugs . . . we all have bad thoughts about such women, but now I invite a lot of women (to join the group, too).¹³

It is important to note there were openly lesbian members of the group, one FTM transgender member who still lived as a woman, and that several important supporters of the group from the umbrella immigrant rights coalition were lesbians who were held in high esteem and treated with great affection. In other words, Caridad alludes clearly to homophobia as a force preventing women from meeting and

working autonomously, yet she is also challenging the conflation of perversion with lesbian and gay identity. To say, "they are not perverse" or "degenerates" does not mean "we are all straight," in this context. Rather, they are all transgressors who have crossed boundaries of nation, gender, language, and sexuality and in invoking this memory and laughing together with her peers, she challenges the notion that transgression is wrong, undesirable, or unseemly.

In the end, the chance to relax, to release troubles through talk,¹⁴ and to learn new and important things were what kept Caridad coming back. Caridad explained that access to "buena información" ("good information") on topics as wide-ranging as child-rearing, immigration law, and public housing rules kept her returning to group meetings and activities until she became more politically committed to the organization and its work. "Información" became the currency she employed to organize other women she encountered in her day-to-day life, as she engaged them in meaningful exchanges about life, politics, and their rights. In a 1996 interview, Caridad contrasted her current views of herself and the group with the presuppositions about *Mujeres* that she had held before she began participating.

Well, I always like to inform people, to talk with someone I know when we're riding the bus together, or if someone starts talking to me, to give them information. For example, I like to invite women I meet to *Mujeres*, especially the ones who are mistaken [erradas] like I [was], and are thinking that a lot of people criticize us. It hurts me a lot that they have said this to my face, "No, that's for women with nothing better to do (no home to care for), that's for women whose husbands have left them. That's for women who have lost their way in life."¹⁵

Though Caridad began her comments with what was apparently a politically neutral introduction about the importance of sharing "information,"¹⁶ she then went on to challenge directly the highly charged forms of social discipline that she and other women experience and exercise over one another, practices and beliefs that actually serve as obstacles to participation in a progressive women's organization. "The woman is in the house, the woman should not be out in the street, and if you are in the street, it's because you are looking for another man. And you have to cook and you have to clean. That is hell. It is hell."¹⁷ Husbands, in-laws, friends, all had offered such running commentar-

ies in those days that had undermined her capacity to go to school, to participate socially and in groups with other women. These arguments were potent with respect to gender and sexuality, respectability, and shame, engendering fear of the social-change potential of autonomous women. “Eso es para mujeres que no tienen qué hacer” literally means “That’s for women with nothing better to do” but also “That’s for women without housework to do,” in other words, for women without even homes in which they can labor as respectable housewives. In the double meaning of “lost”—“Eso es para mujeres dejadas por el marido. Eso es para mujeres que ya andan muy perdidas” (“That is for women abandoned by their husbands, women who’ve lost their bearings”)—these women are both pathetic and threatening, thought to have gone out of control sexually as well as socially.

In response to these discourses of social control and limitations on women’s participation, Caridad mobilized her resources for respectability to defend her right to participate in community life and women’s organizing, summing up again the negative sanctions as another example of lack of information among women in the community:

I say, no, I am not lost. Yes, I defend myself. I tell them that they are misinformed. Look, I say to them, “I have my children, and where I live I am in charge of cleaning, I have to cook.” People criticize me because they see me in the street but now I say, “What’s it to you?” I walk around, I do my duties at home, AND I come to *Mujeres*. It fits my schedule and doesn’t cause me any trouble. I still feed my children, clean my house, even if I have to do it at night, or really late at night. I do everything and I can come here. Because I am very hardworking.¹⁸

Caridad located her legitimacy to carry out a public practice of citizenship in her ability to live up to exactly the traditional gender-role responsibilities that usually preclude women’s full social and political participation. She inverted the perspective on who should pity whom, and focuses a sympathetic organizer’s eye on those who continue to be “erradas” (“totally mistaken”) in their beliefs, reaching out to them with more “information.”

Caridad narrated a counter-discourse to the hegemonic anti-immigrant, anti-poor people, and anti-woman public rhetoric of that moment. Her ability to fully practice her citizenship was contingent on transforming the ideas and practices of formal institutions that ex-

cluded her and of fellow immigrants who diverted one another from activism through informal negative sanctions. While Caridad’s political work with *Mujeres Unidas* has focused on reforming state policies on immigration, welfare, housing, and education, she emphasized the importance of personal experiences and relationships to her eventual willingness to transgress social norms and overcome her own fears about breaking rules and making change. This was not a discourse of individual change as primary or as a necessary precursor to institutional change. Instead, it represents Caridad’s attention to the very thorny question of the role of the subjective in shaping one’s capacity to engage institutions and make social change. Through unpacking such intimate life experiences and how women process them, we can begin to understand what might distinguish a creative transgressor like Caridad from peers or family members who try to dissuade her from changing or developing skills and capacities.

Understanding cultural citizenship as a dynamic process also means allowing for change and development in families and relationships over time. Few women I interviewed saw their husbands, even when there had been abuse, as incapable of change. For most, a decision to leave meant immediate financial hardship for them and their children, even homelessness, and many had passed through the one women’s shelter in the city that focused on serving battered Latinas and their children. Caridad did not identify herself as a survivor of domestic violence, having left the relationship at the first sign of physical abuse. She did maintain her distance from her husband for many years after leaving him, while supporting his ongoing relationship with his children and accepting the financial support he offered with occasional gifts of money passed to her through their children. Several years after I interviewed her, Caridad reconciled with her husband and he and their son came to live in the room Caridad had rented on her own years before. Caridad reported at that time that she was pleased because the nature of their relationship had changed as a result of their years of separation and her own development. She added that life for her and her children was much better with their father in the home.

For the women I interviewed, becoming more independent (“independizarse”) was important for forging family and social relationships that supported rather than diminished their sense of belonging and entitlement in the broader society as well as in their own households. For many, like Caridad, separating from partners and kin-based households required relocating and learning where and how to find

adequate material support for their children, renting rooms in their own name, and paying bills that they may not have managed previously. Rather than a goal of “independence” for its own sake, women spoke of “independizándose” (“becoming independent”) as a foundation for healthier intimate relationships as well as more positive senses of themselves.

“Putting everything in my name”—Tomasa Hernández

Caridad was not the only woman to vigorously defend her domesticity in her interview “in spite of” her participation in *Mujeres Unidas*. Other women also located their legitimacy and legibility as political agents in their mastery at fulfilling traditional gender-roles in their households. They cited their facility with domestic labor and duty as the basis for claims for fair treatment by kin, equality in decision-making about children and money, and autonomy for themselves, what I refer to as domestic citizenship. Their tales of domestic citizenship meshed with accounts of engagement in a community organization where supporting and organizing other immigrant Latinas resulted in highly public and political acts. Women participated in collective interventions with public schools on behalf of members’ children, developed popular theater pieces for grassroots education on the impact of national immigration reforms, and lobbied local elected officials to mitigate the impact of federal cutbacks in welfare and social services, among other activities. How were the stories proving themselves to be dutiful wives, mothers, and homemakers in the ‘private’ sphere related to these ‘public’ acts of citizenship? It was through the process of collective reflection, dialogue, and analysis in which the women participated in *Mujeres Unidas* as much as through the public organizing activities that women came to see the connections between problems and issues in their ‘private’ lives with structural and institutional analyses of their collective situation as immigrants and Latinas in the United States. Tomasa Hernández’s story offers one vivid example.

Tomasa Hernández was in her late 30s and had lived in San Francisco for two decades when we first spoke at length about these issues in 1998. She was just sixteen when she migrated, coincidentally, from the same region of Jalisco as Caridad. She came without much forethought, almost as an adventure with a childhood friend with hopes of being able to send money home to her parents and siblings. When I met Tomasa she was known as one of the group’s founding members because she had begun attending the women’s group even before it

was institutionalized as *Mujeres Unidas*. She was among its most vocal leaders, and projected an air of confidence and self-possession. She had six children, one grandson, and a boyfriend she loved very much.

Tomasa did not appear to be preoccupied with social conventions. At the time of our interview she was pregnant and homeless, living with her whole family on the sofas of various friends while she and her boyfriend looked for a room they could afford together. Tomasa was always dressed in hip urban sportswear, ready to dance at a party, lead the cheers at a rally, and was outgoing and friendly on the street and within the women’s organization as well. Walking around the neighborhood with her, I noticed how she enthusiastically greeted people she knew, including a flamboyant neighborhood drag queen, with waves, kisses, and questions about their well-being. She was an expert at the Mexican verbal art of the *albur*, or good-natured back and forth sexual humor that culminates in one party cleverly out-joking the other, usually at her or his expense. As the object of many of Tomasa’s good-hearted but quite pointed *albures*, I knew her as an intellectually powerful figure who projected confidence with her own sexuality and comfort with others’ differences as well. This is why it was something of a revelation to me to hear her narrate her own history with a powerful emphasis on very traditional ideas about gender roles.

Though she had left her first husband several years before I met her, Tomasa emphasized how that relationship was critical to transforming her sense of her own rights and autonomy. As Tomasa talked about her first marriage, she shook her head, marveling at how she’d been so confused by her husband’s anger towards her, even though she had done everything she was supposed to do as a good wife and mother. At several points, she returned to this same unresolved contradiction in her mind. How could he have treated her so badly when she was living up to all her responsibilities in the home and with their children? She had been raised to believe that it would be enough to care well for her children, husband, and home; yet no matter how clean her home, how well-groomed her children or how good her meals, she could not win her husband’s affection or regard:

I would pray to God, asking why I loved him if he was so bad to me? And always, I had always been a clean woman, a cooking woman, a woman who always had her children well groomed, even if their clothes were modest, they were always clean. They always go to school clean, very clean. I’ve never

wanted to be someone that others tell, “Ma’am, your daughter is dirty, you need to change her.” No. They were always clean, always bathed, and fed three times a day. The bathrooms in the apartments where I have lived, I clean those bathrooms daily. They are very clean, because of all the sicknesses that are out there. And also so that everything is sanitary. I always cleaned the bathrooms daily, daily, daily, daily; one has to always be cleaning. The stove was always clean. Everything.¹⁹

In her stories about that period of her life, she returns to her ritualized role as the good housewife, remembering every detail of her efforts, to remind herself how hard she tried and how the violence she experienced was not her fault. Tomasa’s insistence on hygiene and cleanliness was not only the affirmation of a proper performance by an ideal wife and mother; it was a counter-discourse to the culturally dominant representations of immigrants to the United States and their children as unkempt and unsanitary rather than properly hygienic citizen material. However, the discourse of traditional gender roles and domestic hygiene was a dead-end for her in that it alone did not help her understand the cycle of violence and substance abuse in her marriage.

When a neighbor noticed her struggles with violence at home and reached out to her, Tomasa agreed to accompany her to the precursor group that eventually became *Mujeres Unidas*. She explained that it was through participating in the women’s group discussions and organized leadership trainings that she developed a conceptual framework from which to reevaluate and change her situation. The way she came to understand her own feelings and social position was neither individualistic nor apolitical. Rather, she came to see herself in the context of economic and political factors such as the systematic practice of discrimination against Latinos/as and contemporary anti-immigrant sentiment:

And when I took those [leadership] trainings [about immigrant rights] and I saw more women with problems and I saw that I wasn’t the only one suffering . . . So I said, “Here I have to change because this doesn’t have to continue like this.” So it was like that little plant that when you give it some water, when you water it, you are giving it life, you are giving it the opportunity to flower, to grow, like a guide that keeps growing. So

that’s how I see my life since I started coming here until now. Because now I am a woman who, with all my problems, has moved forward with my six children. Although we have gone through many things, problems, they have given me trouble and many things have happened, but I think that if I weren’t here in the group, if I didn’t have all the information that I have now, I think I would be a ruined woman.²⁰

Knowing Tomasa after she had been through all of these struggles and processed them herself and with her peers, it was difficult for me to imagine her as the wilted flower she described. Indeed, Tomasa cited immigration at an early age and the resulting isolation from her own family and friends as the source of her vulnerability. “I was so scared of being alone, so scared. I had never felt such fear before.”²¹ She emphasized the importance of the combination of good information combined with collective dialogue, support, and activism in her own story of transformation. Tomasa cited “putting everything in my name” (“poniendo todo a mi nombre”) as an important and risky series of steps she took after joining the women’s group. Not long after she began attending meetings, she began to allow herself to trust others outside of her home and family, including her welfare caseworker. Tomasa told the social worker of her difficulty in getting her husband to turn over the benefits checks to her to feed and clothe her children: “He would threaten me. Since I didn’t know my rights or anything, he’d say to me ‘If you don’t give me the money, I’ll go to the social worker and tell them to take it from you.’ And I said, ‘If they take it away from me, what are the children going to eat?’”²²

Not only did the social worker remove her husband’s name from the checks, but when Tomasa went to the next women’s group meeting and shared her experience at the welfare office, her peers told her she could also change the telephone and utility bills, and even the apartment, to her name. She then embarked on a whole series of transgressions—crossing over previous boundaries that had seemed mysterious and even frightening:

Oooh. I felt so happy when they told me that! Well, later he got mad. “You think you’re something because you have everything in your name!” After I began training myself to be like the father and mother at the same time. But I did feel I was bearing a very heavy burden. I would say, “Go pay the rent?

Me?” Even just going, because he never let me go anyplace so I didn’t know where to go to pay anything. I did know what street it was, but the first time I went to pay rent, I was so scared. Trembling!²³

For Tomasa, her willingness to break her husband’s rules and attend the new women’s group, as well as her subsequent capacity to risk transgression and trust in peer solidarity, allowed for major change in her life. She shared these developments with peers in the group at the time and in subsequent years to collectivize her experience, to inform, and to prompt further dialogue with other women. It was years later that she finally separated from her husband. Tomasa herself had never been willing to complain to the police because her husband was in the process of applying for legal permanent residency. She was concerned for him and for how it might affect his application for residency. Although she laughed self-consciously at having worried about *him*, she continues to feel sympathy and solidarity with the father of her children.

As did many other women, Tomasa infused her personal narrative with commentary on the legal and economic structures shaping the course of her own, her family’s, and other immigrants’ lives. Tomasa spoke of the stresses immigration and illegality impose on immigrant men like her husband, who had always thought he would be able to support his children through his own hard work, but to whom economic opportunities were not available as an uneducated, non-English speaking worker of color. Tomasa refused to make excuses for his behavior, but believed that this stress, the discrimination he experienced, and his sense of powerlessness over his own life contributed to his abusive behavior to her. In the course of her interview, she also made reference to the 1994 Violence Against Women Act, which she had once hoped would (but later was told by an attorney would not) allow her to legalize as the common-law wife of a battering legal permanent resident. In addition, she referred to her and many other women’s terrible fears of the 245i clause (“La 245”) of the 1996 immigration reforms that provides for ten year bans on re-entry to the U.S. for anyone found to have lived illegally in the United States. Tomasa learned about these laws and policies in the women’s group, where she also participated in numerous dialogues among members about how different group members experienced such structural forces and discipline in their own lives, as well as in many organizing and outreach

efforts aimed at informing other immigrants and working to change such policies and practices.

Personal Transgressions and Social Transformation

Our analyses of politics and contest, legal entitlements and rights, law and culture need to address the ways that subjectivity, intimate relationships, and the affective realm factor into people’s relationships to the state as well as to one another. Tomasa and Caridad shared with other members of their community organization a vernacular of citizenship, rights, and entitlement that they improvised and elaborated in individual as well as group narratives. They insisted on the importance of gaining autonomy and influence in the family and household, and the particular importance of issues of language, culture, economics, and gender in their daily lives. They did not emphasize personal transformations in consciousness over and above group political action. Rather, by struggling for voice simultaneously in intimate and public, individual, and collective contexts, their understanding of political agency emphasized claiming legal rights, positively contributing to one’s community through service, and necessarily some transformation of household and personal relationships as part of this process.

These women’s stories and experiences represent gendered notions of citizenship that extend beyond the stratified and ritualized realm of state-oriented politics, even as they are enacted on the ground tangibly and consequentially in real political contest at home and in the local community. If we take these seriously as both theoretical and practical interventions, what happens to state hegemony over the boundaries of national belonging and political agency? At the very least we expand the range of realms and discourses that are relevant to our analyses of politics, agency, and the transformation of political subjectivity.

Highly personal stories map women’s processes of political transformation and development as grassroots community activists. Narrators constitute their social roles and rights in part through the repetitive invocation of identities that make sense in the context of the governing rules about what constitutes a legitimate citizen-subject.²⁴ I use the self-consciously “impure”²⁵ shorthand of “domestic citizenship” to call attention to the diverse and distinctly gendered struggles women face and the narratives they construct about their intimate relationships and households as part of their coming to participate in publicly enacted collective claims against the state.

These renditions of citizenship that are produced at the community

level highlight, without reinscribing, the public/private, domestic/political realms of contest over personhood and citizenship. They offer opportunities to retheorize citizenship, nationality, and global systems of power and inequality in ways that account for subjective experiences like family relations and personal transformation. As we reconsider what constitutes resistance in the face of the bleak hegemonic ideologies and global forces of today, Caridad Navarro, Tomasa Hernández, and their colleagues offer important analytical interventions and exemplary daily practices of citizenship. It is harder to despair and more reasonable to hope for a reinvigoration of what it means to belong, feel entitled, and contribute to this society when Caridad assures us that she “is not lost” and Tomasa articulates that despite all appearances, she is hardly “a ruined woman.” Such complex, resistant discourses of subjectivity are closely tied to women’s capacity to act collectively and politically and offer both political and analytical “resources for hope” through a feminist rearticulation of cultural citizenship and a new politics of belonging (Pratt).

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Notes

- 1 This phrase owes much to, but is also distinct from, Nira Yuval-Davis' formulation of "multilayered citizenship" as involving levels of membership and belonging, from the local to ethnic to national and transnational ("The 'Multilayered Citizen'").
- 2 I distinguish between family and household relationships because most of the women I encountered in this research shared close living quarters with extended kin, in-laws, friends and/or strangers.
- 3 For a critical feminist analysis of the concept and strategy of "empowerment" as deployed in late-twentieth century social movements, see Cruikshank.
- 4 The ethnographic fieldwork on which this essay is based was part of a larger project on cultural citizenship, immigration, and women's grassroots political participation (Coll, "Motherhood and Cultural Citizenship").
- 5 The "Manos Cariñosas/Caring Hands" project was open to members with six months or more of participation in the group and participants in this project attend weekly meetings of their own for ongoing support, usually in addition to participating in other group activities. Many women reported to me that they first visited the organization's office in the hopes of finding work, but were surprised to find that they enjoyed general meetings and became more active over time in the social and political life of the group.

- 6 Propositions 187, 227, and 209, respectively.
- 7 See also Eithne Luibhéid's chapter in this volume.
- 8 Reported in *Coll Motherhood and Cultural Citizenship* and "Necesidades y problemas."
- 9 "Entonces dije bueno, yo te aguanté muchas cosas pero una cachetada no te la voy a aguantar, entonces marqué 9-1-1." Interview 9/20/96.
- 10 "No estoy en un lecho de rosas pero comparando con aquel lugar, estoy bien."
- 11 "Dije no, ¡yo no creo en esas personas!"
- 12 "Yo no creo en eso."
- 13 "Le dije no, yo a ese edificio no me meto le dije, porque son puras mujeres perversas. No dijo . . . el tercer piso es de las latinas. Mmm . . . pues vamos a ver de que se trata, y vine y me gustó el grupo, no son perversas, son personas como yo, que han te . . . han sufrido, han pasado experiencias, y un día les dije en el grupo ¿saben por qué no venía? Por esto y por esto otro y todas se morían de risa. Todas pensamos lo mismo: que somos bien degeneradas, somos mujeres que se drogan, o que son mujeres pensamos, tenemos una mente muy mal para estas mujeres, pero ahora invito yo a muchas personas."
- 14 The figurative term women used to describe such dialogue was "desahogarse"—literally, to release or unchoke oneself.
- 15 "Bueno yo, me gusta a mí siempre si voy en el bus con alguien que conozco, o me hace plática, siempre me gusta informar a la gente. Por ejemplo, cuando veo mujeres así, les invito aquí a Mujeres y todas están como yo [estaba antes], erradas, están pensando que muchos nos critican. A mí me duele mucho que me han dicho en mi cara: no, eso para las mujeres que no tienen que hacer, eso es para mujeres dejadas del marido, eso es para mujeres que ya andan muy perdidas."
- 16 Caridad explained to me that most women she meets in everyday life lack the information they need to understand the current social and political context affecting everything from their children's schools to their own access to healthcare and housing. Hers is not a missionary spirit, but rather a democratizing orientation towards the key resource of good information which many immigrants and working people are cut off from. Having access to and sharing good information that people need is part of her everyday practice of citizenship and I met women she had spoken with in this way who came to the group and later began reaching out to others in similar fashion.
- 17 "La mujer es de la casa, la mujer no tiene que andar en la calle. Y si andas en la calle andas buscando otro y tienes que hacer comida y tienes que limpiar. Ese es un infierno, es un infierno."

- 18 “Digo, no, yo no estoy perdida. Si, y me defiendo ahora. No le digo, lo que pasa que . . . que no estás bien informada. Mira, yo les digo ¿verdad? yo tengo mis hijos, yo donde vivo estoy encargada de hacer la limpieza, tengo que hacer de comer. La gente me critica porque me ve en la calle. Ahora yo digo, qué les importa. Ando en la calle, hago mis deberes según yo, vengo a mujeres unidas. Mi horario lo acomodo, a mi nada me perjudica. Tan les tengo comida a mis hijos, como limpio la casa, aunque sea en la tarde, en la noche, en la madrugada. Todo hago y puedo venir aquí. Porque no, no, crea que soy muy trabajadora.”
- 19 “Yo me ponía allí a pedirle a dios que ¿porqué lo quería si el era tan malo conmigo. Y siempre cuando, siempre he sido una mujer limipa, una mujer cocinera, una mujer que siempre traigo a los niños arreglados, aunque este pobremente, pero bien limpiecitos. Siempre van a la escuela bien limpios, bien limpios. A mí nunca me ha llamado la atención que me digan, ‘Señora, su niña la trae sucia, tiene que cambiarla.’ No. Siempre bien cambiaditos, bien bañaditos. Y comida, tres veces al día. Los baños del apartamento donde yo he vivido, diario, diario tengo que lavar los baños, bien limpiecitos, porque tantas enfermedades que hay. Y también para una buena higiene. Siempre los baños diarios, diarios, diarios, diarios se tiene que estar lavando. La estufa diario bien lavada. Todo.”
- 20 “Y cuando yo agarré estos entrenamientos y que yo miraba a más mujeres con problemas y que yo miraba que yo no era la única que estaba sufriendo. Entonces, yo dije, ‘aquí tengo que cambiar porque esto no tiene que continuar sufriendo.’ Entonces, yo dije, ‘aquí tengo que cambiar porque esto no tiene que continuar así. Entonces fue como esa plantita que le hechas agua, que la estás regando, que la estás dando vida, que la estás dando la oportunidad que florezca, que crezca, como una guía que va creciendo. Entonces así es como yo miro a mi vida desde cuando yo entré aquí hasta ahorita. Porque ahorita soy una mujer, que, con problemas y todo, he salido adelante con mis seis niños. Aunque hemos pasado por muchas cosas, problemas, me han dado problemas ellos, muchas cosas han pasado, pero yo pienso que si yo no estaría aquí en este grupo, yo no tuviera toda la información que tengo ahorita, yo pienso que yo fuera una mujer derrotada.”
- 21 “Yo tenía tanto miedo a la soledad, pero mucho miedo. Antes no me daba miedo.”
- 22 “El me amenazaba, como yo no sabía mis derechos ni nada, decía, ‘si no me das dinero, me voy a ir con la trabajadora social y decirle que te lo quite.’ Y yo decía, ‘si me lo quite, y los niños, qué van a comer.”
- 23 “Ooo, yo me sentía tan contenta cuando me dijeron eso! Pues, después se enojaba: ‘Te crees mucho porque tienes todo a tu nombre!’ Después me fui yo capacitando para yo ser como el padre de familia y madre a la vez. Pero si se sentía una carga muy pesada. Yo decía ‘¿ir a pagar la renta?’ Nomás de

ir, porque como él no me dejaba a mi salir a ningún lado, entonces yo no sabía donde pagaba nada. Si sabía cual era la calle, pero la primera vez que yo fui a pagar renta, yo iba bien asustada. ¡Temblando!”

- 24 See for example Kath Weston as well as Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*. My own fieldwork experience confirms that one’s identity as woman was constructed in and through repetition of citational practice of identity, politics, and in this case, resistant subjectivity.
- 25 “Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a ‘pure’ opposition, a ‘transcendence’ of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure” (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 241).