LATINA WOMEN NAVIGATE THE BENEFITS AND HARMS OF A COLLEGE EDUCATION

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree

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In
Human Sexuality Studies

by
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read Latina Women Navigate the Benefits and Harms of a College Education by Michelle Parra, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Human Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University.

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Scholars who study the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality have found that education is both beneficial and harmful for girls and women of color. To understand the specific implications of college for Latina young women, I conducted qualitative interviews with Latina undergraduates. All were working-class, first-generation students at a large public university in California; all had immigrant parents possessing little to no formal education. Analysis indicates Latina daughters and parents believe formal education will result in daughters having a life free of the exploitation parents have endured. However, as daughters pursue a college degree, they encounter a tension: in seeking a better life, they risk marking their parents' lives as undesirable and, in doing so, risk hurting their parents.
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Latina Women Navigate the Benefits and Harms of a College Education

The hardest thing since I left for college is being apart from my mom. She is very important to me. Sometimes we go through difficult times, her there [back home], or me over here [college]. Just not having that connection and not being able to be physically close. I think it is one of the hardest things. It is separation and a result of that separation. It is the disconnection that comes from being away, or from me growing into a different person, and her trying to understand who I am becoming and what I am doing.

-Aurora, third-year Latina college student

What does it mean for Aurora to describe being apart from her mother as her most difficult experience since leaving for college? Aurora’s narrative, like many of the participants in this study, highlights one of the implications that occurs when they leave their parents’ home—“disconnection.” The disconnection Aurora describes, or as I call it tension, arises between daughters and their parents’ as a result of moving away to college. Aurora understands the tension between her and her mother as physical and
emotional distance, and believes it is a result of “growing into a different person.” Aurora is not alone in her experience, many participants echo her sentiment and describe the multiple ways in which college education creates tensions between them and their parents. Yet Aurora, and other participants, indicate throughout their interviews that education is a shared goal for them and their parents. “My mother always pushed education on me as far it being a source of social mobility,” explains Aurora. Aurora’s narrative, like the rest of participants, is contradicting and leaves me with multiple questions. How could pursuing a college education, a common goal for parents and daughters, also be a source of tension? Who is Aurora becoming and what is causing her to grow into a different person?

The central empirical aim of this study is to consider how a college education is beneficial and harmful for Latina college students. To understand Aurora’s experience, like the other participants in this study, I draw on intersectional feminist research. Feminist scholars have found that education is both beneficial and harmful for girls and women of color (Tolman 2002; Fine and McClelland 2006; Fields 2008; García 2012). Researchers who study the educational experiences of Latinas through the intersections of race, gender, education, and the family have found that parents play a central role in daughters’ educational experiences. Additionally, scholars who study the entanglement of gender, sexuality, and schooling have found that daughters’ educational aspirations, like Aurora’s, are particularly influenced by their mothers (Hurtado 2003; Zavella 2003; Ayala 2006; Romo, et al. 2006). Daughters learn from their mothers that education holds
the promise of a better life—one free from the gendered and sexual exploitation they have endured.

In the pages that follow, I detail the benefits and harms of formal education for Latina undergraduate students and their parents. I argue that participants and their parents believe formal education will result in daughters having a life free of the exploitation parents have endured. However, as daughters pursue a college degree, they encounter a tension: in seeking a better life, they risk marking their parents’ lives as undesirable and, in doing so, risk hurting their parents. I highlight three strategies participants employ to navigate the risk of othering their parents as they pursue a better life. The three strategies include: daughters echoing their mothers’ values and beliefs, employ an “identity of distance” to other themselves from their mothers’ gender and sexual lives, and offer their feminist consciousness as a gift for their mothers hoping that it will help their mothers better advocate for themselves.

Studying the Lives of Latina College Students

To understand the implications of formal education for Latina college students, I conducted qualitative, open-ended, semi-structured interviews with seven undergraduate heterosexual Latinas who attend a large public university in California. Participants self-identify as Latina and are twenty to thirty years of age, with the majority between the
ages of twenty to twenty-two. All were first-generation college students—the first Latinas in their families to leave home to attend school. Six started college after high school, and only one had transferred from a community college. All participants had lived most of their lives in California with parents. Six participants were from Southern California and had to physically move out of their parents’ home as a result of attending university in Northern California. One participant was originally from Northern California and commuted for two years from her parents’ home to college, and later moved into an apartment closer to campus. At the time of the interview, all lived outside their parents’ home. Participants’ parents were all Mexican immigrants who had little to no formal education and who worked manually intensive and service jobs. Six women identified themselves and families as working-class; one participant identified as middle-class but described her parents and family as being working-class for several years. All participated in their campus’ Latino Educational Achievement Partnership (LEAP), a research study conducted by a campus Ethnic Studies research institute. LEAP participants strongly identify as Latina and understand their race as shaping their educational experiences.

I recruited participants via email. Before women agreed to be interview, I described the purpose of the study. Then I explained informed consent. If women agreed to participate, I moved forward with the interview process. Participants completed a pre-interview questionnaire form that asked basic demographic information. After the demographic sheet was completed, I began conducting the interview. I conducted
interviews in two major cities in California. Interview were conducted in English, though participants sometimes used Spanish during the interviews to describe their lived experiences. I audio recorded all interviews and later transcribed them. During transcription, I assigned participants pseudonyms and changed non-relevant identifying information to protect their identities.

I asked participants a series of open-ended questions about growing up, messages their parent(s) told them about education, their experience so far in college, and about some of their best and most painful moments in college. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to talk about how different social conditions have informed their experiences while also allowing me to analyze their collective experience through their shared similarities (Charmaz 2006). Interviews typically lasted forty-five to ninety minutes and were conducted on campus or in coffee shops. After interviews ended I debriefed with participants for five to ten minutes.

I used grounded theory to analyze interviews (Charmaz 2006). Before coding any interviews, I wrote analytical memos based on emerging codes and my existing knowledge. After at least one analytical memo for each interview, I used open coding to identify themes and later moved on to axial and selective coding. Then I used focus coding to systematically explore patterns in emerging themes. I brought analytical memos and analysis to a writing group that consisted of my advisor and another student in my cohort. My advisor and peer would provide me with feedback and supported my critical
analysis of interview data. I repeated this process until my analysis became focused and coherent.

**Searching for Representation of Latina College Women in Literature**

Feminist scholars who study the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality have found that education is both beneficial and harmful for girls and women of color (Tolman 2002; Fine and McClelland 2006; Fields 2008; Garcia 2012). Many of these scholars have looked at the ways that sex education has the potential to reproduce and challenge social inequalities. Jessica Fields (2008) and Lorena García (2012) find that school-based sexuality education reproduces gender, racial, social, and class inequalities and teaches girls of color to “other” their bodies and sexualities. Although school-based instruction about sexuality can be harmful to students, Fields also argues that schools can also a place where young girls can explore their sense of self and can discover pleasure and their erotic potential. Similarly, García finds that comprehensive sexuality education is a place where Latina girls can unlearn stereotypes about their sexuality and bodies.

Education that frames sexuality as a potential site of pleasure, rather than dangerous, can be transformative for girls and women. Michelle Fine and Sara I. McClelland (2006) argue that sexuality education is a place to nurture what they call “thick desire.” Thick desire refers to a broad range of desires where young girls of color
can fulfill their intellectual, political, and social engagement desires. For example, girls of color can imagine themselves as financially independent, having sexual and reproductive freedom, having protection from racialized and gendered violence, and having a meaningful future. A thick desires framework highlights how different parts of a person’s identity such as race, class, gender, sexuality influence people’s sense of what’s possible and desirable for themselves.

Deborah Tolman argues in *Dilemmas of Desire* (2002) that education—both formal sexuality education and other instruction about sexuality—is a way for teenage girls to develop sexual subjectivities. Sexual subjectivity refers to a “person’s experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being” (Tolman 2002). In other words, a girl or woman who has sexual subjectivity sees her as a sexual subject, entitled to pleasure, rather than an object.

Although previous studies provide critical insights about the ways in which educational contexts can shape girls’ subjectivities, little research has explored the ways in which college impacts young women of color’s subjectivities. A growing body of literature on college women’s sexuality (Bogle 2008; Armstrong, Hamilton, and England 2010; Ronen 2010) looks primarily at white heterosexual women’s experiences of “hooking up.” Feminist scholars have tried to understand if hooking up is liberatory or oppressive for women and have found that it is both (Bogle 2008; Rupp and Taylor
“Hooking up” describes sexual behavior ranging from kissing to having sexual intercourse. Women appear to have more sexual agency in hookup culture than in dating culture. In hookup culture, women can explore non-normative sexual behaviors without having to attach their behaviors to a sexual identity (Rupp and Taylor 2013). In other words, hookup culture opens spaces for women to transgress conventional notions of gender and allows them to take on fluid sexual identities and experiences. Yet scholars have found that even within hookup culture women are stigmatized for defying conventional notions of gender. Women’s behaviors are policed through the double standard; they are judged negatively based on the number of sexual partners they have, the way they dress, and the amount of alcohol they consume (Bogle 2008; Ronen 2010; Reid, Elliot, and Webber 2011). Additionally, the double standard for women who hookup is apparent in the amount of sexual pleasure they report experiencing during hookups. Women’s hooking up experiences are less pleasurable than men’s (Armstrong et al. 2012).

While illuminating, this research does not address the ways educational experiences, and particularly college, may allow women of color to re-imagine conventional notions of race, family, and other parts of their identities. Aida Hurtado’s study *Voicing Chicana Feminisms* is the only in-depth study about Latina college women’s gender and sexualities (2003). Hurtado finds that college is the first time many Latinas encounter information and insights that challenge previously established notions of gender, sexuality, and *familismo*. 
For Latinas, conventional notions of gender and sexuality include *marianismo* and *respeto*. *Marianismo*, a version of the virgin/whore dichotomy, deems any sexual activity that occurs outside of the context of heterosexual marriage as dangerous, shameful, and unacceptable (Zavella 2003). When Latinas view themselves as sexually desiring or entitled to pleasure they risk being stigmatized (Zavella 2003). Notions of *marianismo* are further complicated by ideas of *respeto* (respect). *Respeto* refers to the cultural value that Latinas should avoid any activity that brings shame to the family, constrains Latinas’ sexuality (García 2012). Notions of *respeto* suggest that women should avoid engaging in sexual behavior because it will bring shame to their families (García 2012; Gutierrez 2016).

Conventional ideas about family may be especially important for young Latinas to navigate. *Familismo* is a cultural value that encourages family closeness, obligation, and support (Romo, et al. 2006) and calls on Latinas to put the needs and desires of their families before their own (East 1998). Some parents draw on conventional notions of *familismo* to prevent their daughters from pursuing education in hopes that they will stay at home, pursue marriage, and have children (East 1998). Although *familismo* may play a negative role in daughters’ educational experiences, feminist scholars have argued that *familismo* can also play a positive role. While some scholars argue that *familismo* prevents Latinas from pursuing a formal education, for many “Latina adolescents, succeeding in school is one of the best ways they can fulfill their sense of duty to the family” (Romo, et al. 2006, 60).
Indeed, feminist scholars have found that working-class mothers insist their daughters pursue an education (Romo, et al. 2006; Rivera and Gallimore 2006; Marlino and Wilson 2006). Mothers believe that education can help their daughters achieve a "better life" or "better future" in which daughters have choices and opportunities mothers lacked (Hurtado 2003; Zavella 2003). Structural barriers such as poverty, lack of accessible education, and immigration policies prevented many mothers from pursuing the lives they desire. Mothers have little control over these structural conditions, so, to help daughters achieve the better life, mothers focus on individual choices. For example, they urge daughters to prioritize educational goals over any pleasures they might pursue in their sexual lives (Hurtado 2003; Zavella 2003; Romo, et al. 2006). Sexual activity carries the threat of pregnancy, which mothers worry will prevent daughters from securing an education and improved socioeconomic lives (Hurtado 2003; Zavella 2003, Romo, et al. 2006; Gallegos-Castillo 2006). Although this message—that girls and women should deny their sexual desires—may be oppressive for daughters, it also bears the traces of resistance and empowerment (Hurtado 2003; Zavella 2003). Formal education is a route to economic independence and the mobility necessary to escape abusive situations—a choice mothers often lacked. Sexuality is not so reliable a terrain for a young woman pursuing mobility and possibility.

*Familismo*, which daughters may find constraining, also ensures that mothers and daughters' efforts and futures are intertwined. Mothers put the needs of the families
before their own and work long hours in manually intensive and often debilitating jobs (Hurtado 2003; Marlino and Wilson 2006). In order that their mothers’ sacrifices not have been in vain, daughters pursue a better future themselves and their parents. As it pulls daughters toward a life their parents may never have imagined, this future may sometimes feel as if it in conflict with the ideas of familismo. However, a better future means a better reality for themselves and their families—one free from poverty and discrimination (Marlino and Wilson 2006; Hurtado 2003).

Ultimately, mothers’ sacrifices play a central role in many daughters’ feminist consciousness and, specifically, their third world feminist consciousness or women of color consciousness (Hurtado 2003; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015). Cherrie Moraga writes, “These stories my mother told me crept under my ‘guera’ skin. I had no choice but to enter into the life of my mother. I had no choice.” For Moraga, her mother’s lived experiences are fundamental to her feminist consciousness, and her feminist consciousness, ironically, causes distance between her and her mother. Moraga states, “Daily, we feel the pull and tug of having to choose between which parts of our mothers’ heritages we want to claim.” Consciousness means Moraga must continuously choose between emulating her mother or distancing herself from her mother’s life—which ironically played a significant role in the development of her consciousness.

In Voicing Chicanas Feminisms, Aida Hurtado argues that Latinas with a college education learn feminism from their mothers. Many participants in Hurtado’s study did
not use the word "feminist" to describe their mothers; instead "they spoke eloquently and at great length about the different women in their lives as illustrations of women’s strength, courage, independence, intelligence, and, most importantly, ability to survive" (2003). Emulating their mothers’ feminist behaviors and values is a strategy that participants in this study use. Like the participants in Hurtado’s study who saw “both women’s strengths and weaknesses and actively chose which characteristics to cultivate,” the Latina daughters in this study also draw on their mothers’ strengths to resist subordination.

Another strategy Latina participants use to cope with the demands of their feminist consciousness is to develop alternative identities of distance. Ranita Ray found that Latina girls draw on feminist empowerment messages to develop an identity of distance, in which Latina girls construct “their own identities as agentic, careful, ambitious, and independent women who are morally different from and superior to the few of their peers who were young mothers” (forthcoming). In the process of constructing an identity of distance, Latina girls cast their sisters and friends as others. Like Moraga and Anzaldúa (2015), Ray finds that a feminist consciousness can bring difficulty to the lives of Latina girls, their families, and their social circles.

Daughters teach their mothers new understanding of sex and sexuality (Hurtado 2003; Ayala 2006), suggesting that women may benefit from Latinas’ feminist consciousness. The participants in Hurtado’s study utilize their feminist consciousness to
help the women in their families and social circles pursue their educational dreams, leave abusive relationships, and quit exploitive jobs. “Whatever the issues, there was an exchange of roles in which the daughter played the role of the supportive friend nudging the mother to take action on her own behalf, or the sister acted as a mentor, teacher, or mother to the other,” writes Hurtado. Mothering is a learning experience for daughters and mothers. Ayala found that daughters teach their mothers new ideas about dating that challenge conventional notions of gender and sexuality; her findings further suggest that mothers benefit from these exchanges.

This study contributes to the growing understanding of the ways feminist consciousness impacts Latina women’s experiences. To understand how a college education is both beneficial and harmful for Latina students, this study bridges previous feminist scholarship on race, gender, class, sexuality, family, and education. I conducted a qualitative study of Latina undergraduates to understand the specific implications college has on daughters and their families. In the following pages, I detail my findings in hopes that they bring clarity to the contradictory experience of Latina college students.
“Don’t be Like Me; I Want You to do Better”: Education as a Shared Goal for Families and Latina Daughters

Formal education is a shared goal for Latina daughters and parents, both of whom believe formal education holds the promise of a well-paying career that is not exploitive and does not require manual work. The women I interviewed describe their parents working manually intensive and sometimes exploitive jobs, and they believe this is because their parents lack a formal education. The women also describe their parents urging them to pursue a formal education in order to escape those material conditions. To construct education as valuable, parents and daughters utilize notions of the American Dream, a “central ideology that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they define it—material or otherwise—through their own efforts” (Hochschild 1995). For participants, like many other people living in the United States, success often means attaining a high income, a prestigious job, and economic security (Hochschild 1995). For participants, achieving success was constructed in comparison to their parents’ lives; daughters are expected to have a better quality of life.

As formal education becomes the sought-after outcome, a desirable/undesirable dichotomy emerges. Daughters learn to seek a formal education and its imagined benefits, including a professional career and lifestyle, and, as daughters learn that education is desirable, they simultaneously learn that a life without a formal education is undesirable. As the data I share below suggests, this dichotomy produces tensions
between daughters and parents. Education introduces daughters to new ideas, information, and consciousness, and these new ways of thinking about the world cast their parents’ lives as undesirable.

Caroline, a second-year student hoping to major in Criminal Justice, explained that her parents expect us [my siblings and me] to have a better life than they did. They don’t want us to work our asses off labor wise because we are going to school [and] have that opportunity….They want us to finish school and have a good career that doesn’t involve having to stress themselves like they did, not getting paid well.

Caroline and her parents value and see formal education as necessary to securing a well-paying career and escaping the exploitation and poverty their parents have endured. Caroline imagines education will help her avoid emotional strain, such as stress caused by low-paying jobs. Caroline and her family invoke the American Dream of hard work resulting in success and posit education as necessary to escaping emotional straining and exploitive jobs. Similarly, Aurora explains,

She [my mother] always pushed education. She always set herself, and her family, as an example. Her family stopped sending her to school at a very young age….My parents used to say, “Why would you want to struggle, we are struggling so you don’t have to work as hard.”
Aurora’s mother draws on her inability to pursue formal education to highlight the imagined importance of education. Aurora and her parents believe that formal education will free Aurora from the struggles they have endured. By constructing education as a means to prevent exploitation, Aurora’s parents utilize notion of the American Dream, where daughters can achieve success through educational efforts. Although using notions of the American Dream can be obscuring, Chicana feminist scholars have highlighted that mothers, in particular, offer these messages in an effort to resist the continued oppressions of Latina women (Hurtado 2003, Zavella 2003). However, though these messages may constitute a form of resistance, they also reproduce systems of oppression. Though their investment in the narrative of success resting on working hard in school, daughters and parents also reinforce the meritocratic values at the heart of the American Dream and obscure the oppressive structures and social inequalities that continue to shape Latina daughters’ and families’ lives.

For example, goals for Latina daughters’ education reflect conventional ideas about daughters’ role in the family. Daughters are expected to have better jobs and lives than their parents. Lola, a senior majoring in Biochemistry, explains,

They [my parents] see education as the light to be successful in this country. I am sure you can be successful without a degree, but me, personally, and my parents think that having a degree from an institution is worth a lot more than not. You have more opportunities, and they don’t
want me to do hard labor. They don’t want me doing what my mom was
doing: cleaning houses, working two jobs, cleaning houses, and working a
tortilla factory. My dad works seven days as a landscaper in the cold, in
the heat, in the rain. They don’t want me to do all that back-breaking
work.

Lola is expected to be successful; to achieve this she must avoid “back breaking work.”
Back breaking work is manually intensive and sometimes even exploitive labor; a
common line of work for poor U.S. immigrants (Zimmerman, Litt, and Bose 2006). To
be successful, she must believe “back breaking work” is undesirable and a marker of
failure. Daughters learn to seek futures that resemble the American Dream and often
exclude their parents.

The investment in the American Dream similarly casts education—and educated
people—as desirable. Meanwhile those without formal education are, implicitly, less
desirable. Like Lola, Liliana’s family expects her to have a better life and believe that
education is the means to do so. She explains,

My dad has always pushed me to have a good education. He has always
told me, “I don’t want you to work with your hands. You have a brain;
you don’t have to do manual labor. You can do stuff in the office, so you
don’t have to use your hands. Don’t be like me; I want you to do better.”
Liliana learns from her father that people who do manual labor are not working with their brains. Within this logic, working-class immigrants become less desirable and more disposable members of society, people are to blame for their material conditions, and the structures of power that shape individuals’ lived experiences are obscured.

Daughters’ draw on parents’ material conditions to explain their desire for a life with formal education. Jasmine, a second-year student majoring in Biology, explains learning the importance of education:

When I was growing up my parents were like, “You need to go to college.” Also, … I see my mom struggle at even the most simplest words. I would say mom read this and she couldn’t. I was like, “Oh shit, it is serious.” She didn’t have a good education.

Jasmine grasps the importance of education through her parents urging her to pursue college. Jasmine also learns to find education valuable by witnessing the material consequences that come with having low levels of education. Witnessing her mother’s inability to read teaches Jasmine to recognize that she does not want the same experience for herself and must pursue formal education to avoid being illiterate. As daughters pursue a life shaped by formal education, they simultaneously cast part of their mothers’ lives as undesirable.
Part of daughters’ desire for education and the lifestyle they imagine results from education rests in believing that lives without education should be avoided. Both daughters and parents value formal education because of its promise of better lives through labor opportunities. Although parents construct educational messages as a form of resistance, messages also reproduce systems of oppressions. The women I interviewed describe parents drawing on notions of the American Dream, meritocracy, and stereotypes to construct education as desirable. Constructing formal education as valuable produces a desirable/undesirable dichotomy where people with formal education are perceived to live desirable lives. Although Latinas and their parents believe education is beneficial, narratives reveal that it is also harmful to families. This is one way that formal education fosters tensions between daughters and families.

“How Do I Leave Them?”: Leaving for College as a Betrayal

Navigating contradictions is a common experience for Latinas living in the United States. As Gloria Anzaldúa explains, Latinas receive multiple and often opposing messages which result “in mental and emotional states of perplexity” (1999). The women to whom I spoke encounter contradicting messages about leaving for college—despite formal education being a shared goal for parents and daughters. On the one hand, parents encourage daughters to live a better life and understand education can help provide this. On the other hand, parents feel worried and abandoned when daughters leave. For their
part, daughters worry that to leave their families is to betray them, and they feel guilty for
doing so, even when their families manage to support their decision to leave home.
Daughters encounter a tension; they cannot act on their desire to pursue a better life
without hurting their parents. Conventional notions of *familismo*, gender, and sexuality
inform daughters’ inability to leave for college without hurting their parents.

Participants’ narratives suggest parents feel abandoned when daughters leave for
college. Denise, a fourth-year student majoring in Child and Adolescent Development,
recalls her mother’s reaction after first leaving for college. She says, “It was difficult
because I was the first person to leave….When I first came up here, [my mother] told me
that I didn’t love her and that I was trying to escape from her when I left.” By doubting
her daughter’s love towards her mother, Denise’s mother is questioning if *familismo*, the
cultural notion that family should always come first, remains central to Denise’s life. As
physical distance emerges, parents become unsure if family continues to be important to
their daughters. Denise’s mother also feels abandoned and believes that Denise is trying
to escape her presence. And, indeed, Denise is trying to escape—perhaps not her mother,
but instead her mother’s life. When daughters decide to pursue a better life, they also opt
to avoid their mother’s lived experiences. Tension results as daughters choose to form
their lives differently; physical distance creates a space between daughters and families
that mothers like Denise’s may fill with questions about whether family remain valuable
to her daughters.
When daughters leave, they also turn away from the usual *familismo* expectations that immigrant families can rely on daughters to take care of their families—caring for younger siblings, cooking, and cleaning (Hurtado 2003). Parents rely on older daughters to help them navigate unfriendly and unfamiliar institutions and bureaucracies, making it difficult for daughters entering adulthood to leave home. Estrella, the oldest participant at thirty years old and a graduating senior, describes feeling guilty when she initially thought about leaving for college. She recalls thinking, “That would be so cool to go to [that university], but I was like—my parents. How do I leave them? Because of the problems at the time.” Lola’s hesitation stems from not being able to help her parents navigate “the problems” once leaving. Throughout the interview, Lola explains that one “problem” she helps with is her mother’s health. Her mother lacks a formal education, and Lola helps母亲 obtain medical items and services she cannot access on her own.

Other participants describe similar tensions arising from not being able to take care of their parents. Jasmine, a second-year student majoring in Biology, explains: “[My parents] were like you shouldn’t go away. You’re the youngest. I had to stay home and take care of them, and I didn’t agree with it.” Jasmine’s parents worry that by leaving she will no longer take care of them. Yet leaving also allows Jasmine to take better care of her parents. She explains, “I tell my dad, ‘Oh, you shouldn’t buy this because you need to buy this.’ I tell my dad, ‘If they don’t pay on time you need to do this because I learned through finding an apartment here.’” By leaving, Jasmine develops skills she can utilize
to help her parents navigate unfamiliar institutions. Her education makes her newly unavailable and newly valuable to her family.

These skills do not simply ease the tensions Latinas navigate. Instead, Latinas who leave for college find themselves routinely transgressing conventional notions of gender and feeling guilty for doing so. For example, most parents expect daughters to uphold *familismo* by reproducing family. When young Latinas leave home because they want an education, and not—at least immediately—their own families, they defy traditional gender and sexual expectations.

Lola explains how leaving for college challenges her family’s expectation of young Latina woman. She says,

> That was the thing: you grow up, you have kids, you get married, and you work. That was the cycle. I hear sometimes [those] who don’t have that cultural norm say, “Oh no, you were expected to go to high school, and then you go to college or a university, and then you get your life settled.”

Lola’s narrative highlights cultural norms women in her family face, they are expected to leave their parents’ home to reproduce their own families and marry. To highlight the racialization of these norms, Lola explains how parents who do not share her family’s culture expect their children to leave their home in pursuit of college. When Lola departs for college, she challenges how women in her family forge their futures. Like Lola,
Caroline explains how leaving for college defies norms and results in feelings of guilt. She explains,

They [my parents] didn’t expect me to leave. My two brothers, well, my oldest brother left because he had a baby….They didn’t expect me to leave because I don’t have kids or other responsibilities but school.

Gender and sexuality sit at the center of Caroline’s experience as a first-generation college student. Caroline compares her experience to that of her older brother, who left home to form his own family. Caroline’s parents expected that she would leave to begin her own family—not to go to school. The idea of young women leaving home for school is unfamiliar to Caroline’s parents—and to the parents of other women I interviewed. Her parents’ discomfort shapes how experiences leaving. She states, “I think they felt betrayed because they thought since I was their only daughter I was going to stay and help around the house.” Caroline believes her parents feel betrayed. How her parents actually feel is unclear, but her perception indicates that leaving becomes a guilt-ridden and painful—if desired and necessary—experience for daughters.

As daughters leave for college and become less available to help their families, speculation also arises about their sexual lives. Denise’s mother did not support her daughter’s decision to go away to university, and she and other family members sexually shamed Denise once she had left home: “Also, a lot of rumors started when I left. My family members started saying that I came up here because I wanted to slut around I
didn’t want any of them to find out.” Denise’s family charged her with being a slut—a woman who defies patriarchal gender norms and, perhaps especially for Latinas, places her desires before their family’s needs. And, indeed, going away for college allowed the women I interviewed to experience new gender and sexual freedom, but, for most, those freedoms were entwined with a sense of resistance and a “thick desire” (Fine and McClelland 2006) for a life and future free of exploitation for themselves and families. Formal education facilitated that resistance, offered a path toward freedoms, and engendered suspicion and mistrust among people these women loved.

“Once I Got to College, I Understood”: Daughters Encounter Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Sexuality

In college, as Latinas gain new understandings of gender and sexuality, many develop a feminist consciousness. For the women I interviewed, this new sense of consciousness brought new pleasures; Latina daughters experienced their bodies and subjectivities outside of traditional norms. A feminist consciousness allows daughters to claim ownership of their bodies and sexualities. How Latinas claim ownership ranges—from learning that sex can be a pleasurable experience for women to learning feminist notions about beauty—Latinas learn that their bodies, gender, sexualities, and selves are capable and worthy of desiring and experiencing pleasure. Yet this new experience of seeing gender, sexuality, and themselves differently suggests that a feminist
consciousness fosters tensions between daughters and parents. Daughters and parents no longer share the same perspectives of gender, sexuality, and women's bodies. Consequently, daughters no longer hold the same understanding about their own gender, sexuality, bodies, and selves as their parents previously understood.

Feminist notions of beauty allow Latinas to experience their bodies as desirable. Jasmine explains how feminist ideals about beauty shape her sense of self. She explains,

My freshmen year I called myself ugly. I thought I looked ugly. I was, like, "My face looks fat. It is a weird angle." Like, now I started looking at other women and how they embraced their beauty and how they didn't feel ugly and they embraced their imperfections, and that made me become more confident. I am beautiful the way I am.

Latinas are socialized through their families and the media to view European characteristics as markers of beauty and are taught to see their indigenous features as undesirable (Hernandez 2009). In addition, popular media portray Latinas as sexually excessive and out of control; this stereotypical representation of Latinas undergirds social panics about young Latina women's sexuality (Hernandez 2009). Portraying Latinas as sexually promiscuous teaches girls and women to see their sexuality as undesirable, dangerous, and possibly threatening. College disrupts such colonial notions of beauty and sexuality provides Latinas with an alternative feminist understanding. As she witnesses
women embracing decolonial notions of beauty, Jasmine’s understanding of herself shifts, and she is better able to experience herself as confident, beautiful, and desirable.

Other participants similarly explained that the social possibilities of college made a new sense of self possible. Lola describes herself before college as self-conscious about her physical appearance, specifically about her light skin:

[In high school] I was trying to make friends with other Latino kids, but they were a lot darker than I was, and they told me I wasn’t Mexican enough. I was like, “What does that mean? We eat the same food, we speak the same language, both of our parents are immigrants.” I knew that. It made me question what was wrong with me at a young age…. With those students in high school I couldn’t fit in. I was ashamed of who I was.

For Lola, light skin, a stereotypically European feature, fostered alienation and the erasure of her Latinidad. Lola felt ashamed of herself and believed something was wrong with her. Her self-perception changed when she began college and met people who understand that she is both light skinned and Mexican. Lola explains,

I don’t feel ashamed anymore. [I] found common people that accept me. They are like. “Yeah, I knew you were Latina. I knew you were from Jalisco because you have light eyes or you have certain features. Some Latinas are light skin.”
The people who Lola meets possess feminist understandings of Latinidad and understand that Latinas are diverse and have a range of physical features. Access to people who are consciousness of the diversity of Latinas’ physical appearance validated Lola’s identity. Lola no longer felt either ashamed of her physical features or isolated from her ethnic group.

Access to feminist ideas not only allowed the women I interviewed to embrace their physical features but also granted them a physical mobility impossible at home. Such mobility allowed them to engage in behaviors and exercise discretion they could not pursue when under their parents’ watch. Estrella explained, “I am used to the freedom and being on my own, here [in college] I go in and out whenever I gots to, like going to the library late at night to study... Not having to ask for permission or notify someone constantly. I like that.” For Estrella, whose father doesn’t like her going out, moving in and out of the public sphere while she is away at college is freeing. Estrella explains that her father polices her behavior when she goes back home. She says, “My father doesn’t want me going out unless he picks me up....I just don’t end up going out because I don’t want to deal with it.” Conventional gender norms construct girls and women “belonging in the home,” the private sphere. For Lola and other participants, college is often the first time they did not have parental supervision and could, therefore, enter the public sphere as they please.
Like Estrella, Caroline also experiences pleasure from having mobility and engaging in behaviors that parents believe are inappropriate. She states,

I just like my freedom up there [at college]. That is what I really enjoy. I don’t feel guilty with what I do because nobody is there to shame me. My parents are always questioning when I go out, like, “Who are you going to go out with? What time are you going to be back?” and I don’t miss that.

Mobility allows Caroline to enter the public sphere and socialize with people at her discretion. As I argued in the previous section, participants feel guilty when they transgress parents’ gender and sexual expectations of daughters. Caroline’s narrative suggests that daughters feel ashamed when they defy their parents’ expectations and that being away at college allows them to engage in transgressive behaviors without disobeying their parents.

College also brings new access to information about sexuality, which affords participants more opportunities to seek and experience pleasure. Aurora explains her emerging understanding of sex:

Once I got to college, I understood. I took more classes. I talked to more people with different backgrounds and different perspectives and going to the doctor….I think before, it was very traditional where it was, like, you have to have sex with the man you are going to marry—just things like
that. I think once I understood what sex was and I understood that the real purpose of it—which to me is just not procreation, it is more for pleasure.

A woman should be able to have pleasure out of sex not just because she has to have children.

Aurora no longer believes that sex should only occur for reproduction, a traditional way of understanding heterosexual women’s sexuality. Instead, she now embraces a feminist belief that the “real purpose” should be for pleasure. As Aurora highlights, Latina girls and women are often taught that sexual activity should only occur in marriage for reproductive purposes (Zavella 2003). Latina/o families often frame sex as negative and dangerous and teach their daughters to refrain from engaging in sexual activity (Zavella 2003; Romo, et al. 2006). For Aurora, new understandings of sexuality foster her sense of sexual subjectivity; Aurora feels entitled to and worthy of sexual pleasure (Tolman 2002).

Participants utilize feminist understandings of gender and sexuality to make sense of others. Lilliana, a graduating senior who took many classes in Women and Gender Studies, explains learning feminist notions of gender. She explains,

Because of all the women and gender studies classes I’ve taken I’ve realized how much we live in a binary type of world, where there are girls and guys and there is no between. There is feminine and masculine, no in
between. If a girl tries to go into the masculine world that is seen as “bad” because you aren’t seen as a girl.

Through classes, Liliana learned about the gender binary, where sex and gender pertain to two opposing categories, woman and feminine or man and masculine (Lorber 1996). A critical understanding of that binary helps Liliana recognize that gender expression and behaviors are dichotomized and that those who stray from the binary are frequently stigmatized:

Now I think it’s ridiculous to have all these ideals because it’s all subjective it shouldn’t [be] objective. You decide how to express yourself. Especially with my little brothers—one of them has longer hair, he likes it. My dad doesn’t like it. He’s like, “Oh you look like a girl,” and I’m like, “Just leave him alone; if that’s what he likes, that’s what he likes.”

Liliana deploys her feminist consciousness to advocate for her younger brother. When Liliana’s father shames her brother for having long hair, a characteristic that strays from the hegemonic masculinity her father hopes to enforce, she turns for a response to feminist understandings of gender expression. Liliana attempts to teach her father the value of people should engaging in behaviors because the behaviors adhere to their desires and not because they conform to conventional notions of gender. Liliana may have found a way to bring new ideas to her family, but her narrative highlights that her feminist consciousness has the potential to create tension within her family.
When women leave for college, their feminist consciousness becomes heightened. For participants, their feminist consciousness is both beneficial and harmful for Latina daughters and their parents—allowing them to simultaneously experience new pleasures and pains. Gaining new information about gender, sexuality, and women’s beauty allows daughters to pursue and achieve subjectivities in which pleasure is central to a sense of self. Although a feminist consciousness benefits daughters, it also has the potential to be hurtful. Those who do not possess their feminist consciousness become other as women achieve and assert a feminist consciousness.

"I Feel like She Should Not be Living Life like That": How Daughters Navigate Tensions

Daughters develop three strategies to navigate the tensions they encounter when pursuing a college education. As Latina daughters experience the benefits of education—like mobility, learning new feminist notions about gender and sexuality that bring new pleasures—they are also hurting and othering their mothers. Like Aurora describes in the introductory quote of this paper, many other participants’ narratives have traces of the “disconnection” they feel between them and their mothers. Daughters develop three strategies to alleviate the tension between them and their mother. One strategy is to emulate their mother’s behaviors and believes—particularly the ones that echo feminist values. The second strategy is that daughters distance themselves from their mothers’
gender and sexual lives. They explicitly and implicitly believe that their mothers’ gender and sexual lives are oppressive and undesirable. Lastly, daughters invite their mothers to share their feminist consciousness—hoping that it will also bring new benefits for mothers.

"My Mother Taught Me": Learning Feminist Behaviors from Mothers

To help alleviate the negative implications of a college education, daughters echo their mothers’ values and beliefs. Despite finding their mother’s life undesirable and trying to escape their mothers lived experiences, participants believe they resemble their mothers. Like the participants in Hurtado’s study (2003), daughters describe learning important feminist behaviors and values from their mothers. Caroline describes learning from her mother the importance of self-respect from her mother. She says,

My mother taught me, well she was a good mom. She told me to always have dignity, respect, and to not let people step over myself and to know how to defend myself. I wouldn’t depend on my dad’s opinion. I wouldn’t ask him for his opinion I would just do my own thing. I grew as a person like that. I grew up a little bit independent from my dad to the point.

For Caroline, the value of self-respect is important to her feminist consciousness. In hopes of claiming independence and mobility, Caroline draws on notions of self-respect
to challenge her father’s authority. Challenging male authority requires daughters to transgress conventional notions of gender, family, and respect. Under notions of *marianismo* Latina girls and women to obey male authority—even when it is oppressive. Additionally, because of *familismo* and *respeto* girls and women are expected to avoid behaviors that bring shame to the family. When girls and women stray from conventional notions of gender, likes Caroline, they are simultaneously challenging traditional values of *familismo* and *respeto*. By describing her mother as the one who taught her this skill, Caroline highlights that her mother is a source of feminist consciousness.

Mothers teach participants various ways that marginalized women resist oppression from men. Denise’s mother suffered from domestic violence for many years. She recalls how her mother contends domestic abuse:

*I remember he [my father] wouldn’t let her work because he was just like that. So, she didn’t have her own money, so she would have to find ways to get money. She would lie sometimes. He would ask, “Do you have money?” and she would say, “no” even if she did, but sometimes he didn’t want to give her money. I remember when I needed money for school when I was in elementary. He would say he didn’t have money, but he always had money for other things. So, my mom, I remember she started growing vegetables and fruits out of house like in the garden. She would*
sell them, and she would use that money to buy me notebooks and things for school.

Denise’s narrative highlights the many ways immigrant women fight oppression within the margins (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015). Denise’s mother is not able to obtain a formal job to generate her own source of income because of her husband’s manipulation. Like Denise’s mother, many immigrant women in abusive relationships have little economic mobility (Crenshaw 1993). Yet many women develop strategies to resist their partners’ oppression. Denise learned from her mother many strategies, including withholding information from her husband and engaging in the informal economy sector. By witnessing their mothers’ lives, daughters learn that resisting oppressions can take on many forms.

Similarly, Aurora explains her mother’s efforts to resist further economic marginalization. Since living in the United States, Aurora’s mother has mostly worked low-paying and manually intensive jobs. Aurora describes her mother’s commitment to achieving economic mobility. She says, “My mom, in between jobs, she would go to classes for English for her GED, because she understood that is what she needed to get a better job.” Aurora’s mother also believes that formal education will help her achieve economic mobility. For Aurora, witnessing her mother’s educational efforts influences her feminist consciousness. She explains,
Sometimes I would help her she would tell me, “If I understood what you were learning I would help you.” I thought it should be her helping me, but I understood she didn’t have the knowledge on subjects and the fact that I was helping her it was funny, but it was okay because I understood that there was another language that I had mastered kind of at that point and she was just getting to know the language.

From her mother’s life, Aurora learns the importance of hard work and perseverance, two Chicana feminist values (Hurtado 2003). She also discovers that her mother’s inability to speak English and lack of formal education contribute to her marginalization. The language barrier her mother navigates also contributes to dynamics in their relationship that veer from the norm. Mothers regularly help their children with homework, but, as Aurora’s narrative suggests, this may not always be the case for working-class immigrant families.

Daughters also describe learning from their mothers the importance of being financially independent of men to their mothers. Lilianna says,

I know my mom likes working because most of her life she was a housewife. It is a new sense of freedom, which I love for her. She works, makes her own money. She is not dependent on my dad that way. She meets people, and she has friends, besides my dad and my brothers….I am really happy for her because she doesn’t depend on my dad anymore
because I didn’t like that, because I feel like she should not be living life like that.

Like the Latina college students in Hurtado’s study (2003), Liliana’s interview suggests that daughters trace their commitment to economic independence to their mothers. Liliana believes that her mother finds working pleasurable because it affords her both mobility and an independent source of income. How Liliana perceives her mother’s experience of work suggests that Liliana believes that both she and her mother have similar lives, desires, and pleasures.

“I Don’t Want a Future Like That”: Othering Mothers’ Gendered and Sexual Lives

To navigate the tension that occurs because of the different believes that daughters and mothers have in regards to gender and sexuality, daughters employ an "identity of distance." Latinas draw on the feminist empowerment paradigm to construct "their own identities as agentic, careful, ambitious, and independent women who are morally different from and superior to the few of their peers who were young mothers" (Ray, forthcoming). Daughters utilize an identity of distance, to mark their beliefs on gender and sexuality as desirable. In the process of distancing themselves from their mothers’ gender and sexual lives, daughters marginalize their mothers and cast their lives
as undesirable for failing employing the same ideals as them. Participants reject the way their mother’s gendered behaviors. Liliana explains,

I feel like she [my mother] was taught to be a certain way, and it has played a role in my own life. In Mexican culture they teach you to be a housewife and nothing else. Where you are suppose to cook and clean. She would push me to do that stuff, and I would not like it, and I would say. “That is not what I am interested in.”....That is why I don’t know how to cook because I am so against learning it I didn’t want to pick it up.

Liliana does not cook because of its association with women’s traditional gender roles. By rejecting cooking, Liliana redefines gender roles while simultaneously othering women who cook—including her mother. Liliana specifically uses her rejection of cooking to define her own sense of womanhood.

As participants explained their sexual futures, daughters further other their mother’s sexual lives. Daughters believed that pregnancy at a young age is undesirable. The women I interviewed draw on feminist ideas about women’s self-sufficiency to explain their beliefs on pregnancy. Denise says, “I want to be financially stable. I feel like it would be financially irresponsible for me to have a child if I am not. I will when I am financially stable.” Although Denise is entitled to have children when she wants, the notions that women should become mothers only when they are financially responsible effectively others their mothers. Denise’s mother had children at the age of twenty-one
and has always been a member of the working class. The idea that women should wait to have children when they are financially responsible is not a realistic belief for working class immigrant women who many never become “financially stable.”

Lola similarly explains her views on motherhood. She says, “Kids? I don’t know right now because I am not financially stable. No kids right now maybe later when I am financially stable.” Liliana also asserts that women should become mothers when they are financially responsible. The belief that women should have children only when they are financially responsible, masks the structural social inequalities that cause poverty and instead blames the individual for their material conditions. In this process, daughters suggest, perhaps unwittingly, that their mothers’ decision to have children was irresponsible.

In addition, daughters other their mother’s sexuality by othering how they forge intimate relationships. Liliana says,

I want to be in a relationship where he understands me, where he is woke. Someone who I don’t have to explain things to someone who understands their privileges. People always say you end up with someone like your dad, but I can’t end up with someone like my dad. I love my dad but [I am] not down to be with him. He needs to realize his own privilege and be open to changes that are happening.
Liliana finds her father’s way of thinking undesirable. As I mentioned previously, Liliana describes how her father polices her mother’s and brother’s behaviors. In the process of marking her father’s machismo undesirable, Liliana marks people who chose *machista* men as intimate partners undesirable—including her mother. Similarly, Jasmine explains how she views her parents’ relationship as undesirable. She says, “I was home alone with my parents and my dad was getting kind of aggressive and he was literally about to hit my mom...[T]hat made me realize that I don’t want a future like that.” It is reasonable for Jasmine to want a relationship free of violence. Yet in doing so, she is also marking how her mother forges intimate relationships undesirable. Jasmine draws on her mother’s relationship to constructs her own desires.

“I Want Her to Have Memories”: Inviting Mothers Into Feminist Consciousness

Latina daughters bring home from college their feminist consciousness—sought-after, transformative, and conflicted—as a gift to their mothers. While the changes that a college education brings introduce and highlight tensions in their relationships with home, the daughters also see the feminist messages they gain while away as resources they can use to teach their mothers to advocate for themselves and other marginalized women. Participants hope that sharing their consciousness will help their mothers achieve a better life.
Liliana offers one example of a daughter deploying a feminist message of autonomy and choice to help her mother:

When my mom was [starting to explore] with makeup, he [my dad] was kind of like, “Why? What are you doing? Why are you exploring with makeup?” And I was like “Mom, it is your body. If you want to explore with makeup, do it. If you want to wear fake eyelashes, don’t let my dad tell you otherwise.”

Liliana draws on the feminist discourse of “my body, my choice,” to teach her mother that she—and not her husband—should have control over her body. By encouraging her mother to disregard men’s opinions, Liliana also tries to support her mother in defying conventional notions of gender, familismo, and respeto. When girls and women challenge male figures in Latina/o households, men and women routinely consider their behavior unacceptable and disrespectful (Zavella 2003). As she encourages her mother to experiment with cosmetics, Liliana also invites her mother to prioritize her own pleasure.

Liliana continues,

I want her [my mother] to have memories. She works so many days of the week. Like this weekend, she was just cleaning. I was like, “Stop cleaning, go do something you like. Force my brothers to do it. They are going to clean if you tell them.”
Liliana’s mother works a manually intensive job and cleans at home—responsibilities that college is supposed to help daughters escape, that feminism casts as undesirable, and that college-educated daughters strive to distance themselves from. Liliana finds it difficult to locate pleasure in her mothers’ life. To help her mother escape this presumed undesired gendered labor, Liliana encourages her mother to have others in the household—her sons and husband—clean. It is unclear if this strategy whether is beneficial to her mother; nevertheless, Liliana’s account suggests she is trying to be helpful.

Similarly, Denise talks about helping her mother leave a physically abusive relationship. She says,

I have shown my mom what empowerment is….I have shown her that it is not her fault that a male hurt her. She always thought it was always her fault. She always thought she had to stand up for herself and fight. I always encouraged her to do it, to leave him, but now I have learned to teach her in better ways….Now I listen to her to what she tells me, and I put other things out as options. I kind of just ask her what she wants and wants to do. I just provide her with resources or statistics.

Like the participants in Aida Hurtado’s *Voicing Chicana Feminisms* (2003), Denise utilizes feminist messages to help her mother leave an abusive relationship. Once again, we cannot know if Denise’s words benefit her mother, but Denise’s story suggests that
she is committed and proud to utilize the insights she gains in school in efforts to help her mother. As explained earlier, daughters learn additional skills to help their parents navigate unfamiliar institutions and bureaucracies when they leave for college. Denise’s narrative indicates that daughters utilize their knowledge to help improve their mothers’ life—a central value in third world feminism. As Anzaldúa explains in *This Bridge,*

> It is the responsibility of some of us who tap the vast source of spiritual/political energies to help heal others, to put down a drawbridge; at the same time, we must depend more and more on our source for survival. *Ayudar a las mujeres que todavía viven en la jaula dar nuevos pasos y a romper barreras antiguas.* (To help women who still live in cages to take new steps, and to break old barriers.)

In efforts to help her mother “break old barriers”—in this case, leave her abusive husband—Denise utilizes the skills she learns in school and her feminist consciousness as a drawbridge.

> Aurora also describes sharing her feminist understandings of gender and sexuality with her mother:

> We had a conversation about people being queer. Me just explaining the difference between gay, homosexual, heterosexual, transgender, bisexual.
Her just asking me questions so that she doesn’t mislabel or mis-gender people, so she doesn’t offend them or insult them in any way.

By teaching her mother different understandings of gender and sexuality, Aurora is essentially sharing her consciousness with her mother. Aurora’s narrative indicates that daughters want to teach their mothers the knowledge and skills they learn in anticipation that it will also benefit their mothers.

Yet, even as daughters try to bridge the distance between their lives and their mothers’, the process of sharing consciousness threatens to other their mothers. Daughters perceive their consciousness as desirable and something they should teach. The gesture is generous, but it is also fraught. As Aurora explains, “Her, [my mother], trying to learn from me is a sign that she understands [that] I have a different understanding of the world than when I was living with her.” As daughters become educators and mothers become the students, power dynamics shift. Typically, children are expected obey and learn from parents, but when daughters share their consciousness with their mothers, they become the educators. For some participants, the shift in power dynamics creates even more tension between them and their mothers.

Mothers may feel upset and hurt when these power dynamics shift. Jasmine tried to teach her mother how structural barriers influence her cousins’ inability to become employed. Jasmine recalls the situation:
Recently my cousin came from El Salvador, and my mom doesn’t like that she stays at home and does nothing, and she has a child… [S]he thinks she should get a job. I told her one time, “Mom, she’s an immigrant. Not everyone is going to hire her. It’s harder for her. You need to help her.”

As she explains how immigrations policies inform her cousin’s struggle to obtain a job, Jasmine is attempting to teach her mother how “the personal is political” and highlighting how political and social structures continuously shape women’s lived experiences (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015; Lorde 2003). Jasmine also emphasizes with her mother the importance of helping marginalized women achieve a better life—a common feminist value among women of color (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015; Hurtado 2003).

Although Jasmine’s intention was to help, her interview suggests that sharing consciousness can hurt mother. Jasmine explains:

She [my mother] got mad she was like, “Why are you defending her [your cousin] you like her more than me….” I’m like, “No, it’s not that. You need to understand that this is right and this is wrong. I am showing you a different point of view. Instead of showing you what’s inside, I am showing you what is outside.”

Ironically, Jasmine’s attempt to help her mother results in tension. In the process of sharing their consciousness, daughters risk hurting their mothers by offending
conventional notions of *familismo* and *respeto*. Jasmine’s mother interprets her daughter’s behavior as a sign of disrespect and defiance. Although Jasmine’s intention is to help, possessing a feminist consciousness ironically others her mother. Jasmine considers that her way of viewing the world is correct and that her mother should adopt her views. By encouraging her mother to become like herself, Jasmine unintentionally casts her mother’s beliefs as those that should be left behind.

**Conclusions**

The experiences, narratives, and lived experiences of the Latina participants in this study are contradicting. A college education is both harmful and beneficial for daughters and their families. The knowledge that Latinas acquire—general and unique to feminism—introduces new pleasures and pains for Latinas. For example, a heightened feminist consciousness results in daughters both helping and further marginalizing their mothers’ lives. To navigate these tensions, participants engage in three strategies—which even in comparison with each other are contradicting. For example, participants both emulate and reject their mother’s lives.

Contradictions—generative and defining—can be a pleasurable and painful experiences for Latinas. To navigate contradictions, Latinas develop a *mestiza* consciousness—a hybrid identity that allows for the subject to cope with ambiguity that
come from inhabiting multiple cultures. *Mestiza* consciousness allows Latinas to challenge and simultaneously reproduce traditional, sometimes even oppressive, cultural messages they hear growing up (Anzaldúa 1999). Although a *mestiza* consciousness can be beneficial for Latinas because it allows them to embrace different cultures, it is painful to live in the borderlands. Anzaldúa writes, “The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The *mestiza*’s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness” (1999).

In this study, I highlight the contradictions and implications that a college education fosters for Latinas who go away for college, are heterosexual, working-class, first-generation college students, and have immigrant parents. Interviews indicate that Latina daughters and parents believe formal education will result in daughters having a life free of the exploitation parents have endured. However, as daughters pursue a college degree, they encounter a tension: in seeking a better life, they risk marking their parents’ lives as undesirable and, in doing so, risk hurting their parents. Daughters develop strategies to navigate this tension: they echo their mothers’ feminist behaviors and beliefs, reject parts of their mothers’ sexual and gender identities, and bring home their feminist consciousness in hopes that their mothers will become more like them.

My findings support the work of previous feminist scholars who argue that education is both beneficial and harmful for girls and women of color (Tolman 2002;
My central argument is that daughters cannot pursue their desire to achieving a better life through formal education without hurting their parents. Like the studies of Chicana feminist scholars Hurtado (2003) and Zavella (2003), my findings highlight that Latina mothers teach their daughters educational messages in the midst of sexism, racism, classism, and violence. My findings suggest that both mothers and fathers construct messages amid social inequalities in hopes of challenging restrictive ideas and conditions.

Parents encourage their daughters to pursue a formal education and anticipate that a college degree will create more socioeconomic possibilities and free their children of the manually intensive and exploitive labor they have undergone. Yet the educational messages Latinas hear from their parents reproduce notions of the American Dream and meritocracy that further mask and help reproduce the inequalities that sustain their parents' oppression. Additionally, in the process of encouraging daughters to pursue formal education and its imagined lifestyle, a desirable/undesirable dichotomy emerges. Parents teach their daughters that they should only desire a lifestyle with formal education and that one without is undesirable. Ironically, these messages cast the lives of their own parents as undesirable and further reproduce systems of oppressions.

My findings also support García's (2012) work which argues that conventional notions of gender and the family negatively influence Latina daughters' lives but are also continuously being redefined by young girls and women. Like the participants in García's
study my participants felt constrained by their families’ traditional notions of gender. When the women participating in this study left home for college, they strayed from conventional notions of gender; parents believed that it was the role of the daughter to stay home and take care of the family. Daughters redefine their role of taking care of the family. To help parents navigate unfamiliar institutions, daughters draw on the educational skills. I also find that that daughters redefine gender roles for young Latina women when they leave for college. Traditionally women are expected to leave their parents’ home to reproduce their own family, but when daughters leave for education—they are exemplifying a different gender and sexual life trajectory for them.

Like the feminist scholars who argue that college brings new sexual and gender freedoms for women (Bogle 2008; Rupp and Taylor 2010), I find that Latina students also experience new freedoms. Latinas have more mobility when they leave for college and can engage in behaviors, like entering the public sphere at their discretion, which defy traditional notions of gender, family, and sexuality. Furthermore, Latinas encounter new feminist knowledge about gender, sexuality, and Latinidad which allows them to challenge previous conventional notions they find oppressive. Thus my project suggests that Latinas experience gendered, sexual, and racialized freedoms when they leave for college.

My findings support previous research studies that believe feminism is beneficial for women (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015; Hurtado 2003) but also complicate this
argument by highlighting how it is potentially harmful for Latinas and their families.
When daughters learn feminist ideas about gender, sexuality, and their bodies in college
these understanding bring new pleasures for participants but also results in further
marginalization of their parents. Like the Latinas in Ray’s study who other their sisters
and friends whose gender and sexual lives stray away from the feminist empowerment
paradigm (forthcoming), daughters in this study other how their mothers forge sexual and
intimate relationships.

While my study is not generalizable about all Latina undergraduate students, it
does highlight the implications a college education has for Latinas who are working-
class, first-generation college students, and have immigrant parents with little to no
formal education. When I recruited participants for this study, I did not intentionally
recruit participants who were first-generation, working-class, or had immigrant parents
with low levels of formal education. Yet all participants shared these identity categories.
The fact that participants shared many identity categories leaves me with the follow
questions. I wonder if the implications Latina participants in this study voice are unique
to working-class and first-generation Latina college students who go away for college.
What are some of the implications for Latinas who have parents with college degrees or
are middle and upper class? I also wonder if other women of color who share similar
characteristics as the Latina participants in this study experience similar benefits and
harms. What are the implications of a college education for other women of color who
are working-class and have immigrant parents with low levels of education?
References


