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# Not Coming Out, but Building Home: An Oral History in Re-conceptualizing a Queer Migrant Home

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**Abstract:** A feminist study and oral history based in the “coming out” experiences of a Third World, Zapotec-Oaxacan, working-class immigrant woman. Discussion of community issues around queer sexualities, dominant narratives, and home building; brings attention to little-cited scholarship and theory on practices within minority communities.

**Key Terms:** Queer migration; Queer organizing; Non-normative genders and sexualities; Notions of home and homebuilding; Coming out

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## INTRODUCTION

The growing field of queer migration has theorized queer migrants’ intersections of sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and citizenship, whether in cultural production, the impact that policy has in their lives, or in their quotidian practices (Cantú, 2009; Luibhéid, 2002; Manalansan, 2003; Gopinath, 2005; Chávez, 2011, 2013). It has largely challenged dominant gay and lesbian discourses for uncritically reproducing Western, racist, and settler colonial ideologies that invisibilize and further marginalize queer migrants (Manalansan, 1998; Wekker, 2003; Puar, 2007).

This article contributes to the growing scholarship on queer migration by presenting the story of a queer Mexicana migrant who, by embodying her intersectional experiences, disrupts the practice of equating “coming out” with the idea of “coming home” or “arriving home.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, she demonstrates how she builds a sense of home through the conditions under which she lives, challenging the erasure of queer migrant narratives within dominant discourses. Systems of power within academia have demonstrated little interest in centering the voices of marginalized groups or using community-based methods to do so. This study uses oral history to disrupt the lack of visibility of queer migrants’ narratives within scholarship. It generates a critique from the narrator’s own daily experiences of living a queer migrant life to show how we can build theory and interpretation from grounded ethnographic research.<sup>2</sup>

This study is based on the oral history of Kitzia, a self-identified queer Mexicana, Zapoteca, Oaxaqueña,

Third World, and working-class woman, who, when interviewed in December 2012, was living and engaging in political activism in Los Angeles. She was twenty-five years old. Her experiences disclose that queer sexualities are a continuous negotiation of survival, and that creating a sense of home involves building intersectional communities of trust, survival, and resistance. Borrowing from queer Latino oral historian, Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, this article is “part of a historiographic activism” that privileges “the reconstruction of community narratives” (2008, 182). As an activist who is socially and politically conscious of the layers of marginalization she faces, Kitzia Esteva has much to offer about homebuilding. She challenges “coming out” as the normative and over-simplified construct of a queer home. Meanwhile, she demonstrates that constructing home is building communities of trust and compassion with those around her.

By bringing Esteva’s story to the forefront,<sup>3</sup> I interrogate the common assumption that “coming out” is an “arriving home” for all queer individuals. That is, I question the idea that coming out is always *the* queer liberation. I suggest that the closet is instead a constant negotiation as Esteva continues to survive in a system that was never built to serve her needs. I then discuss the difficulties of creating a sense of home as a queer migrant woman in the U.S. Finally, I analyze the ways in which she offers alternative ways of conceptualizing home that are intersectional, encompassing her positions as a queer immigrant woman of color and a political activist. In doing so, she builds family and community

ties within and outside her immediate family. Building homes that are intersectional creates political spaces that allow for survival as a queer, working-class, Indigenous, undocumented, migrant woman.

### ORAL HISTORY AS METHOD

Oral history as method offers its own alternative understanding and construction of knowledge. In contrast to quantitative research, it does not intend to prove something about an entire population; in this case, about all queer migrant Latinas living in the U.S. An in-depth analysis of Esteva's story demonstrates that individual queer migrant stories matter, not only because the lives of queer migrant individuals are important, but also because they can offer additional ways of understanding systemic violence. Marginalized communities are not only numbers. They have individual and complex stories that illuminate from new perspectives, systems of power, historical events, time and space, and day-to-day resistance. Given the few available written and oral archives about queer migrants, in writing this article I follow the footsteps of oral historians Roque Ramírez and Alamilla Boyd when they indicate that those who study marginalized groups, "where no documents or acid-free folders existed, researchers set out to create them" (5). This article therefore serves as a place where Esteva's words are archived in a particular time and space as I record her speaking back to heteronormative ideologies, dominant gay and lesbian discourses, and anti-immigration policies in the U.S.

Utilizing oral history in this manner belongs to the project of decolonizing academic research. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a professor of Education and Maori Development in New Zealand, argues that research has historically been a Western and colonizing practice that "desire[s], extract[s], and claim[s] ownership of our [Indigenous] ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously rejects the people who create and develop those ideas" (1). However, "Indigenous peoples across the world have other stories to tell," which, on the one hand, challenges the narratives that Western research generates, and on the other, retells Western colonial history through their own eyes (2). Similarly, oral history, as Paul Thompson defines it, "is a history built around people" (28). It has the potential to serve the purpose that Smith suggests as a method that can "recover neglected or silenced accounts of past experience, as a

way of challenging dominant histories which underpin repressive attitudes and policy" (Perks and Thomson, 183). Consequently, this article is both one that documents Esteva's experiences as these challenge dominant accounts of sexuality, and one that decolonizes methodology.

### NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

I utilize the term "queer" to refer to Esteva's social and political position as non-heterosexual, but also to speak of non-normative genders and sexualities. Additionally, I turn to Eithne Luibhéid and Karma Chávez in their approach to queerness. Luibhéid's use of "queer" is "a call to transform, rather than to seek accommodation within existing social structures" (2005, x). Chávez, borrowing from José Esteban Muñoz, sees it as something that "implies what is possible for making lives livable" (6). My use of the term "queer," therefore, also reflects Esteva's commitment to challenging systems of power in order to make her life—and the lives of those around her—more livable, by creating a sense of home.

When Esteva first realized she was in love with another woman, she saw herself as a lesbian. The moment she disclosed her sexuality to her mother she used the term bisexual, and for years she has identified as queer. She came to understand "queer" as a term that is open, encompassing different genders, sexualities, and radical politics (while recognizing that not all self-identified queer people embrace radical politics). Esteva is in continuous conversations about the meaning of queerness for herself and the communities with whom she organizes. At the time of our interview, she saw "queer" as a political term that goes beyond orientation, countering binaries of gender and sexuality, and speaking to the politics of resistance. Further, she has been part of the UndocuQueer movement, which employs "queer" in organizing non-normative undocumented communities. "Queer" in UndocuQueer, as Chávez suggests, often emphasizes self-empowerment, acceptance, and identity of undocumented migrants whose genders and sexualities are non-normative, and where the goal is to achieve their legalization and liberation (102, 104). The movement and Esteva's involvement in it reflect their use of the term as a non-rigid and non-normative identity, as well as a struggle against hegemonic power. Thus, in this piece, I utilize "queer" as a political term that speaks to identity, but also as one that challenges normative genders and sexualities, and interrogates larger systems of power.

### KITZIA'S MIGRATION STORY

Born and partly raised in Mexico City, Esteva spent the first fifteen years of her life moving between Mexico City and the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz with her family. At the age of thirteen, her mother, sister, and two nephews (one of them had been diagnosed with leukemia) migrated to the U.S., while she moved in with an aunt in Mexico City. In 2003, her father, who had been separated from her mother for several years, migrated with Esteva to the U.S., and the city of Oakland, where he stayed for about a year before returning to Mexico. Here she tells her experience crossing the border:

The first time we [her and her father] were in the desert, we were walking and walking, and walking, and then there was a point when we ran out of water. I was like, "Damn, we're not going to make it," you know? It just felt like an infinite amount of hours. I remember we left before the sunrise and then it was the sunset and we were still walking. It got really dark. At some point, the coyote that was directing us around decided to go see if he could find the person who was supposed to pick us up on the highway. Eventually we made it there [to the highway], but the border patrol intercepted us. And I remember being like "Damn! All this walking!" And you know ... in my mind it felt like it was days, but obviously it wasn't ... maybe it was twenty hours of walking before we were intercepted [...]. The moments when I couldn't be with my dad were scary. But overall, I just felt, I don't know, I was on a mission to be here with my family, so it was worth the risk for me. I had a lot of fear that my nephew was going to die and I wasn't going to see him again. I think that was in my mind the whole time. I was like, "You know what, I'm almost there, I'm going to see him, he might still be alive and it's going to be okay" [...] The few times that we were

separated for different reasons, I was, not freaking out, but I definitely felt fear. But yeah, I mean, other people were doing it [migrating]. And I think what was difficult was that I was usually the young girl of the group that was trying to cross, and everybody else was a guy. The way I remember it was mostly as something I accomplished. Like beating death and beating the migra,<sup>4</sup> beating the U.S. in some ways. Definitely there were times that I was like, "Oh man, why can't my family just go back? I don't want to be doing this," and [...] also feeling like I was leaving something really important behind. I remember the last time we crossed. I remember looking back and kind of being like, "This is it, I'm not going to see Mexico for a long time." I remember looking out in the distance and kind of just saying my goodbyes in my heart. And I remember that being really fucking difficult. I remember thinking, "Something was just taken away from me" and seeing it go away and walking away. I guess that's when I realized that this time we were going to make it to the other side. It was a realization that I was finally saying bye because I was going to make it. It felt good that I had that certainty, but at the same time I was like, damn, goodbye.

After September 11, 2001, the U.S.-Mexico border became increasingly secured and since then has been undergoing a process of further militarization in order to "fight terrorism." In the words of Patricia Zavella, "those racialized as nonwhite became increasingly scrutinized and seen as security threats" (39). As Esteva reflects, she felt scared being the only young woman in a group of men, especially when she was not with her father. When the border patrol arrested them, her father was taken to a jail cell while she was asked to wait in what she remembers being a lobby-area. She was afraid the officers would tell her to go home on her own. Not knowing where she

was, she wondered how she would find her way back to Mexico, or her way forward to Oakland. Feminist scholars, Sylvanna Falcón and María de la Luz Ibarra, have documented that part of the systematic militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border involves sexual violence, often by border patrol agents and coyotes against female border crossers (Falcón, 119; Ibarra, 276). Despite the violence she knew occurred while migrating, Esteva was “on a mission” to be in the U.S. with her family and willing to take the risks that crossing the border implied. After her father was released, they crossed again, that time reaching Oakland. Her feelings of accomplishment, and of beating the U.S. *migra*, surfaced from knowing that despite the imperialist power of the U.S. they managed to evade its immigration control and join her family.

For economic reasons and due to her nephew’s illness, Esteva left her home in Mexico to move to another country. Saying goodbye to Mexico, where she hasn’t been back since 2003, marked the beginning of a new chapter in her life, as an immigrant, a woman of color, a non-English speaker, and a non-citizen in the U.S. It would also be in the U.S. where she would get in touch with, and explore, her queerness.

#### “THE CLOSET” THROUGH A QUEER MIGRANT LENS

Being an immigrant and being in this country did give me a few tools; I don’t know, I feel like being an immigrant, this conversation of being undocumented, shaped a little bit of the queerness stuff, at least to a degree where I was like, “Well this is another dimension of oppression that I have to experience.” Some of it felt painful and difficult, and definitely there wasn’t always this space where I am now, where I feel comfortable with it, I feel happy about it, and it brings me a lot of pride [...] There was a point where both of them [being undocumented and queer] felt really oppressive. They felt like categories that were imposed. But I think that there are a lot of things that connect with each other. One of them is my

consciousness because I understand everything in political terms; the more I grow older the more that is the case. That’s not to take the emotional aspect [for granted] because politics, for me at least, are very emotional. I feel like the understanding of exclusion from the perspective of being undocumented or being an immigrant, and also being a woman, and being queer, makes more sense—all of it. The framework of all the different “isms,” like capitalism, patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, heterosexism, all of those things, it makes sense to me because I experience the exclusion in so many ways that I’m like, “Oh, they’re all connected, and they’re all bad, and we must get rid of them.” In some ways, even though I believe a lot in self-determination [...] I feel happy that I had the fate that I had. It was meant for me to be who I am because, from experience, from the emotional aspect of what it is, I’ve learned a lot more than reading a book. There’s a lot of wisdom from experiencing it on an emotional level. [It] makes you more compassionate for other people. When somebody else would say, “Somebody needs to come out of the closet,” that doesn’t come from a place of compassion. So in many ways, what has shaped my identity is learning to have compassion for different people, for myself, learning to do away with shame, and continue the process—it’s always a process and sometimes it’s a regressive process.

Esteva’s political consciousness emerges from her intersectional experiences, as well as from her mother, who has been a political activist since they lived in Mexico, and continues her political work in the Bay area of Northern California. Esteva became politicized early on. She also attended college, and was a student activist in queer and student of color spaces.

Unlike much of the existing research on queer migration, which is mostly on gay men, Esteva did not migrate “while being queer.” She came to identify as queer once she lived in the U.S., about a year later. While she is a queer immigrant, her experience shows the complexity of queer migration, and allows for a fluid understanding of the interconnectedness of queerness and migration. Her experiences as an undocumented, racialized immigrant in the U.S. have impacted how she understands her own queerness today. Being an undocumented immigrant showed her what it was like to be an outsider and to be put into categories she had never used for herself before. It gave her the tools to understand her queerness, which at the beginning felt oppressive. Had she not had the immigrant experience, she might have had a very different process coming to terms with her sexuality. Currently, in her political activism, she uses both social positions—immigrant and queer—as political tools to gain visibility for the queer migrant movement. While she faces oppression from both social positions, she now also sees them as experiences that make her stronger and more compassionate.

Compassion for fellow queers comes from knowing first that “coming out” is not a “coming home,” per se. For queer people of color, revealing their non-normative genders and sexualities is not always an option. In Esteva’s case, not always disclosing her sexuality has been a method of physical, economic, and emotional survival. For instance, the first time she fell in love with another woman was at the age of sixteen, when she was in high school (while living with her mother in Oakland). As noted here, the circumstances of her relationship demonstrate the particular negotiations some queer migrant women need to make.

I fell in love with somebody in high school. With this girl who fucking broke my heart. It’s funny because my mom doesn’t know about it, [but] she was actually doing an internship at the organization where my mom used to work. She just had a lot of shit going on in her life and with her family, too, so you know, I’ve forgiven her or whatever (laughs). That was the first time [in my life] that I was like, “Oh, I definitely like her.” I always just kind

of experienced looking at people and feeling attracted to different people, and I never made much of it. I wasn’t like, “that’s scary” or, I don’t know. I kind of just accepted it. But I guess falling in love is different. And that’s when I was like, “Oh, I’m definitely a lesbian!” and for a while I was like, “I’m a lesbian!” I remember coming to this conclusion with my girlfriend at the time, and she was like, “Don’t tell your family, you’re crazy.” I was just so excited, I was like, “Damn, I’m a lesbian! Yeah! Let’s make this happen!” But she was like, “No, don’t tell them, you need to chill, first of all ‘cuz, you know, I work with your mom, so my job is on the line.” You know, she just had [...] a lot of shit she was dealing with.

Esteva did not share with her mother about her sexuality until she was twenty years old (although when she was seventeen, her mother asked if she was a lesbian, to which she responded no). This was the first time Esteva and her ex-partner were in a same-sex relationship. Their decision to not disclose their relationship was a difficult one, not only because it was a same-sex relationship, but it was also influenced by their positions as working-class and undocumented immigrant women. In the case of her ex-partner, who was afraid of her family’s reaction, not knowing what she would do if she was kicked out of the house, she also knew her job would be on the line. Being undocumented, it would not have been easy to find a new job and a new home at the same time.

Their mutual decisions to not reveal their relationship influenced how Esteva came to see queerness. Later, after other experiences and conversations, she shifted her understanding of what it means to be “out” as a lesbian, which is often perceived in binary terms: you are either “out” (out and proud) or you are “in the closet” (and internally oppressed). Queer of color scholar, Martin Manalansan, problematizes this binary, arguing that the coming out narrative is based on Western definitions of same-sex practices (1997, 486). In *Global Divas*, his book on gay Filipino men in New York City, Manalansan found that “coming out, or becoming publicly visible, is not a uniform process that can be generalized across different national



cultures" (1997, 501). It also cannot be universalized to encompass different and complex experiences of brown, working-class, undocumented immigrant women. That is, "coming out" does not translate to a sense of "arriving home" for everyone. It is not always an act of liberation for *all* queers at *all* times. Similarly, remaining "in the closet" is not the same for everyone, given the power structures that queer migrants and queer people of color must navigate. As noted above, Esteva originally wanted to disclose her first same-sex relationship and was excited to see herself as a lesbian, but that was not the case for her ex-partner. They each needed to navigate the visibility of their relationship based on the constraints of their daily lives. Economic survival—keeping a job and housing—were key factors for each. Disclosing their relationship would not have meant being a liberated modern lesbian couple, due to the systems that marginalize them for being immigrant, women, queer, brown, working-class, and undocumented. The intersectionality of their social positions created the conditions for them to keep their relationship private. Queer visibility, thus, is a continuous negotiation of circumstances.

On the other hand, queer of color critiques have noted that "coming out" is not a one-time process (Fortier, 2001; Eng, 1997). Coming out also does not speak only to sexuality. For Esteva, coming out is—in her work as a political activist—a constant process depending on the spaces where she moves at different times. Thus, she *now* has come out multiple times. In her political organizing, it has been important to speak about her undocumented status, her political sexual life as polyamorous and queer, and her political ideology as leftist. However, she also strongly believes that not everyone wants to publicly speak about their queerness, as was the case with her first same-sex love, or to publicly declare their undocumented status. She reflected on how those who have citizenship, class, and white privilege are able to announce their queerness at all times and in most spaces where they move. For her, however, always revealing it—or expecting others to do so—does not reflect a home-like place.

#### QUEER INDIGENOUS APPROACH TO "COMING OUT"

I see the closet as a colonialist invention, because, in other cultures—like the Zapotec culture for example,

there's no real secret in the community. You know, if you live in Oaxaca, in Tehuantepec or Juchitán, people just know each other's business. No joke, you would just go and ask anybody about somebody else, and they just know. There's a little bit of judgment value but most of it is just, "How can I support? How can I be of help? How can I be with you?" and I feel like that's not unique to Zapotec culture. There's so many Indigenous cultures, or cultures that might not be quote-unquote Indigenous, that understand queerness on different levels and appreciate it, or respect it, or hold it sacred. So this idea of "you're closeted," or "you have to be in silence," or "you have to be hidden about who you are," is a colonialist imposition. It's just like being undocumented, because you have to protect yourself in order to survive and you have to fight it. So I think that maybe for people that are white and rich, they can see it [the closet] in a different way, but for me, my POC [people of color] reading is that this is a colonialist imposition, and I'll be careful about it.

Esteva offers a sharp and necessary critique of the closet from her Indigenous and migrant positionalities, through centering colonization. She has been in dialogue with fellow political organizers and activists who often create spaces to speak about their experiences as a way to organize their communities against anti-immigrant, heteronormative, and patriarchal policies and norms. Her political consciousness is constantly in motion as a tool for organizing, but also as a personal one to understand the oppression she faces. Being undocumented has taught her that navigating power structures is necessary in order to survive. She utilizes this framework to analyze "coming out," reviewing the impact colonization has had on genders and sexualities, as well as the role that community plays in what is—and is not—known about queer sexualities in different spaces.

The anthropologist, Lynn Stephen, has observed that within Zapotec culture in Oaxaca, *muxe* has come to be understood as a third gender, pushing against binary colonial constructions of gender and sexuality. It is attributed to those who are assigned male at birth, taking on a more feminine role as they grow older. Muxes do not give up their masculinity and engage in romantic relationships with *cis*<sup>5</sup> males and females (43). Spanish colonization in the Americas violently imposed the binary of gender as solely male and female. Yet Oaxaca is an example where there always were “a variety of gender, sexual, and social roles that did not conform to the ideals of a dual male/female gender system” (49). Today, muxes continue disrupting the rigid colonialist binary gender system. As Stephen documents, the Zapotec community in Juchitán, Esteva’s hometown, maintains a tradition of welcoming and respecting muxes (44).

The process of categorizing sexuality as a taboo, and dominant heteronormative systems, are legacies of colonialism for Esteva. Interviewed by ethnographer Megan MacDonald in the Twin Cities area, Beth Brandt, a self-identified Mohawk lesbian, explained, “Our sexuality has been colonized, sterilized, whitewashed ... what the dominant culture has never been able to comprehend is that spirit/sex/prayer/flesh/religion/natural is who I am as a ‘Two-Spirit’” (151). Both Esteva and Brandt articulate contemporary constructions of sexuality as deeply colonized. Political theorist, María Lugones, strengthens this link by arguing that colonialism’s stake in creating and reinforcing the gender binary and heterosexuality is to make up the conditions for racialized patriarchal control over labor and knowledge production (206). In other words, exploitation within a colonialist and capitalist context is made possible by, among other factors, the normative gender and sexuality system.

In Esteva’s view, the colonization of gender and sexuality has been key in creating the construct of the closet, implying secrecy. Disclosing queerness is not always necessary in the Indigenous communities she refers to in Oaxaca, as there is indeed a sense of community where “people just know.” However, when Esteva migrated within Mexico, and then to the U.S., she not only experienced separation from her communities, but also faced additional oppressive colonialist structures. Because colonization plays a significant role in separating communities and creating structural conditions of violence that queer people of color face today, not always

disclosing queerness cannot merely be perceived as an act of internalized oppression. Doing so puts all the weight and sometimes shame on the person, and away from the structures. While Esteva describes the construct of “the closet” as a result from colonization, she is also clear that not revealing it is often necessary in certain circumstances, *precisely* because one continues to live under colonialist systems and ideologies. Navigating these becomes a necessity. There are multiple negative consequences that marginalized queer people of color cannot afford to experience on top of the structural violence they already confront for being people of color, immigrant, and often working-class or poor. She reflects:

I know that it [the closet] is real and that people experience it on a psychological level and at the same time I don’t like it, and I don’t like when people tell me that I’m closeted or when they say, “Oh, so and so is closeted.” It’s like, “Ok, obviously you know, so why don’t you try supporting them?”

Despite the colonialist construct of “the closet”—or perhaps because of it—the relationship that marginalized queer people of color have with coming out narratives is not simple. It is not as clear-cut to state that coming out equals arriving home, and that not doing so is merely an act of internalized oppression, without first looking at the systemic violence that the colonization of gender and sexuality has created over the past centuries. Reinforcing heterosexuality and gender binaries, both built into structures and societal norms, is part of this colonization. Always disclosing queerness, thus, cannot be reduced to being perceived as an act of decolonization for queer people of color. Based on the socio-economic, anti-immigrant, and patriarchal structures in place, it can often be safer not to reveal queerness in contexts where different forms of violence are likely to occur. Navigating such violence is an act of survival and thus of resistance to the many colonialist structures that have been built to marginalize queer people of color. Building communities of trust and compassion, however, has been consistent in Esteva’s life as she engages in creating a sense of home.



## WHERE IS HOME? THE CHALLENGES OF CREATING HOME

It was a different transition because I've lived in DF [Mexico City] and Veracruz and in Oaxaca, so I was kind of used to migrating, *per se*, but I definitely wasn't used to the culture here. And I came to Oakland, to a really fucked up area of Oakland where there was a lot of police brutality, there was a lot of really poor people selling drugs on the streets, a lot of gang violence that I heard about but never actually saw. Sometimes I heard shootings and stuff but I never, like, looked out my window or anything like that. But I do remember a couple of times coming back from school and seeing the police strip search the people that were selling drugs right outside my house. And it was people that I said hi to, that I was familiar with, so it was painful to see that. I never actually saw that in Mexico. Maybe I was a little sheltered from it, I don't know, but it was different. It was in-your-face racism. And so that was painful and difficult [...]. My mom was pretty open about, you know, this is an imperialist power and people here who are Latino or Black have a really tough life. And I came [to the U.S.] with that in mind. But it didn't make any sense because of the pictures and the stuff that you see on TV—it looks completely different. And then when I came [to Oakland] and saw what she meant by that, I was like, "Oh, this is not your standard, 'some people are criminals but it just happens every once in a while.'" It was an everyday thing, like people were beaten up by the police in the street, or they were fighting each other, or they would be selling drugs. I actually never saw anybody sell drugs in

México, and I lived in a neighborhood that wasn't, you know, rich. I lived in a lower-middle class neighborhood, where I guess those kinds of things could happen, I just didn't see them. I don't know. I just kind of felt like, in your face, the poverty and the racism [in Oakland].

When Esteva arrived in the U.S., she became aware of the blatant racism. She quickly had to learn to manage the systemic violence that she faced and witnessed as a young working-class transnational immigrant, such as the institutional racism, poverty, and police brutality in communities of color. Despite experiencing internal migration within Mexico, migrating to the U.S. was a different transition. Knowing how to navigate the oppression within the U.S. —to interpret how others read and perceived her and when she could and could not make herself visible—was a tool she needed to develop for her survival.

Esteva recognized that in her new physical home, poor people of color were targets of structural violence. For many, this could be a crude awakening to the falsity of media images that circulate, portraying the United States as the "American Dream." Esteva's life-long activist mother, as she notes above, taught her early on that the U.S. is an imperialist country. If Esteva was indeed exposed to positive images of the U.S. from Mexican media, she articulated understanding that she would not feel liberated while living in the U.S., which she confirmed after witnessing what she calls "in-your-face racism" in Oakland.

Sociologist Yen Le Espiritu, when speaking of Filipino immigrant families in the U.S., argues, "immigrant subjectivity is a production that is always in process" (215). In other words, migrants constantly create meaning for themselves (208). Similarly, Martin Manalansan, referring to Filipino gay immigrant men, points out that "together with experiences of alienation and displacement come the experiences of rebirth or a second chance" (2003, 17). Despite, or perhaps in some ways due to the difficulties, alienation, and marginalization they experience, many immigrants do not always despair, but "refigure their lives and selves within existing constraints" (149). The process of refiguring lives and selves is what Lionel Cantú calls the "journey of the self" that gay immigrant men in his study experience within such limits (2009, 135).

Esteva's situation is different from those of gay men in Manalansan's and Cantú's studies; she did not migrate while identifying as queer and her queerness was not a factor in her decision to migrate. However, her "journey of the self," as an immigrant who is also queer, has meant navigating social spaces, learning where she can and where she cannot, where it is safe and where it is not, to disclose her queer identity. The systemic violence she has endured and witnessed has had an impact on how she understands her sexuality and her search for "home."

### **BUILDING A POLITICAL HOME**

Esteva's personal journey has been explored through her political organizing:

There's this idea of a political home, right? Like a place where you belong, where your ideas are respected, and where you can have a sense of leadership, empowerment, and all those awesome things. But also where you can be challenged. Sometimes challenging can also be home, you know? [...] There are other organizations that I'm a part of, that I see as family, that I see as a school, that I see as a place to belong, and also a place where I feel a lot of trust, and if I have trust then it doesn't feel so difficult when you're challenged, or when you make a mistake and somebody tells you that it wasn't right, you know? You learn to take it as a lesson. And that's also a lesson, to have those spaces 'cuz you should ask for something you can have in a family, if the family has good ties with each other, if they're people that tell the truth to each other. The truth might be painful, but I feel like a lot of times in political spaces when people are organizing they do a lot of fucked up shit. And we don't have trust with each other, and we'll just kind of go behind each other's backs and talk shit, or get really angry at somebody and then write a piece about it, but [do] not confront the

person. There's power dynamics, of course. But a lot of it comes from not having trust in each other. I feel like something that I really value about the UndocuBus is all of us being able to come out of the shadows with all of our different experiences, and talk about being queer and things that don't usually get talked about in that same intersectional context. It was just really open and really honest. Yeah, that's not always the case in organizing spaces and in political activist spaces where people sometimes get kicks out of being in the movement. It's a hard dilemma [but] to me, finding an organization where people both understand me and support me—that is a political home. Where I work now [...] is a political home to me. I'm going to be with my family and that's another political home. When it is a political home, it takes a lot of commitment; and you learn to deal with all the dynamics, [...] committing to work on the difficult dynamics even though they might be painful and challenging. But in order for you to make that commitment, you have to feel safe, and feel a level of trust for other people. That cannot be built from out of nowhere.

A home, for Esteva, is always in the making, and a never-ending process. Political organizing has been a way for her to find different homes, where she can work with others who are also interested in fighting oppressive systems. The political homes she has found in the U.S. through activism, with fellow undocumented people, including her mother, and importantly, with other queer migrants, has led her to understand that being an immigrant *and* queer come together in her activist work. With fellow organizers, she works to create spaces that put forward the needs of queer migrants—including access to health care and stopping the detention and deportations of non-normative migrants—through political homes of trust and commitment.

In 2012, Esteva joined the UndocuBus campaign, also called the “No Papers, No Fear Ride for Justice” campaign (Chávez, 100), organized by undocumented people throughout the U.S. It was two years after S.B. 1070 in Arizona, and similar state laws were passed to criminalize undocumented immigrants. The UndocuBus began its five-week journey in Phoenix, Arizona, visiting fifteen cities and ending at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina.<sup>6</sup> Its purpose was to challenge the Obama administration for its inaction in stopping the criminalization of immigrants (100). During the campaign, Esteva and her peers (many also queer) formed a political home of support, through honest interactions with one another while fighting for immigrant rights.

Yen Le Espiritu discusses homemaking among Filipino immigrants in the U.S. as part of building political coalitions across differences (2003, 2-3). Those communities of resistance reflect one way in which immigrant women rebuild a sense of political home (Espiritu, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Stephen, 2007). Sociologist Hondagneu-Sotelo, in her research on Mexican communities in Northern California, found that many immigrant women are politically involved in their communities, “mobiliz[ing] their kin, friends, and neighbors to push for school reform for their children” (197). Many were undocumented, and poor or working class. With the well-being of loved ones in mind, their political involvement became an important part of their home and community.

Esteva emphasizes the not always recognized interconnectedness of queer and undocumented communities in a political context. Mainstream gay and lesbian activism seldom takes migrant communities into account, and mainstream immigrant rights work often overlooks queerness. Esteva, however, unites the two in her political organizing, as they are important in her daily struggle. Thus, she participated in the UndocuQueer national movement<sup>7</sup> that bridges both communities, contributing to the visibility of many queer undocumented people. Esteva demonstrates that her migration and queer experiences come together in the process of constructing a home for herself.

## CONCLUSIONS

Coming out is a constant negotiation in Esteva’s personal life, as well as a tool in her political work. Making her queerness visible in her everyday life is not always

safe, just like it is not always safe to reveal she is undocumented, as either or both can be received by different forms of violence (verbal and physical, as well as structural). But within her political work, she has explicitly made her queerness and her immigration status visible, calling attention to the intersectionality of both positions. Coming out to everyone, everywhere cannot be assumed to always constitute a coming home. Instead, as Esteva’s story demonstrates, “home” is a continuous process of building communities of trust and compassion.

Esteva’s narrative is what I would call history in the making.<sup>8</sup> Her experiences and her political activism have developed through and in the face of historical anti-immigrant actions, such as S.B. 1070 in Arizona, and through resistance struggles like the UndocuQueer movement and the UndocuBus campaign. Esteva’s story offers new considerations about homebuilding and a sense of home. As a queer immigrant, she challenges dominant constructions of home through the very act of living and navigating systems of violence, including anti-immigrant, racist, capitalist, and colonialist (reinforcing gender and sexuality normativity) structures. Always disclosing her queerness is not building a home for Esteva. Instead, she negotiates visibility and determines when and where to build homes, when key elements of trust, commitment, and survival are present. As Audre Lorde, lesbian Black feminist, once stated, “We were never meant to survive.” However, Esteva survives and resists a set of structures that were never built to serve her needs. Her voice stands against normative, dominant, and exclusionary constructions of homebuilding.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I mostly utilize the word “migrant” to highlight that Kitzia, like most migrants, has migrated multiple times within and beyond borders, instead of moving once and staying put. However, I also use the term “immigrant” as a reminder that as such, Kitzia cannot escape the structural systems in place that keep her marginalized.
- <sup>2</sup> In this article, I use oral history as a method. That is, I speak about queer migration and re-conceptualize a queer home by bringing forward Kitzia’s story. As Paul Thompson argues, oral history “thrusts life into history itself and it widens its scope” (23). Kitzia’s voice, thus, shapes the argument and widens the scope of queer migration.

- 3 Kitzia wants her real name to be used in the article. As an activist and community organizer, she has shared her migrant experiences publicly. She has also given other interviews with her real name.
  - 4 Migra: colloquial way of referring to the border patrol.
  - 5 Cis refers to gender identity matching the gender assigned at birth. In contrast, trans\* refers to gender identity being different from the gender assigned at birth.
  - 6 <<http://therumpus.net/2012/11/the-rumpus-interview-with-kitzia-esteva/>>
  - 7 The term "UndocuQueer" is attributed to Julio Salgado, an artist based in San Francisco and a self-identified queer and undocumented activist (Chavez, 81).
  - 8 Borrowing from Roque Ramírez and Alamilla Boyd as they explain the importance of archiving marginalized people's stories/histories (2012).
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