

**NARRATIVES OF LATINO-AMERICAN IMMIGRANT
WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES**

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated with love to:

*Ma y Pa, que no sólo me dejaron ir,
sino que me apoyaron, echaron porras y mandaron su cariño.*

My hubby Jason and my new-born-baby Olaf Damián,
who lovingly endured the research and writing process.

Abstract

This thesis explores the immigration experiences of five Latino-American women who reside in Lethbridge, Alberta. Rather than using interviews as a research protocol, the author used conversation as a tool to explore the narratives of these women's experiences. Four of the five told their story in Spanish, and after transcribing the conversations, the author used critical inquiry to find common ground between the women's narratives and her own immigration experiences. This thesis explores topics such as belonging and connections to different communities and how these women use stories of change and continuity in constructing their identities. Language, employment, recognition of previous education as well as separation from their families and support networks were the main difficulties identified. As anticipated, these women accessed federally funded and provincially delivered immigrant settlement services, such as ESL classes. While hesitant to use formal counselling, three of the women accessed these services for gendered matters such as spousal abuse. Relationships based on kinship were crucial resources and central to their narratives as was church, which provided both a familiar and significant source of community and support. This study found that when using conversation the researcher establishes relationships with the participants, other writers/academics, as well as the readers. Thus this thesis suggests that narrative research is fundamentally a relational activity. In this context stories are considered gifts, and the exchange of gifts an important aspect of research design. The narratives were shaped by, and interpreted in light of, various contextual factors such as the women's relationships with the researcher, and their individual as well as socio-cultural and historical

circumstances. The five women who participated in this research were found through community networking, and had some familiarity with counselling—either as service recipients or a professional connection—circumstances which shaped their willingness to participate as well as the stories they narrated about their immigration experiences. In constructing the narratives of their past experiences, from the vantage point of the present, the women emphasize gratitude to Canada and only subtly allude to issues such as racism or stereotyping.

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Introduction

Historically immigration has played a significant role in the configuration of the Americas, particularly Canada and the United States of America as we understand them today. Canada recognizes immigration as a main force in the development of its population base and, with it, its economical configuration. Immigration is expected to be the only source of net population growth in Canada within the next 25 years (Canadian Labour and Business Centre, 2003).

Most immigrants to Canada concentrate in the main urban centers, 75 percent in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal alone (Krahn, Derwing, & Abu-Laban, 2005). The smaller urban centers and rural communities differ from the bigger cities not only in the resources they provide for new immigrants, but also in the composition of their population that is usually “less multicultural” than that of the main urban centers. For immigrants located in smaller communities means that opportunities to access immigration services, social support, schooling, and one’s own extended ethnic community can be reduced or are nonexistent.

As Radford (2007) points out, increasing the research that focuses on immigrants and visible minorities “would enable us to better understand the challenges and hurdles faced by immigrants and minority groups across Canada,” (p. 47) which would in turn contribute to improve policies that benefit the economies of the smaller communities and the living conditions of new immigrants. At least partly for these reasons it is important to understand how immigrants make sense of their immigration experiences and the ways in which receiving communities also change as their newly arriving members bring with them cultural diversity and specific needs. Newcomers to Canada will need, for example,

to learn one of the official languages, either English or French, find employment and do many things differently compared to how they did them in their country of origin.

Historically, most studies about the phenomenon of immigration and adaptation used to focus on male experiences and ignored or subsumed the experience of women as immigrants. This was derived from the fact that the Canadian immigration system accepted a greater number of male immigrants as principal or “economic” immigrants while most women and children were classified as dependent family members of those workers.

Feminist scholars have pointed out the importance of including the immigration experiences of women who migrate, in an attempt to understand differences in their experiences and the experiences of males. Canadian scholars as well as task forces from governmental bodies have reported and made recommendations for resolutions on the problems that immigrant women encounter (see Warren, 1986, p. 1). Studies about women’s immigration experiences are also summarized in the review article “Gender matters: Ethnographers bring gender from the periphery toward the core of immigration studies” by Mahler and Pessar (2006).

Migration is *gendered*, different for men and women, as well as *gendering*; it changes gender definitions and relationships between immigrants and their families (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992, p. 411). The process of immigration can challenge gender related assumptions, expectations and behaviours, which requires adaptation and negotiation of roles in the family (Dion & Dion, 2001). Researchers have tended to ignore immigrant women’s experiences, or have studied them primarily as dependents of men, thus rendering immigrant women’s stories invisible or stereotyped (Boyd, 1986;

Mahler & Pessar, 2006). One way to study gendered experiences is through listening to women's stories of their experiences and life-histories. The Personal Narratives Group (1989) propose that the dynamics of gender emerge clearly in the narratives of women because their narratives show how they 'negotiate' their gender status in their daily lives and during the course of their lives (p. 4).

The present research focuses on female immigrants to Canada in an attempt to recognize the value of women's "trials and triumphs as they negotiate a life for themselves and for their families" (Warren, 1986, p.1), as success stories. Their narratives explain from today's point of view the experiences that brought them to where they are today, and through which the women make sense of their actions and construct their identities. These stories help to understand how the heterogeneity, uniqueness and creativity of such experiences and how they contribute to the ideal of inclusivity and multiculturalism that Canada upholds.

I am both an immigrant woman and a graduate student in counselling psychology. From that double position I often wonder about the immigration stories of other women: How do they understand their immigration experiences and how do they integrate them into their identities? What do their experiences and mine have in common (as immigrants, and as women)?

My interest in studying immigrants' adaptation processes is based on the assumption that what I learn about and from them might help me better understand my own process and identity as an immigrant woman and might also help future women immigrants to better understand them-selves. As Behar (1996) proposes, through this research I hope to come to know others by knowing myself and know myself by knowing

others. My findings are offered to educators, counsellors and other service workers who interact with new immigrants in the hope that those workers might use my findings as a stepping stone to understand other immigration experiences.

This research on Latino-American immigrant women's experiences is important for two reasons. The first one is that the results will contribute to the knowledge that is available for professionals who work with clients from Latin-America, as well as other minority groups, and to help those professionals better understand the differences these clients present. The second reason is that the exercise of exploring other women's immigration stories is also an internal exercise, as I will be including and reviewing my own experiences. This autobiographical exploration will provide me with new elements to incorporate into my professional understanding of the immigration experiences and, I hope will improve the services I provide to clients in similar circumstances. In addition, it will provide insights into my own changing identity as a Mexican immigrant woman living in Lethbridge, Alberta.

This document consists of alternating vignettes and theme chapters. In the vignettes I present a brief summary of my encounters with each woman and her story, as well as a narrative depiction of each one of us with our immigration story. Each one of these women is an individual for me and their names evoke in me their faces, their special warmth, details about their families or their dress or their home that make them unique and clearly different from each other. However for the reader who has not had the pleasure to meet them, I recommend they use these vignettes as a reference that will help situate each of these women in her specific context while reading each chapter.

Through the chapters in this thesis I explore the narratives that the women shared with me as well as my own experiences as an immigrant woman and as a researcher. To explore in more detail the women's stories I organized each chapter around issues or topics that I am interested in and in those that emerged through the telling of the stories. Thus, each chapter seeks to present the stories that the women told me about their immigration experiences around a specific topic for inquiry into their and my identity.

The first chapter, "Qualitative Research Tradition," describes the process I followed to find the participants for my study and the methodological approach to the women's narratives. In this chapter I introduce the use of stories and conversation as an important component of this study.

The second chapter, on constructing self-identity, explores the narratives of the women in search of ways in which they use change and continuity to re-negotiate their identity and roles. The main idea explored here is that each individual creates meaning of the experiences of their lives, and in articulating the meaning of those experiences re-negotiates their identity and traditions.

The third chapter, "Belonging and Connections," focuses on how belonging to different groups and/or communities is interwoven with the women's definitions of themselves as Canadian citizens, Latino-Americans, and immigrant women.

The fourth chapter, entitled "Experiences as Newcomers" responds to the original seed that started this research project: to investigate the main difficulties that the women found as new immigrants and which services and resources they accessed to try to overcome those difficulties.

The fifth chapter proposes that research is a relational activity. In it I explore the idea that my research is the result of a matrix of relationships, not only with my participants but also with other academics, theories, and a possible audience that will receive the findings of my research.

The last chapter exposes the importance of understanding the narratives *in their context*, and intends to clarify some of the “agendas” (Patai, 1987) or motivations that the women had when deciding to participate in this study.

Judith's Story

I was born and grew up in Chilpancingo, a small city in the state of Guerrero in Mexico. I grew up speaking Spanish, but became familiar with English through the media, watching movies and listening to music from our northern neighbors. Growing up my siblings and I had opportunities to do summer English classes, as well as complete high school and university English courses. My parents came across some English summer classes programs in Canada, and proposed it as a summer activity for me and my siblings. My brother was the first one to enter that summer program and he loved it, so the next year we went together. I also enjoyed the experience and repeated the following summer and a third time on my own to study English, while living with a host family and visiting some Canadian tourism highlights.

After high school I moved to the city of Cuernavaca, to enroll in a psychology program at the University of Morelos. I learned that my university had an exchange program with a Canadian university. During my last year of university I applied to participate in the program and learned about rural development more for the excitement of being back in Canada than for interest in the topic. During this exchange, I learned about globalization and how it affected the small rural communities that were also new to me. I also met the man that later became my husband: a funny, energetic and 'outdoorsy' Canadian boy.

I became an immigrant to Canada in 2001, when I married Jason. After a year of living together in Mexico, we decided that Canada offered better career options for both of us, and that we would live in Canada for a short period of time and then return to Mexico. Our dream was to live in Canada for a period of five to eight years and move

back to Mexico for another five years or so, and then decide where to go from there. My decision to immigrate was made easier knowing that my stay in Canada would be temporary.

It has been six years, and my career in Canada as a mental health professional is just beginning. I expected that the undergraduate psychology degree I achieved in Mexico would not allow me to work in Canada and planned to use my first two years in Canada to complete a Master's program in Educational Psychology. This process took time and included becoming acquainted with the Canadian university system; seeking validation of my undergraduate degree; completing classes that were a requirement to enter the program; and along the way understanding how the national student loans system works. I am finally achieving my original plan, somewhat delayed, as I am working on my thesis to complete my Master's degree in Counselling.

While living in Saskatoon it was hard for me to find employment. I started working at a group home for people with disabilities. I liked working for them, but it was really difficult to keep up with the schedules. I started as a casual worker at four different homes, working full time hours doing the shifts that the other workers needed off. That meant working random evenings, nights, and weekends and I constantly felt exhausted and isolated. Eventually I started taking university classes at the University of Saskatchewan because I thought I needed to get used to university in Canada, as I was trying to figure out how to get into a Master's program in Psychology.

In 2003 Jason had an internship year and we moved to Austin, Texas, where he could use and improve his Spanish while still receiving credit from his program. During that year I had an America visa as a dependent of his religious occupation visa. That

meant that legally I was not allowed to work other than volunteering at the church. I had started studying French while in Canada and decided to audit some French classes at the University of Texas. I also tutored and taught Spanish to some friends, and did lots of reading, exercising, painting, and enjoyed the music scene as I was determined to do all of those things that I felt that I didn't have enough time to do during my "normal life." I also visited my family in Mexico twice that year, and that was exciting for me because I got to spend some time with the first one of my nieces, who was then only a baby.

What I miss the most about my country are people: my family and friends, my nieces growing up, and the big family reunions. Sometimes I feel a lot more independent—in certain ways—than I did when I was in Mexico. I started doing adult things when I came here, things I had not needed to do yet in Mexico, such as figure out how to do taxes or get a job. My increased fluency in spoken and written English, and having to do things on my own, has allowed me to become more independent.

My communication with my own family in Mexico continues to be strong as we all have access to long distance telephone and the Internet. I don't think of my immigration experience as something hard or difficult. However, I do recall being very depressed my very first winter in Saskatchewan and often wondering if it was worth staying. Sometimes I am really home-sick, or miss the weather or the familiarity of things that here become so complicated (especially during the winter).

Present difficulties seem to obscure the difficulties from the past. Right now, for example, I am again trying to figure how to move from the student world into the working world. That means taking a job where I could use my academic preparation and not another job that I'm overqualified for.

Qualitative Research Tradition

Qualitative and quantitative research traditions have different logics of justification (Carson, 1986). While quantitative methods seek objective results, independent of the meanings given to it by the participants, qualitative methods seek the very meaning participants attach to the topic of study. Qualitative approaches to research seek to understand the richness of experience, the meanings that individuals make out of their lives, rather than quantitative approaches that seek generalizations. My approach in this research forms part of this qualitative tradition and is informed by authors such as Carolyn Ellis (Ellis & Berger, 2002; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992) and her autoethnography, Daphne Patai (1987, 1988) and her study of life stories, and Carola Conle (1993, 2000) and her narrative inquiry.

Carolyn Ellis, a sociologist, uses autoethnography, a method of research that consists of “using stories written in an autobiographical genre about the relationships of self, other and culture” (Ellis & Berger, 2002, p. 849), to explore the *meaning* of human lived experience. Through the use of these stories, Ellis explores how the meaning that people make of their experiences is shaped by the physical, political and historical contexts of such experience. Ellis advocates for the importance of studying subjectivity and *meanings* because humans act based on the meanings that events and relationships have for them (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992).

Daphne Patai (1988) conducted research with “invisible women” in Brazil to explore relationships between women’s lives and cultural structures. By asking women simple questions about their lives, Patai aims to “learn from these women how their lives appeared to them, and, starting with their life histories as subjective documents, to gain a

sense of the cultural constrains and pathways that provide structure and directions to women's lives" (Patai, 1988, p. 143). Patai recognizes that the life stories she collected for her research are the result of a dialogue, not a monologue. She considers each interview situation an interaction that includes both the participant's and the researcher's senses of self, cultural assumptions, words and gestures in the exchange of memories and questions.

As with other qualitative approaches, this research focuses on specifics and particulars, as opposed to abstractions and universals (Conle, 1993; Goode, 2006). My interest is not to produce results that can be broadly generalized. Instead, I present specific stories that allow the participants, the researcher and the readers to gain a new understanding of these women's immigration experiences. By understanding *these specific* stories and relating to them, readers can later relate to other *particular* immigrants and their stories. Like Patai (1988), I asked simple questions to invite the women to tell the stories that express their own themes, while bearing in mind that my participation in this interaction contributed to the choice of the stories that the women shared.

Narrative and Conversation as Research

Other people's experiences might teach me about myself as I identify in their stories some elements of my own and as I find resonances of my story in theirs. The concept of *resonance* refers to metaphorical connections that are made either with one's own life experiences or within experiential narratives that are shared by a group of people (Conle, 1993). Part of this inquiry focuses on the way the narratives of the participating Spanish-speaking immigrant women resonate with my own.

By writing about the resonances that I find I hope to offer counsellors, educators and other professionals the opportunity to better understand our immigration experiences. I also hope that the readers will find their own resonances with the narratives presented here, and that by interacting with these stories their understanding of women's immigration experiences will be transformed. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest narratives may be "read, and lived, vicariously by others" (p. 8). Through narrative, readers and listeners relate to other people's experiences, and come to understand how the narrative contributes to making sense and creating the reality of the person who is sharing her or his story.

Considering the interview as a conversation allows us to understand that through dialogue the interview "becomes a joint reflection on a phenomenon, a deepening experience for both interviewer and participant" (Weber, 1986, p. 65). The interview is an experience *lived* by those present, an experience in which the participant has an active role but also one in which the researcher has a certain personal involvement with the topic or phenomenon being studied. Researching life-stories and biographies is the product of an encounter or, as Catani (1981) describes it, "the result of a two-way seduction, a love story" (p. 212) expressed in the combination of the autobiographical style of the participant telling the story, and the biographer-like role of the researcher.

By recognizing the impossibility of being an objective observer, and presenting my own preconceived ideas, responses and participation during the interactions with the participants in my research, I become a *vulnerable observer* (Behar, 1996), someone who is not a blank slate but a participant who will also be affected, cognitively and emotionally, by what she is witnessing and by her relationships with the participants.

Also, I become aware of the power relations that affect the interactions between participants and myself, such as differences of socioeconomic status, and age, and that those relations also affect the content and nature of what my participants choose to share in their narratives. Awareness of all this helps me to understand that each story is not a finished entity, but only one of the possible versions of these people's stories (Miles & Crush, 1993).

How I Carried Out My Research

I placed posters both in English and Spanish with information about my study at the university, some department stores, the Asian Market (a specialty importing food store), a downtown coffee-shop, Lethbridge Family Services–Immigrant Services, and an English as a Second Language center called Flexibility Learning. I contacted the English as Second Language instructor at Lethbridge Community College and at the University of Lethbridge. I tried to place posters at both the Lethbridge Public Library and the main post office but was not allowed to; interestingly enough both places said they could not post this kind of community information, but offered to share the information with their employees instead. The posters invited possible participants, immigrant women born in a Latino-American country and residing in Lethbridge, to contact me via telephone or e-mail. I also told my acquaintances about the project, asking them to share the information with possible participants, and sent my poster via e-mail through the Faculty of Education web-server asking my classmates to pass along the information to possible participants.

My first contact with the participants was via telephone or e-mail. Friends told two of the eventual participants about me and about my study, and subsequently I contacted them to invite them to participate. People that had seen my posters told another

two women, and these women contacted me. One of these women invited her sister to participate in my study. I asked these five Latino-American women who were willing to participate in my study to meet with me individually on three different occasions.

The first time I met each woman was at their homes or mine and after introductions I explained my research project to them. In each case I reviewed the letter of consent with them to clarify the information included in it and I asked them to fill out a short questionnaire with information about their immigration to use as context for the stories. The questionnaire (included as Appendix A) addresses general information such as: main reason for immigrating, age at immigration, proficiency of English language, incorporation into schooling and employment. By answering this pre-interview questionnaire and meeting in person, our story exchange began and the tone was set for our next encounter when the interview would take place.

The second time we met, each woman shared a narrative account of her personal immigration experiences. The initial request was: “Tell me about your immigration experience /*Cuénteme acerca de su experiencia de inmigración.*” The rest of the interview was guided by the woman’s narrative (the account of her immigration experience). See Appendix B for more details about the questions that I had planned to use in our conversations. After this initial story, each interaction took the form of a conversation between the participant and me, with the objective to allow her to express her own themes (Patai, 1988). On some occasions I also shared experiences of mine that resonated with the story the women were telling; for example, when one of them was talking about different ways she keeps in touch with her parents who still live in her country of origin, and how she does not use the postal services anymore because “they

can't be trusted," I shared with her some of my personal bad experiences mailing packages or gifts to my family in Mexico. During their stories I also asked or introduced issues or questions that had emerged from previous interviews with other participants. The participants had the option of speaking in English, Spanish or both as they felt comfortable, and except for the youngest one, they all chose to tell their story in Spanish.

All the interviews were video recorded and transcribed. I transcribed the interviews following Patai's (1988) and Tedlock's (1983) suggestions to document as close as possible the actual conversation that took place, including elements such as the repetitions and pauses, and in a way that preserves the speaker's communication style. I used quotation marks to signal reported speech, what somebody else said, as well as ellipsis (...) to mark when an idea was interrupted to start a new phrase. My goal was to evoke the interactions and emotions present in the actual interview. Each interview resulted in a transcript of around thirty double-spaced pages. After each meeting I also took notes of my personal responses to the interactions, including my emotions, ideas and questions. The notes and journaling I did varied from a short paragraph to a couple full pages each time, adding to a total of fourteen single-spaced pages in my word processor and a few extra pages in the notebook I usually carried with me.

The transcriptions of the interviews, the written questionnaires and my own notes are the primary texts of this inquiry. The following four main questions guided my interactions with the women—our conversation, my questions and comments—and the subsequent inquiry into the materials collected. I have used these questions as a guide in organizing the stories from the women into the main themes that constitute the chapters of my writing.

- 1) How do these women incorporate their experiences into their sense of identity?
- 2) What are the issues (difficulties or challenges) that these women identify as crucial in their immigration experience?
- 3) How did they solve these challenges? Which challenges persist?
- 4) Which resources (internal) and supports (external) do they identify as having accessed?

I met with each participant a third time to show her the transcriptions of the interviews, clarify any questions that I (and/or she) had, and to show her the vignettes that I wrote to summarize our interactions during that time. In this meeting, the last one required for my study, I presented them with the idea of meeting the other participants in the study. This idea came from my interaction with each one of the women and a wonderfully candid question by one of them. When Marina learned that she would be interviewed on her own, she said, “Oh, you mean I’m not going to meet the other women?”

Even though I had not originally planned a meeting with all the participants, I felt compelled to do something in return for their gifts of stories. I proposed to cook a meal for them to set a space where we could all meet. They all seemed excited and interested in meeting the other women. After several phone calls and re-arranging schedules we had a gathering at my home where we shared food, and got to know each other through more stories.

Stories as Gifts and Research as Relationships

The women who participated in this study gave me the gift of their stories. I certainly felt honoured and deeply touched by their willingness to share their experiences

and concur with Atkinson's (1995) description of stories as a "spiritual and eternal gift" that "cannot be seen, only felt [... and] convey the heart and soul of what life is about and what it can be" (p. 134). Through the stories they shared with me, these women allowed me to feel closer to their lives and to journey with them into their experience. The gift of their stories can be seen as the gift of "one-self" given through the narrative experience as the resolution of an interpersonal relation (Catani, 1981, p. 212).

Listening to their stories allows me to explore *my own experiences and identity* by reflecting on their narratives and how they have incorporated their experiences into their identities. By writing about their narratives I share the gift of their stories with a wider audience, but the context has changed. What they shared with me personally has been re-told by me almost a year later, and it is possible that they would not recognize themselves on paper. The story they shared presents a view of "how they [saw] themselves at [a] point in their lives and how they want others to see them" (Atkinson, 1995, p. 116). Their identities are in continuous transformation and their narratives would differ when told at a different point in time, to a different interlocutor or when moved by a different motivation. Personal narratives, as well as the inquiry and its results, are not static; rather, participants are transformed as they incorporate new understandings into the meaning they make of their life (Conle, 1993). It is important to consider these stories in their context, and the specific narratives as a result of the convergence of situations at the specific time of *my* relationship with these women, or otherwise, as Conle warns us, these stories run the risk to become stereotypes.

Sharing stories as gifts is part of an exchange by which the women share their own knowledge and view of their world as a means to allow understanding and change.

The stories they share have *inherently valuable knowledge* that needs to be reciprocated (Lokensgard, 2001, p. 189). In receiving their stories as gifts I am indebted to the development of our relationship and feel the need to reciprocate their gift with something else. Thus the gifts that I give in exchange for their stories (i.e., organize a meal for them, share my own story, etc.) are not in direct relationship with a certain “value” that their stories have, but instead their value is in building the relationship, and should be seen as actions (rather than items) that are done in appreciation of the women’s gifts of stories (Lokensgard, 2001, p. 122). Listener and narrator establish a strong relationship because of the interaction that takes place between them. Listening to somebody’s story can be a way of empowering the speakers by guiding them to a deeper understanding of their own life (Atkinson, 1995). In return for their stories, as a listener, I offer to them the possibility to be heard and to speak their *own truth* about themselves, to validate their points of view and personal *truths* without fear of judgment or punishment (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 262).

In view of the uniqueness of the narratives, exploring the relationships that gave way to the exchange of stories as gifts becomes as important as exploring the stories themselves. A chapter of this thesis, “Research as a Relational Activity,” is dedicated to exploring some of the relationships that impacted the women’s stories as well as my inquiry. There are two central kinds of relationships that I will explore: The first kind are the relationships that develop in “real life” between the researcher and the participants (Lieblich, 1996); and the second kind are the “mental” relationships that develop between the researcher and her previous knowledge both personal and academic (Gergen & Gergen, 2002).

Sara's Story

I told some Canadian friends of mine that I was looking for women that could be interested in participating in my study. My friends suggested to call a family they knew from El Salvador directly, as it would probably be a lot easier for me to explain my study and knowing that they would be okay with them giving me their phone number.

So I called. I was a little bit nervous about phoning up strangers but very excited about the possibility to connect with Spanish-speaking people. The phone call made me feel relieved and glad, the family was friendly and (according to the father) open to the idea of participating. They were glad to help out their friends' friend, as Sara's dad explained—*si eres amiga de nuestros amigos eres nuestra amiga*—(if you are our friends' friend you are also our friend) and they would do as much as they could to help me.

We met for the first time at their home, where I explained to Sara and her mother what I wanted to do. Sara's mom decided not to participate, as she said that her daughter's story would be more useful to me. Sara filled out the questionnaire with general information about her immigration while I drank some water and admired her family photos hanging on the wall. In one of the pictures Sara is sitting down in a chair beside her husband and surrounded by three teenage sons. Even though the picture is a few years old (her sons are adults now and she has separated from her husband) she looks the same, her long dark curly hair framing a smiling, peaceful face. In trying to describe Sara I can only think of describing her as having a sincere face; it is something hard to describe in other words besides sincere, open, and frank. I left that day with an appointment set up to have the actual interview at my house, where I would videotape our conversation.

The next time we met I had a video-camera set up and ready to go. After the courtesy greetings, and getting some coffee and tea from the kitchen, we sat in the living room. I could not tell at that moment that Sara was a little bit nervous, which she told me at a later date. She let me know she was ready to speak by saying, “*Bueno, entonces usted hace las preguntas...*,” meaning that I could start asking the questions and she was ready to answer them. I told her that I wanted to hear in detail her immigration story.

Sara’s story was full of gratitude to Canada for receiving her, her husband and three little sons in 1988 as refugees fleeing the war in El Salvador. Sara related how hard it was to be apart from her family, as they were always very close, *muy unidos*, even though she married very young. She remembered that an organization called LISA supported them to settle in Lethbridge, but could not recall what the acronym stands for, “landed immigrant something,” and that they had English classes and her children started going to kindergarten and daycare immediately. Eventually Sara’s parents and brother also immigrated to Lethbridge.

Sara said that she feels very proud that they didn’t lose their culture and traditions, as it was important for her that her children learn Spanish. They always spoke Spanish and always had *comida Salvadoreña* at home. Sara had never worked in El Salvador; she was dedicated to her home and children but once in Canada she decided to work to help support the family economically. She worked as a daycare worker for eleven years, and later as a janitor in an office building, and several homes where she continues to work. She does not get to practice her English as much as she would like to.

Sara said she had *malas experiencias* in her marriage, mainly physical abuse and jealousy from her husband, which lead her to ask for help from her ESL teacher and

another Spanish speaking woman she knew from church. She was attending two different churches at the time, but because of her poor English language skills decided to ask for help from somebody who spoke Spanish. Sara didn't get much support from that person, but eventually she got more involved in her new church and her faith has helped her to feel stronger. She also called the police and on one of those occasions they took her to the women's shelter, where she received counselling and support. She has been separated from her husband since June 2005 but has decided not to divorce, as she is willing to give him a chance to get back together if he allows God to work on him and change him. Sara is sad about her separation from her husband, but also has realized that she can do things for herself, and that she has the right to her own opinions.

Sara keeps in touch with her family in El Salvador by using the phone and finding the best long distance rates she can find. She would like to visit them every year but because of the cost she has only been able to visit three times in the 18 years she has been in Canada. Sara said that even though her economic situation is a lot better in Canada she dreams of returning to El Salvador and taking her parents back home where her siblings still live. She knows that if and when that happens part of her life will stay here, as she is positive that her (now adult) sons will probably stay in Canada.

At the time of our interview I found it hard to believe that Sara was 44 years old because she looks so youthful and moves so lightly. She usually referred to me using the formal *usted*, and was very courteous. She mentioned in our conversation that she has always liked using *usted* because it conveys respect and love, and she always uses it to address her siblings instead of the informal *tú*.

Sara and I met one more time after I had transcribed the interview. She read all 30 pages of it. I had a few questions about things that were not clear to me. I also told her the idea that had emerged from meeting the other women of maybe getting together to have some Mexican food together. She agreed that was a good idea, and she said that growing up she was always shy, but now she likes to meet more people all the time.

Constructing Self-Identity: The Fluidity of Tradition

Humans construct *reality* by organizing their experiences and memories in the form of narrative (Bruner, 1991). Reality, as described here, includes the world around us, as well as our identity. Using language through narrative, we craft and construct the stories that comprise the different *selves* that we use to interact with others, in other words, our identity (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). We redefine ourselves by narrating the experiences that lead us to *who* we are today. Thus the understanding of reality is subjective, and we understand, share and recreate that reality in our interactions with others. As Patai (1988) suggests, the encounters between two individuals (in this case myself and each woman I interviewed) are moments of the “intersection between two subjectivities” (p. 146). As this interaction takes place, the narrator chooses to share a particular version of her life story in a way that explores the past, and this might become an essential component of her sense of identity, and thus make sense of the present (Patai, 1988).

Discourse studies of identity narratives propose the view that identities are “practical accomplishments that are constructed [...] in the everyday flow of verbal interaction,” (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 83). Narrative accounts of personal experiences have the potential of creating rich meaningful stories of the experiences that are being described. As Patai (1988, p. 147) puts it, “telling one’s life story involves a rationalization of the past and leads into an inevitable present.” The women chose from all their memories and stories which ones to share with me, sharing *one* of the many possible versions of their life stories. The experiences that a person *chooses* to share have a certain role in the development of the self, as they are incorporated into a historical unit

that explains “why” the self has developed as it has (Hankiss, 1981). Narrative inquiry is a process of collaboration (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) that represents reality, but at the same time constitutes it (Bruner, 1991). In this chapter, my objective is to point out ways in which the women’s narratives shared with me portray, while creating, their self-identity.

In her study of experiences and self-perceptions of immigrant women in Calgary, Warren (1986) identified six bridges that new Canadian women used to help their transition to life in Canada. These bridges are “situational perspectives or attitudes adopted by the women on the basis of their experiences” that contribute to form their new Canadian identity. Allowing connections and transformations between their “old” and “new” cultures and ways of doing things, the bridges identified by Warren are particular ways in which continuity and change become tools in the creation and understanding of women’s sense of identity and belonging. Keeping in mind Warren’s concept of bridges that link the old and the new, I searched for continuity and change in the stories the women shared with me, and identified some of the aspects that the women used to *story the self* (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000), narrating stories that describe who they are through their experiences.

I selected excerpts from our interviews that made me feel closer to each of these women. Some of them describe or explain ways of doing things, some motivations for their actions, or relationships, but they all were selected based on my response. Listening to these stories I felt like *I knew better* the women telling me the story and I felt closer to understanding *who they are*. In listening for continuity and change in their stories, they

evoked in me some of my own experiences, which helped me while trying to understand their immigrant women identities.

Stories of Continuity

The following excerpt from Sara's narrative (personal interview, February 20, 2007) shows the importance that continuing her "cultural ways" of doing things have for her sense of identity and of family as a unit. Sara arrived in Canada as a young wife and mother of three boys, and she depicts her family interactions during their first years, when the boys were still living at home. In this example cultural continuity is specifically represented by continuing to eat the same food and continuing to speak the Spanish language at home.

porque en mi casa, español todo el tiempo
 con los muchachos
 ellos me hablaban en inglés
 yo en español, porque yo quería que ellos aprendieran
 que no se les olvidara su lengua, por que sí, hay muchas familias que vienen con
 niños pequeños y se dedican nomás al inglés
 y está bien, porque no digo que no
 pero porque si uno se concentra en la lengua inglesa uno lo aprende bien rápido
 porque hay experiencias, ¿verdad? de que sí...
 pero yo no quería que a mis hijos se les olvidara el español
 porque decía "Nosotros acá podemos aprender el inglés
 pero están nuestras familias allá
 y los vamos a ir a visitar un día, y para mí va a ser muy doloroso
 el que mis hijos no hablen, no entiendan"
 y no, ¡no no no no no!
 y en la casa se habla español, y claro entre hermanos ellos se hablaron en inglés,
 se les hacía mas fácil
 pero sí, este, pusimos esas reglas
 que la comida acá, no comida canadiense,
 solo comida salvadoreña
 afuera sí, porque aquí no hay restaurantes, ¿verdad?
 cuando salgamos a comer afuera sí podemos comer
 pero aquí en la casita no van a faltar las tortillas los frijolitos, el queso.
 Y así y me siento muy orgullosa por que no perdimos nuestra cultura nuestras
 costumbres.
 Porque es un orgullo para mí, es un orgullo ahora

de decir de que hemos conservado nuestra cultura, por lo menos adentro de nuestro hogar, ¿verdad?
(Sara 156-183)

because in my house, Spanish all the time
with the boys
they used to speak to me in English, [and]
I [spoke] in Spanish, because I wanted them to learn
to not forget their language because, yes, there are many families that come with small children and devote themselves only to English
and it's fine, because I don't say it's not
but because if you concentrate on English one can learn it really fast
because there are experiences, right? that yes...
but I didn't want my children to forget Spanish
because I said "We can learn English here
but our families are there
and we are going to go visit them one day, and for me it would be very painful for my children not to speak, not to understand"
and no, no no no no no!
and in the house Spanish is spoken, and of course between brothers they spoke to each other in English, they found it easier
but, yes, we set those rules
that meals here, not Canadian food,
only Salvadorian food
going out yes, because there aren't any restaurants, right?
when we go out to eat, okay, we can eat
but here in our house will always be tortillas, beans, and cheese
And in this way and I feel proud, because we didn't lose our culture, our ways.
Because I am proud, I am proud now
to say that we have maintained our culture, at least inside our home, right?
(Sara 153-183)

Sara finds it important to carry forward her culture, which she describes here in terms of eating the same food and maintaining (and transmitting to her sons) the Spanish language within the family as a way to maintain a *connection* with her origins and with their extended family. The sense of continuity or preserving the culture implies overcoming the danger of losing it. By preserving Salvadorian culture, Sara finds continuity in the new "foreign" culture and society in which they are immersed. Her role as a mother continues to be to take care of the children, and to teach, maybe the emphasis

in the cultural transmission to the next generation is clearer than before. Sara, the young mother of three, never worked in El Salvador, once she decided to work in Canada, the employment that she sought was in a way an extension of her mother and homemaker roles, her first employment in a daycare, and later as a janitor.

There seem to be two spheres in Sara's life, her home with continuity at its core; and the outside world, the world of work full of learning, change and adaptation. In a new place where everything is different or, in her own words, *en un lugar extraño*, the family home and its dining table at its core become an oasis of familiarity, and the rules set for the family to speak only Spanish at home, a way to maintain connections with her family here (and her extended family in El Salvador).

By sharing the importance of maintaining the Spanish language—while speaking to me in Spanish—this narrative connects Sara and I to each other. The Spanish language is something special that we share and want to preserve because it makes us different from the strangers from this new place, and because it maintains us connected with our (far away) families and culture. Sara invests energy in maintaining the language and finding ingredients to cook her same Salvadorian dishes because this is something that she can specifically maintain constant in a world where almost everything else seems different and implies change and adaptation.

There seems to be a certain reaffirmation of identity by comparing and contrasting “our (old) ways,” the ways we know of doing things, with the “new ways,” which are norm in the new cultural context. By comparing and choosing to continue doing the things our way, a sense of continuity and familiarity, of being the same despite the challenging new environment offers comfort and a renewed sense of identity. The

following excerpt I chose is from Maria's interview (personal interview, March 1, 2007). For Maria, who lives with her elderly parents and her eighteen-year-old son, a choice can be made to preserve the cultural values by continuing to do things a certain way. In this excerpt Maria points out the difference between the "Latino-American ways" of living, defined by closely knit family and support versus the "(North) American way" which is more individualistic. This narrative also introduces the element of choice. Maria compares the two ways of life, chooses one or the other in each instance of life, and follows through on her choices.

y precisamente como ahora el cardiólogo nos habló
 "¿quién es la responsable?"
 entonces digo "yo,
 yo soy la que vive con ellos
 yo soy la que esta mas relacionada con ellos"
 pero lo que ya no quiero hacer
 y hasta me lo dice una amiga canadiense
 "nunca los mande a un asilo de ancianos"
 y esa es la idea del latino
 nunca mandar a nuestros padres a esos hogares
 aunque se presentan muchos sacrificios
 pero no es mi idea hacer eso.
 tratar de tenerlos lo mas que pueda yo
 porque
 he tomado...
 yo tuve
 mi hijo
 bueno...
 las buenas ideas que me ofrecen acá y mis ideas como latina
 entonces tomo lo que me sirve
 lo que pienso yo analizo
 ¿qué es lo mejor? eso es lo que tomo
 yo estoy en contra muchas dicen
 "18 años, ay ya mi hijo ya se va a ir de la casa
 ¡ay que feliz! ya no tendré que preocuparme tanto"
 "que idea tan errónea" digo
 ya cuando se case (risita) ya que se vaya
 ya que tenga su privacidad, su hogar, y mejor así
 si, ósea, si tienen cosas ahí
 pero digo "mientras el esté soltero

el esté estudiando
 yo lo quiero tener lo mas
 que pueda
 lo mas que el quiera estar conmigo
 yo quiero vivir con él”
 esas son las cuestiones que yo no estoy de acuerdo el tipo de cultura americana y
 canadiense
 yo no estoy de acuerdo
 los papás también cuando ya están viejitos los mandan al asilo y eso es lo que no.
 A nosotros nos han inculcado bastante el respeto a la familia.
 (Maria 1123-1162)

and just recently the cardiologist called us
 “who is responsible [for them]?”
 then I say “me,
 I am the one who lives with them [Maria’s parents]
 I am who is closer to them”
 but what I don’t want to do
 and even a Canadian friend tells me
 “never send them to a seniors’ home”
 and that is the idea of the Latino
 never to send our parents to those homes
 even though there are many sacrifices
 but that is not my idea to do that
 try to have them as much as I can
 because
 I have taken...
 I had
 my son
 well...
 the good ideas that are offered to me here and my ideas as Latina
 then I take what works best for me
 what I think, I reflect
 what is best? and that is what I take
 I am against many women who say
 “18 years, yey finally my son is going to leave from my house
 I’m so happy! I won’t have to worry so much”
 “what a wrong idea!” I say
 when he gets married (giggles) then he should go
 to have his own privacy, his home, and it is better that way
 yes, anyway, they do have things there
 but I say while he is single
 he is studying
 I want to have him as much
 as I can

these are the issues that I disagree [with the] kind of American and Canadian culture
 I don't agree
 the parents also, when they are old are sent to the homes and that is what shouldn't be.
 We have been taught very well the respect to the family.
 (Maria 1123-1162)

Maria's role in her family has changed from parent to parental caregiver. She told me that after her separation from her son's father, she realized the importance of the *real* family, (the immediate family) and she rejoined her parents to form a family unit. Maria does not see becoming a caregiver for her elderly parents as a change derived from her immigration, but as a continuity of the way Latino-American families do things and a way to maintain some of her values: the respect for family, closeness, support and care for the other members of the family. She cares for her parents and they keep her company, everyone has a complimentary role in the family to look after each other.

Her narrative portrays Maria as an active agent in her new context, and not simply a passive recipient of her current living conditions. Her actions and choices have been influenced by the conditions of her Guatemalan cultural context, as well as the way she integrates her new experiences in the United States and Canada into her story. Maria is an active agent in creating her identity, her changing context does not determine what she does but serves as a frame of reference in a "dynamic process through which the individual simultaneously shapes and is shaped by her environment" (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 19).

In defining or describing our-selves, often the way we do things seems to merge with our identity, or describing who we are. The following excerpt comes from my interview with Silvia (personal interview, March 9, 2007), who came to Canada

originally as a teenager to study English and after a short return to Colombia decided to come back to study and eventually permanently reside in Canada. I asked her about how she is the same/different from how she was before immigrating to Canada. With this question her response focused mostly on personal characteristics and ways of interacting with people surrounding her.

J—¿cómo has cambiado tu
 como has cambiado y en que forma crees tu que eres igual
 a la mujer que eras antes de venir a Canadá?
S—hum
 esa es una pregunta grande grande
 yo creo que...
 a ver
 hum
 yo no sé
 yo creo que siempre he sido una persona... no súper extrovertida
 ¿no? he sido mas como
 mas bien
 mas bien callada
 no no mucho
 no tampoco muy muy tímida
 me gusta me gusta relacionarme
 me gusta conocer gente nueva
 yo creo que sí...
 ah hasta que
 no yo creo que...
 hasta que yo creo que esa siempre ha sido mi personalidad
 como que observo bastante primero
 y como que después ya cuando me siento como que es mi campo
 como que ya me siento segura
 o como que la gente con la que siento que me puedo relacionar
 como que ya me
 como que ya
 si siento como la libertad de abrir el corazón ¿no?
 de ser yo misma
 como que a veces...
 sí
 y eso yo no creo que haya cambiado
 no, el hecho de cambiar de cultura...
 sí, yo sigo siendo en ese aspecto la misma.
 (Silvia 848-881)

J—How have you changed?

How have you changed and in which ways are you similar to the woman you were before coming to Canada?

S—hum

that is a big, big question

I think that...

let's see

hum

I don't know

I think I have always been a person... not overly extroverted

no? I have been more like

mostly

mostly quiet

no no very much

neither too shy

I like to interact with others

I like meeting new people

I think so...

oh, until

no I believe that...

I believe that has always been my personality

like I observe a lot first

and after when I feel more like it is my space

I feel kind of more safe

or like people with whom I feel that I can relate

it's like then

like then

I feel the freedom to open my heart, no?

to be myself

like sometimes...

yes

and that I do not believe has changed

no, the fact of changing cultures...

yes, I continue being the same one in that aspect.

(Silvia 848-881)

According to her story Silvia is pretty much the same person now as she was before immigrating. As we will see later she presents a strong *assimilation* posture in her interactions with Canadian people. She talks about maintaining her values (mostly her Christian values) but as a guest in this country, and as an immigrant, she adapts to the expectations and ways of doing things here.

A very important continuity factor for Silvia is her religious beliefs and the church as institution and community. She originally came to Canada with people her family had met through their church. She came back to Canada to study in a Christian university and taught at a private Christian elementary school. Keeping her beliefs has been important for her and the rest of her can change, to do what is “expected of her” here, as long as it does not contradict her basic principles and values.

Describing who we are sometimes implies a change of context to allow for continuity of our identity, or who we are or used to be. In the next excerpt Maritza (personal interview, March 5, 2007) adds an interesting twist to the story about who she is. Moving to Canada allowed her to be the person *she always knew she was* but *was not allowed* to be by her living conditions in Guatemala. When her conditions changed, having support from her family again and feeling empowered to leave her partner and follow her dream, she was able to flourish into the woman she knew she could be.

yo quería tomar mas Inglés porque yo noté de que el Inglés lo iba aprendiendo rápido
y cuando estuve recibiendo unas clases del gobierno ellos me fueron ayudando y me fueron promoviendo rápido porque yo rápido agarraba el Inglés
y cuando yo le dije a él
que yo quería irme a la escuela porque quería estudiar mas Inglés
el me dijo que no
el me dijo que yo había venido solo a trabajar aquí
y que yo no tenía derecho a estudiar
entonces ya eso ya me empezó a dar mala espina porque
yo conozco mi capacidad y
y me gusta estudiar
y le dije yo “bueno, okay” le dije yo, pero yo no estaba contenta porque era uno de mis sueños
en mi país yo era maestra de educación para el hogar y estaba estudiando en una universidad
y por razones económicas no pude continuar
entonces yo yo estaba muy frustrada por la por la forma de él
entonces casi al año
cuando ya íbamos a aplicar

yo tomé la decisión de dejarlo definitivamente
 porque ya no pude vivir con él
 yo ya no lo quería yo ya no lo respetaba
 yo ya estaba cansada de su control, del maltrato
 y ya había aprendido yo acerca del abuso
 que en nuestro país es aceptable
 pero aquí no
 y ya mis ideas empezaron a cambiar ya no me gustó eso
 ya quise ser yo mas independiente
 y no pues dije "*That's it!*"
 (Maritza 253-282)

I wanted to take more English because I noticed that I was learning English really quickly
 and when I was receiving classes from the government they were helping me and promoting me quickly because I quickly grabbed the English [language]
 and when I told him [ex-partner]
 that I wanted to go to school because I wanted to study more English
 he told me "no"
 he told me that I had come here just to work
 and that I had no right to study
 then that started to bother me because
 I know my ability
 and I like to study
 and I told him "well, okay" I told him, but I was not happy because it was one of my dreams
 in my country I was a home economics teacher and I was studying at the university
 but for economic reasons I could not continue
 then I... I was very frustrated by his ways.
 Then at almost one year
 when we were going to apply
 I made the decision to leave him definitely
 because I could not live with him any more.
 I did not love him any more, I didn't respect him any more
 I was already tired of his control, his mistreatment
 and I had already learned about abuse
 that in our country is acceptable
 but here it is not
 and my ideas started to change, I didn't like that anymore
 I wanted to be more independent
 and therefore I said, "*That's it!*"
 (Maritza 253-282)

yo me he considerado una mujer con mucha potencia con, potencial
 y yo dije "si yo no voy a hacer lo que yo quiero me voy a me voy a marchitar"

yo se como... yo necesito... yo soy una mujer muy apasionada
 yo necesito hacer algo con cariño
 cuando lo hago lo hago con cariño lo hago con pasión
 porque es algo en lo que yo creo
 algo en lo que, yo sé que es mi fuerza
 y si yo no lo hago
 pues me voy para abajo
 y por eso dije era mejor deshacerme de el
 a dejar mis sueños
 (Maritza 1067-1077)

I have considered myself a woman with lots of energy, with potential
 and I said “if I am not going to do what I want to do I am going to I’m going to
 wither”
 I know how... I need... I am a very passionate woman
 I need to do things with love
 when I do something I do it with passion
 because it is something in which I believe
 something... which I know it is my strength
 and if I don’t do it
 then I go down
 and that is why I said it was better to get rid of him
 than to leave my dreams
 (Maritza 1067-1077)

Maritza describes herself as a passionate woman and details some of the conditions that impeded her to follow her passion “to have a career.” In her story she describes herself as the same in her core: she always wanted to be a professional, she is passionate and generous; the changes in her contextual conditions—with her immigration—allowed her to flourish, or be that woman she knew she could be.

The second excerpt is for me the most illustrative of Maritza storying her-self for me (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000), showing me a persona that highlights her qualities, the person she wants me—and the invisible audience of readers of this paper—to see. Maritza, in response to my interest in her immigration story finds those important events and turning points that allow her to show me her transformation through time looking back

from her present to her past. She explains her present self through the decisive events in her life and her actions.

When I think of Maritza there is a certain phrase that always comes to my mind, something she told me during the very first contact we had over the phone: she told me that she has experienced in Canada things that she never thought she would live through. This phrase makes reference, of course, to both “the bad” that is partner abuse leading to their separation, and “the good” that is herself achieving her own career dreams, getting married, and being with her family again.

The last interview I had was with Marina (personal interview, March 16, 2007), the youngest of the participants, who arrived from Guatemala via the United States of America when she was only ten years old. I found that, as suggested by Weber (1986), some of my participation in the conversation was a response to what the other women had shared with me, and my interest in, what by then I could identify as the topic of continuity and change in relation to identity. I asked Marina how her relationships with her family changed or remained the same with her immigration to Canada, and this is what she answered in English:

I think when you come to Canada
 you get a sense of being independent
 that's a...
 I don't know, that's what I feel, that
 the society here just wants you to take care of yourself
 and be independent, trying to do everything for yourself and all that
 so you kind of develop that so... that sense that
 you are kind of alone but not really
 so I think that has changed
 that now I'm like...
 I have to take care of myself
 Yeah I have my family and everything but I have to look after me
 I have to see what's best for me.
 What stays the same is that... how close we are

we still remain very close, we talk all the time
 do everything together seems like
 we see each other almost every weekend
 constantly talk on the phone and all that stuff
 not sure what else
J–If if somebody were to ask you
 let’s say
 someone you don’t know comes by and asks you “Who are you?”
 what is your response
M–my name (laughs)
 “I’m Marina”
 and they... people are like
 oh where are you from
 because they see my dark skin
 and they are like “she is not Canadian”
 so I’m like
 “oh, I’m from Guatemala”
 that’s what I always answer “I’m from Guatemala”
 even though we are Canadian citizens now
 been for years but
 that’s what I answer
 I’m from there that’s where I grew up
 and I’m here now
J–so are you a Canadian?
M–yes I am a Canadian citizen
 I feel like I am Canadian and Guatemalan
 I can’t say I’m just Guatemalan or Canadian
 so...
J–interesting
 I’m a Canadian from Guatemala
M–yeah (laughs)
J–That sounds good!
M–It makes sense
 (Marina 575-621)

Our conversation continued with my own opinion; I told Marina that becoming a Canadian citizen will not replace my *being* Mexican. I believe that a big part of who I am derives from my connections with my country and my stories of growing up there, and for that reason I understood that she also felt Guatemalan and Canadian. Her Guatemalan identity is still present, even though her ways of doing things are now more Canadian,

and it was interesting that it is other people asking her who she is what elicits this explanation that she *came from* Guatemala. All of it seems to only qualify who she is, which she answers simply with her first name.

Stories of Change and Adaptation

Learning plays an important role in immigrants' adaptation to different cultural norms, language(s) and social practices. This adaptation implies the ability to maintain one's memories, definitions and values, at the same time as being a participant in the new environment (Minh-ha, 1994). People's self-image develops and changes when learning ways to relate to their new environment and cultural context.

The women I interviewed talked about them-selves changing in many ways. They each experienced changes in their:

- a) relationships with others and their roles in their families and in the Lethbridge community
- b) careers or occupation
- c) self-esteem by virtue of being able to do things in a different context, from learning the English language to *superar* or overcoming difficult situations.

In their stories the women talked about change and adaptation as something positive, and of their ability to adapt as a quality and strength. At the same time that they described changes in them-selves, they also talked about a certain liberation or discovery of their self, their ability to decide and re-create them-selves by creating "frameworks of meaning" to make sense of their own lives and selves (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 22).

Silvia shows in her narrative the fluidity of identity and the difficulty to “explain” it. As we saw in the excerpt shown above, Silvia first told me that it was a “big big question” (and a big task) to try to describe ways in which she has changed and in which she has continued to be the same woman. In the excerpt shown then, she tried to concentrate on describing herself now and before coming to Canada; each of the examples that she shared with me seemed to have both elements, continuity as well as change. She maybe is not as shy, and a bit more organized—to which she adds playfully that her husband would laugh if he hears her describing herself as organized—but still the same woman that likes to observe and learn first and act later, and is careful to not offend anyone or impose her own culture, but also feels really appreciated when people show interest in it. Silvia (personal interview, March 9, 2007) identifies the changes in her way of doing things as a demand from the new context and the expectations that people have of her:

y cuando ya vine a Canadá uno como que se amolda ¿cierto?
 como que dice, bueno, la gente está esperando algo de mi
 entonces lo voy a respetar y voy a hacerlo
 vivo acá y entonces me toca
 no como que me toca
 pero es como funcionan las cosas
 hago un esfuerzo por hacerlo de la manera que quieren o que se debe
 (Silvia 901-907)

and when I came to Canada one kind of fits in, right?
 like saying, well, people are expecting something from me
 then I'm going to respect that and I am going to do it
 I live here and then it's my responsibility
 not that is my responsibility
 but that is how things work
 I make an effort to do it in the way they want it done or that it should be done
 (Silvia 901-907)

Throughout Silvia's story there are different instances where she talks about changing her way of doing things *a la manera Canadiense* (to the Canadian way) as she is always aware that she is the guest here and does not want to impose her culture on her hosts. These responsibilities of being a "guest" also explain in a certain way all the positives of the stories the women told me. It is part of being a good guest to forget the hardships and be thankful for all the welcoming, as well as a Christian principle to show gratitude and be thankful, and to "give back." Being a guest in this country seems to imply a responsibility that in Silvia's case seems to be to assimilate and *fit into* the Canadian way of life.

To become a permanent resident of Canada applicants need a sponsor that will be responsible for the applicant's well-being for the next 10 years. The role of the sponsor, in a permanent residency application is to ensure that the new immigrant will not misuse (overuse or abuse) Canadian resources by, for example, going on social assistance. Becoming a Canadian citizen also implies a series of responsibilities, such as becoming an active participant in Canadian society by voting, volunteering and learning about environmental practices.

With her new role as a mother, Silvia talks about changes in her attitudes by becoming more eager for cultural connections with her Colombian heritage. Since her daughters were born, Silvia has been looking for ways to connect her daughters with her family in Colombia, and she wants to implement traditions with her daughters, or create new ones if necessary. Sarup (1994) talks about traditions as those parts of the culture that do not change, while in reality "tradition is fluid, it is always being reconstituted. Tradition is about change—change that is not being acknowledged" (p. 97).

Traditions then are a way to connect with our culture, but in the ways we implement those traditions we change them all the time, or create new ones. Here is an excerpt from Silvia's interview (personal interview, February 20, 2007) where she talks about the importance of sharing her traditions with Canadians and about the importance of passing on traditions to the next generation.

Alguien alguien quería que yo llevara música de [Colombia]
 y yo decía “en fin voy a llevar el disco que mis papás me dieron”
 y a la gente le gustaba y yo me ponía emocionada y me enorgullecía ¿no? pensar
 que
 sí, como que me me ponía emocionada
 de oírla y de poder compartir eso con
 con gente de otras culturas, y canadienses también,
 ahm sí, con la
 y con otras cosas también
 la comida
 ahora es por mi familia ¿cierto?
 por que queremos establecer tradiciones familiares
 que ha tomado mucha mas fuerza
 y yo quiero que
 si como que
 que establezcamos tradiciones colombianas también ¿no? en esta familia
 entonces yo también llamo a mi mamá y le digo ¿no? “dame la receta de esto”
 pero [ella dice] “yo no sé, no la sé”
 porque siempre íbamos a la panadería y lo comprábamos ¿no?
 si era algo de horneado
 o si
 los ingredientes también a veces son difíciles de conseguir acá ¿no?
 digamos que se hacían si la sopa como de papa con ¿no? muy sabrosa
 con tres clases de papa acá que no se consiguen las tres clases de papa ¿no?
 ¿ustedes les llaman papas o patatas?
J—papas
S—y entonces si hay cosas así
 trato lo mas que se pueda para conseguir ¿no? esas tradiciones
 pero si no se puede ¿no? tengo que buscar otras
 tengo que buscar
 ahm, sí
 (Silvia 1124-1153)

someone someone wanted me to bring some music from [Colombia]
 and I said “well, I’ll bring the disk that my parents gave me”
 and people liked it and felt excited and proud, no? to think that

yes, I felt kind of emotional
 to hear it and be able to share that with
 with people from other cultures and Canadians too
 ahm yes, with the
 and with other things also
 the food
 now is for my family, right?
 because we want to establish family traditions
 that has got stronger
 and I want to
 yes kind of
 establish Colombian traditions also, no? in this family
 then I call my mom and ask her, no? “give me the recipe for this”
 but [she says] “I don’t know, I don’t know it”
 because we always went to the bakery and bought it, no?
 if it was something baked
 or if
 the ingredients also are difficult to find here, no?
 let’s say that they made a potato soup, no? very tasty
 with three different kinds of potatoes here you can not find the three kinds of
 potatoes, no?
 do you call them *papas* or *patatas*?
J—*papas*
S—and then there are things like that
 I try as much as I can to get, no? those traditions
 but if you cannot, no? I have to find other ones
 I have to look
 hum, yes
 (Silvia 1124-1153)

In her search for traditions and continuity (connection) for her daughters with her Colombian culture represented by language, music, and food, Silvia acknowledges that traditions are not static, but in a way she finds them necessary. When she can’t follow her traditions she wants to create new ones. How can these new traditions be a source of continuity? The changes to her life, her way of understanding things and planning family traditions are ways to redefine who she is in this country. By *adapting* the connections between the old ways and the new into new ways of being, she has adapted to this new place without completely losing touch with where she comes from.

The new traditions that Silvia and many other migrant people establish speak to the construction of the identity. Sarup (1994) defines the strangers as unclassifiable, those who are physically close (to the new land) by remaining culturally remote. Reversing this image we could think of the continuation of old traditions and the creation of new ones as a source of continuity because the traditions remind us of who we were, where we came from; our memory guides us to remain *culturally close* to our origins while *physically remote*. In Sarup's (1994, p. 98) words, "identity is not to do with being but with becoming."

Another example of the inevitability of change in this new context given the social expectations for her to adapt or change comes from Sara's story (personal interview, February 20, 2007). This excerpt is from very early in our interview, and Sara was talking about when she had just arrived to Canada, being far from her parents and siblings, who stayed in El Salvador, and who had always been very supportive, as well as separating for the first time from her three sons:

y luego llegamos acá, y sí, yo tuve que ir a la escuela
y mis hijos también
como ya lo mencioné el mayorcito fue a la escuela y los otros dos pequeños
fueron al daycare
esa situación fue muy dura para mi, pero
esa era la vida que nos esperaba aquí en Canadá
no teníamos otro...
otra cosa que escoger
mas que aceptar ir a la escuela y
y los niños al daycare, ¿verdad?
y a la medida que fue pasando el tiempo, pues,
como le digo siempre con la nostalgia de la familia
pero uno con la mentalidad de que, bueno, estamos en un país diferente
cuánto tiempo vamos a estar acá no sabemos
pero sí tenemos que adaptarnos
tuvimos que adaptarnos al sistema, ¿verdad?
(Sara 112-128)

and then we arrived here, and yes, I had to go to school
 and my sons, also
 as I already mentioned the oldest went to school and the other two little ones went
 to daycare
 that situation was very hard for me, but
 that was the life waiting for us here in Canada
 we didn't have another...
 anything else to choose
 more than to accept to go to school and
 and the children to daycare, right?
 and as time was passing, then,
 as I was telling you, with us always missing the family
 but one has the idea that, well, we are in a different country
 how long we will be here we don't know
 but yes we have to adapt ourselves
 we had to adapt ourselves to the system, right?
 (Sara 112-128)

Sara's positive attitude towards change suggests an "enthusiastic resignation":
 this is how it is, we have to do it that way, so we better adjust to it. Within the general
 theme of Sara's story, which seems to be gratitude to Canada for her family's safety,
 having to change herself in order to have a better future seems like a fair exchange. In
 combination with the excerpt presented earlier in which she addresses ways in which she
 continued her old ways of doing things, such as speaking Spanish at home and cooking
 Salvadorian food, we can sense a way of rebelling to this inevitability by reclaiming a
 space of continuity.

Here is another approach to change from the youngest of the interviewees, Marina
 (personal interview, March 16, 2007). In her interview she said that coming to Canada
 you become more "open minded." Marina came to Canada very young, and living in
 Canada for almost 19 years, her career choice might have been influenced by her
 immigration experiences. She said that if she had stayed in Guatemala she would
 probably have worked in her family's business, or perhaps gone to university to study. I

asked her how she decided what career (profession) to follow, and this is what she replied:

I decided to get into social work
 that is what I'm doing right now
 'cause I just see that there are people all over the world that need help
 and I know that as...
 we came as immigrants
 we had some issues
 and we had to deal with
 a lot of loss and a lot of hurt and all that
 so I know that people everywhere
 have some kind of problems and
 I just wanna give back
 help try to help people in whatever they're going through
 so that's why I decided to do social work
 just just to make a little bit of a difference I guess
 (Marina 451-464)

In the following excerpt, Marina is answering my question about which things have changed and which remained the same in her family. Marina describes the differences between Guatemalan and Canadian society's influence on her sense of individualism and ways of relating to family and others:

I think when you come to Canada
 you get a sense of being independent
 that's a...
 I don't know, that's what I feel, that
 the society here just wants you to take care of yourself
 and be independent, trying to do everything for yourself and all that
 so you kind of develop that so... that sense that
 you are kind of alone but not really
 so I think that has changed
 that now I'm like
 "I have to take care of myself
 yeah I have my family and everything but I have to look after me
 I have to see what's best for me"
 (Marina 575-587)

Marina is different than the woman that she would have been if she had stayed in Guatemala. To imagine who she would be now, she related to cousins that are her age and live in Guatemala. Some of them are studying university, but people her age also are married and have children. I asked her if she ever thought about going back to Guatemala to live and this is her response:

No
 I kind of thought about that but I don't think I could live there
 I love to go visit because my family, my grandparents are still there
 but to live there I'm just so used to living here now
J—what are the things that you could not live without
M—I just all the
 having access to water all the time
 the healthcare
 I just enjoy the way of life here
 just the way things are
 except for the coldness of course
 but
J—of course (laughing)
M—of course
 But I don't think that I see myself living there again
 I guess I don't know
 and the way women are treated different too
 I don't think I can see myself been there just being
 the minority I guess
 So I think
 yeah I thought about
 I wonder if I'd ever go back
 but no
 (Marina 785-807)

Marina would not like to go back to Guatemala to live because the living conditions are so different here, and the way she expects to be treated are not the norm in her place of origin. I found interesting that she mentions being a “minority” in Guatemala, referring to being a woman while she has not used that word to define herself in Canada. This is even though some of her experiences in Canada are about being treated

differently because she looks different or did not speak the language when she first arrived. The stories she tells about not knowing how to do things and having to learn from the very few Guatemalan families they knew are also stories of struggling for being part of a minority. From all of this I wonder if she felt as a minority at one point but does not any more.

I will now share an excerpt from Maritza (personal interview, March 5, 2007) that addresses her view of her own change. In this part of the conversation Maritza talks directly about how her changes affected other people, in particular her ex-partner. Maritza describes the changes in her life as a liberation that lead to fulfillment of her dreams. Some of the changes that she talked about were recognizing that she lived in an abusive relationship, seeking help, breaking the relationship with her partner, and pursuing her dream of studying for a university degree. Through these different experiences she was able to be the independent woman that she always wanted to be, and she learned to use her many resources to solve her own problems.

J—¿Cree que usted es una mujer diferente ahora de la mujer que era en Guatemala?

M—uy si

muy muy diferente

tengo mas confianza en mi misma

mi autoestima es muy... mas fuerte

eh como dije tengo muchos recursos

y he aprendido muchas muchas destrezas aquí en Canadá

entonces eso es lo que me ayuda mucho

y aprendo cosas pero rapidísimo

a veces me quedo asustada

entonces en mi trabajo se asustan cuando miran ellos me dicen

que me corrigen solo una vez y a la siguiente ya lo estoy haciendo bien

entonces se quedan asustados

y hasta para escribir me ayudan bastante

porque todavía

a pesar de que lo he escrito por tantos años todavía tengo problemas con mi inglés

y mi esposo incluso el también me ayuda cuando mira que escribo algo

“corrección,” así muy sutil para que no me enoje
 “no, está bien” le digo yo
 pero
 oh si incluso [él] me lo dice
 mi ex-esposo me lo dice
 “tu no eres la Maritza que yo conocí allá en Guatemala”
 “si, porque esa era bien pendeja” le digo yo
J–(risa)
M–“ésta no” le digo yo
 “yo soy bien lista”
 (Maritza 1039-1065)

J–Do you think that you are different from the woman that you were in
 Guatemala?
M–Oh yes
 very very different
 I have more confidence in myself
 my self esteem is very... is stronger
 hum how I already told you I have many resources
 and I have learned many many skills here in Canada
 then that is what helps me lots
 and I learn very fast
 some times I scare myself
 then at work they get scared when they see that and they tell me
 that they correct me only once and the next time I’m already doing it right
 then they are startled
 and even to write they help me a lot
 because even now
 even though I have written it for so long I still have problems with my English
 and even my husband helps me, when he sees that I write something
 [he tells me] “correction,” just very subtle so I don’t get angry
 “no, it’s okay” I tell him
 but...
 oh yes, even [he] tells me
 my ex-husband tells me
 “you are not the same Maritza that I met in Guatemala”
 “yes, because that one was very stupid” I tell him
J–(laughs)
M–“not this one” I tell him
 “I am very smart”
 (Maritza 1039-1065)

For Maritza change in her life was possible thanks to the changes in her situation
 and conditions. One of the important elements is that soon after her arrival to Canada,

even though she was in a new place she had her family's support that she had lost in Guatemala when her family emigrated. Once in Canada her parents supported her and her sister helped her connect with the resources she needed to transform her situation.

Maritza constructs her story as a *development* story. Each one of the situations is a step in her development to be where she is now. For example, she developed strength by living the situations that she lived in Guatemala, she learned to trust herself by following the suggestions of friends to try new things, like enrolling in college, and later in university. Thanks to all these changes she is at a point now where working at the shelter where she once was a client she can support others in their own process of change.

Looking for changes in the women's stories, I realized that Maria's (personal interview, March 5, 2007) story addressed change in two different ways. One of them was to talk about the things that she *had to* learn, for example how she feels happy to have learned a second language. The other way is pointing out the things that in reality "are not that different" for her. In her story she talks about people asking about things that they expected would be different and difficult for her, but her usual response is that there is really not that much difference. In her response there is a certain attitude of defending her position in a "higher class." For example, she talks about cosmopolitan cities in Guatemala, shopping and "Western" cooking that were very much the same for her in Guatemala, and in the United States of America as has been for her here. Showing off to people, for example, that not only Guatemala has great shopping centers, she has also been in better ones in San Francisco and New York. This would not be the same experience that someone from a rural community would have, for example, or someone who did not live in cities like New York, were Maria lived, would have had.

The following excerpt is the closing of our interview, once we had decided that the interview was finished and I asked Maria if there was anything else she wanted to add. First she explains to me the importance that courtesy and respect have in her family, as something her parents taught them, and how she herself taught her son and feels proud when people congratulate her because he is a very formal and courteous young man. The she provided the following explanation about her family willingness to adapt to Canadian society:

como le digo...
 aquí ha venido mucha gente de diferentes lugares
 y especialmente, si se da cuenta,
 un porcentaje son familias muy pobres
 muy humildes
 que no tenían una base, muchos no saben leer ni escribir
 entonces todo eso
 eso hace
 lo hace a uno [que si ha tenido educación]
 aceptar más... otra cultura más fácil
 si uno esta mas... entre una cierta categoría
 que en otra categoría mas baja y es mas miedo que tiene la persona
 entonces por eso siento yo que mucho inmigrante que ha venido
 de pueblos muy pequeños, de lugares... de aldeas
 es muy difícil para ellos tratar de integrarse
 por eso prefieren quedarse en su rinconcito, digamos en su lugar
 mantenerse en el grupo, como decía
 Pero los que tenemos ahí si la cosquillita de integrarnos más, de conocer más
 no nos quedamos ahí
 si llega a conocer mas gente latina
 se va a dar cuenta.
 Pasaron muchas experiencias que... muchos de ellos cuando dejaron sus países
 que...
 hay yo lo dejé re-bien
 yo hasta en avión me fui para California
 ya después en avión me vine para acá.
 (Maria 1224-1248)

As I was telling you...
 people from many different places have come here
 and especially, if you notice,
 a percentage are very poor families

very humble
 that did not have a base, many do not know how to read and write
 then all of that
 that makes
 makes one [who has had some education]
 to accept more... another culture easier
 if you are more... within a certain [higher] category
 than in another lower category. And is more fear that [a lower class] person has
 then that is why I feel that many immigrants that have come
 from small towns, from places... from villages
 is very difficult to try to integrate
 that is why they prefer to stay in their little corner, in their place
 to stay within the group, as I was saying
 But those of us that have the little itch of integrating more, to know more
 we don't stay there
 if you met more Latin people
 you will notice it.
 There were many experiences that... many of them when they left their
 countries...
 uy, I left it just-fine
 I even left in an airplane to California
 and after in a plane I came here.
 (Maria 1224-1248)

Elsewhere I will present some excerpts from Maria's narration where she talks
 about her English acquisition as an asset and about the importance for her to participate
 in the community. Both of these, having the English language and her participation in the
 community complement her explanation from this excerpt that identifies integration into
 Canadian community with upward social mobility.

Later on, when we met to review the transcripts from the interview, Maria
 (personal communication, April 13, 2007) told me that she had been noticing, because
 Holy Week just went by, how much she still misses Guatemala after so many years. She
 recounted some of the Catholic traditions and festivities with great nostalgia. This
 different approach to talk about differences makes me think that her finding similarities
 instead of differences is a way to cope with having been forced out of her country.

Finding ways in which things are so similar, and “really not that different,” helps her not to miss her home country as much and in a way help to alleviate the pains of her exile.

Re-negotiating Identity

As I hear these women’s stories I think of how sometimes I feel a lot more independent, autonomous and strong than I ever thought I was when I lived in Mexico. This is not a constant for me; sometimes I retract like a scared little turtle and want other people to make simple decisions for me, to tell me what to do, to make things easy for me. Sometimes I feel that I have overcome great difficulties and changes, and other times I feel that my strength and courage had always been there. As I ponder on some of the difficult, hard or seemingly impossible things that I have accomplished, I realize that things that now seem normal at the time were big issues that occupied all my time and energy.

Continuity and change are two topics that I find myself exploring often. Continuity and change are not two different and defined elements of our identity, they are linked in many ways, and each area seems to be multifaceted. Change seems inevitable, by definition migrating is *moving* to a different place, and with it not only the place but also the people, the socio-cultural conditions, and the environment are different. We also are different in the new environment than in our “original” one. The way we relate to the new language, the new people and the environment and how we understand and relate to our “old” place and people change. A friend used to tell me that we are a different person in every language we speak.

With so many changes we look for something that we could recognize, that would allow us to recognize ourselves. Continuity does not mean doing things in the same way,

which is almost impossible, it means choosing a thread that will allow some stability, something that we recognize and that we can trust.

Some ways in which I am trying to keep some “cultural continuity” with myself are in fact *new* ways of doing things for me. For example, wearing traditionally handmade clothes I feel connected with my Mexican heritage, however, before coming to Canada I did not feel like I needed that connection and rarely did I wear them. I crave and cook things that I never cooked back home. I actively seek out music that at home I would listen to only circumstantially. All of these are, however, activities that help me in my search for my Mexican identity abroad, and things I have been doing to help me figure out who I am.

While living in Mexico I never thought of being Mexican as defining my identity. Once in Canada being Mexican became a lot more important than it ever was. Trying to recognize my-self, I create, describe, and understand who I am using continuity and change. Even though I have always been re-constructed, with my immigration experience many contextual elements changed at the same time—and more drastically—than before.

Looking back on the interviews with the five women I recognize that it is my search for continuity and change that I’m trying to find in their stories. I do not know who or how they were before, I only know them now, but I assume that there must be both difference and continuity in their identities, and I want to find out what both are.

Sara spoke about continuity in feeling proud for preserving her own culture through language and food; she also spoke about change and adaptation, the inevitability of adapting to a very different culture, language, and ways of relating to one another. Sara talked about the difficulties and support that she got along the way: her first job, conjugal

abuse and separation, counselling and family support. All of these elements contribute to explain who she is today—“*una mujer de valor.*” The word *valor* in Spanish could be translated in two different ways: courage and value, and both seem to be appropriate in describing qualities that Sara did not recognize in herself before but does now.

Maria explained her family values and their forced exile from her country as something that she never ever imagined would happen to her. Elements of continuity in her narrative are her family and religious values. Elements of change and adaptation are the acquisition and use of the English language to be more involved and integrated into the Canadian community. She is happy to be an active member in her community and feels that she has moved up in society since her arrival thanks to all her participation in different communities and her relationship with Canadians and not only other Latino-American people. Maria makes a special reference to *choosing* between her own Latino-American ways of doing things and the (North) American way to use whichever serves her better without contradicting her family values.

Silvia described characteristics of her personality that are the same, or that have not changed in her way of being. She likes to learn from her environment, and fit in as she is expected to, as she believes that imposing her own culture would only cause her to be upset, which wouldn't change anything else. Silvia is, however looking for new ways to reconnect with her Colombian culture in particular traditions that she could teach her daughters so that they feel closer to their grandparents and proud of having “two cultures.” Silvia talked about *creating new traditions* as a source of connection (continuity) for her daughters with their Colombian heritage.

Marina identified continuity in the way her family relates; they are very close and do many things together. She also talked about the change in her own response to Canadian expectations to be more independent and look out for herself. Even though she enjoys visiting her grandparents and the rest of the family in Guatemala, she knows that she would not be able to live there because she is used to the way of life in Canada. She identifies herself with Canada, but when people ask her she explains that she is from Guatemala, while her initial response will be to only say her name as an explanation of who she is.

Maritza described herself as a passionate and generous woman, who always knew she wanted to have a career but was not able to study in Guatemala. In Canada she has lived and learned things she never thought she would, such as recognizing the increasing abuse from her partner, and leaving him to follow her career dreams. She feels proud to have completed an education “and in a second language;” she says, and feels now, after 15 years that she is where she belongs, appreciated in her jobs, close to her family and married to a man who supports her.

All of these stories of change and continuity show ways in which identities are re-negotiated everyday, in relationships with others, the new environment and even in relationship with our-selves. These stories exemplify what Code (2000) identifies as the “precarious balance” of identity that women have to negotiate “between the tenacious forces of integration and the desire to maintain a sense of their cultural identity as a strategy of self-preservation in their country of adoption” (cited in Agnew, 2005b, p. 28-29).

In the next chapter I will explore another aspect of identity: Belonging to different groups and communities. Some of the groups we belong to could be seen as being ethnic or cultural, situational, or familial. I will explore examples of ways of belonging in the stories of the women I interviewed in connection with the notion of identity through “the story we tell of ourselves and which is also the story others tell of us” (Sarup, 1994, p. 95).

Maria's Story

Maria's sister contacted me to inquire about my study and about becoming a participant. When she found out I was still looking for women to participate in my study she suggested I talk to Maria and arranged a meeting with the three of us at their parents' home. In that initial meeting we had introductions, talked in general about our experiences with learning English and teaching Spanish to Canadians and our time spent in Canada. I presented my project and the consent letter and explained the procedure for the research; they also took some time to fill out the questionnaires. I set up a time to meet independently with each one of them.

Maria is a 50 year-old woman who shares a home with her parents and her 18 year-old son. She has short, curly, dark hair that frames her round pale face. Maria is very kind, well-mannered and soft-spoken. She talks to me with a certain motherly care that I welcome. Maria and most of her family had left Guatemala when the political situation became unstable and her father's and brothers' lives were endangered. She came to Canada in December of 1989, after living in the United States of America for five years.

For our recorded interview we met in the basement of Maria's home. She introduced me to her son and her parents and we got ready to record. Maria started her story by remembering how the whole family left because the war between the government and the guerrillas made it unsafe for them to stay, with direct threats to some members of the family. In 1983 or so, she moved to California but they were not able to get immigration *papeles* and a friend suggested to her brother they apply to Canada or Australia. After presenting the documents required and proof that they were in danger, they were accepted into Canada and came to Lethbridge. She had a new-born baby but

was separated from the baby's father, and moved here with her parents. Two of her brothers decided to stay in the United States, as they had a better chance of getting their Green Cards to stay in the United States of America.

Maria recalled that she never really needed too much English in the United States, as there was Hispanic TV and radio, and many Spanish-speaking people. When in Canada Maria and her parents took English classes; they really enjoyed being in a smaller city and made an effort to get involved in the community. Maria had some Spanish-speaking friends, but she always thought it is important to *integrarse a esta sociedad*, so she joined one of the Catholic churches and a couple of charities, and she studied at the college as well. Maria especially likes to be part of those organizations because she feels that she belongs to them, and as she takes on more responsibility she feels that she is giving back to her community. Maria is very happy that she felt "forced" at some point to learn more English because now she has become a better person, or, as she said, *estoy superándome* (improving myself) by being more involved in the community.

Maria was a secretary in Guatemala, and even though she has office assistant training from the local community college, she found it hard to find a job she is trained to do and is currently employed in housekeeping. Maria accessed counselling services, initially through the college, and later through family services, and she really appreciated those services, even though she was scared of using them at first. She has also appreciated having the healthcare and subsidy programs that helped her with her son's health care costs.

Maria still feels sad about having had to leave her country, as she never thought she would have to leave, and she feels like part of her *corazón* is still there. She feels like

crying when she hears her national anthem. Maria was very moved during the ceremony to become a Canadian citizen, she is grateful for what this country has given her family and feels very *orgullosa y feliz* (proud and happy) when she listens to the Canadian national anthem.

When I asked Maria what has been the hardest for her, she mentioned that at times some people have rejected her. Then she qualified this, almost dismissing the statement by saying that such actions were a reflection of their ignorance. She remembers some classmates at the college and some of the nurses at her job being rude. She did not call it racism but “*ciertas actitudes porque uno es inmigrante*”—certain attitudes because one is an immigrant. But she is very thankful for all the other persons that have been welcoming and accepting.

After transcribing the interview I met with Maria to show her the transcript. We visited for a little bit and then she told me that after talking to me she had been reminiscing a lot about her country, especially because she remembers that Holy Week, the time of our meeting, was one of her favorite times in Guatemala; she and her sisters used to go with their mother to the church and the festivities and she really misses that.

Belonging and Connections

I am a Canadian Citizen now; does that mean that

I belong to Canada or that Canada belongs to me?

I was having a conversation with my husband about becoming a Canadian citizen when I realized that I was not sure what it meant to be Canadian. Our conversation was in English and I had to stop to ask him, “What does *belonging* mean?” At that point my question was about the grammatical use of the word. In Spanish we translate the verb to belong as *pertenecer*, which we use in two ways: to be part of something else, and to own something as property. Playing with the ambiguity of those meanings I wrote the line that I later decided to keep at the beginning of this chapter. It started as a word game, but after thinking about it, I came to realize how much deeper the question was. Belonging *to something*, such as a group, or an community can hold a plethora of meanings. Such ambiguity of language points to the importance of exploring the richness of meanings and the complexity embedded in concepts such as this. This chapter explores the concept of belonging and some ways immigrant women establish connections and relationships with diverse communities to create meaning of their experiences as new Canadian women.

Belonging to Canada: Becoming a Canadian Citizen

On July 20th of 2007, I became a Canadian citizen. I have lived in Canada for six years, and I finally am, as my friend Jazmin calls us, a *MexiCanadian*. When I first moved to Canada I thought that because I married a Canadian, and I lived, studied and worked in Canada, I would become a Canadian citizen “automatically.” I later learned that to become a Canadian citizen I had to be a permanent resident. I was required to have lived in Canada for at least three of the past four years (1,095 days) before applying for

citizenship (Citizenship and Immigration, 2007). I concentrated then on filling out the application forms to become a permanent resident of Canada, and postponed thinking about the citizenship. In 2006, while planning a family visit to Mexico I discovered that Mexican citizens are no longer allowed to travel through the United States without an American visa. Instead of applying for an American visa I decided that I would again return to the question of what I needed to apply for the next step in my *canadianization*: becoming a citizen.

Once more there were forms to fill out; I needed identification photos, pay a processing fee, mail in my application and wait the required 12 to 15 months for a date to write my citizenship exam. I received a booklet in the mail explaining the rights and responsibilities of becoming a Canadian citizen. In it was also the information I needed to study in preparation for my citizenship exam, information about Canada's history, geography, economy and political system. Many of my Canadian friends said jokingly that by now I probably knew more about Canada than they do. Jason, my husband, had fun telling our friends that I would be a Canadian soon and that I could already recognize Don Cherry and enjoyed "hockey donuts" at the arena.

Finally the year-long wait went by and I received an invitation to write my exam at City Hall on July 19th, as well as an invitation—if approved—to the Oath of Citizenship Ceremony the next day. I was excited and nervous studying for my exam. I knew it would not be difficult; it would be easier than any university exam I had written, but I could not help but thinking about other applicants who were not used to reading and writing in English, sometimes not even in their own language...would they be as nervous as I was or would they be plain scared?

The day of the citizenship exam a representative from the Department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada checked us in by corroborating that we had our identification and immigration documents with us. He directed us into one of the rooms in City Hall, where close to 50 people wrote the exam. As people completed the written exam we were asked to leave the room and wait outside. After everyone had finished writing the exam, the Citizenship and Immigration representative asked us to return to the room and informed us that everyone had passed the exam, and reminded us to bring our photo identification for the ceremony the next day. At the citizenship ceremony, we heard the representative of Immigration Canada, as well as the mayor of Lethbridge and other government representatives welcome us as new Canadians, congratulate us for our courage in moving to a new country, and thank us for contributing to making Canada a better place. I repeated the Oath of Citizenship, along with the other 51 applicants and then all present sang together "Oh Canada." I was happy and excited, and a little bit sad. I mostly felt numb trying to understand what was going on in this formal ceremony and what this meant for me. The citizenship ceremony was a formal transition that brought up mixed feelings about my identity.

A few weeks before, when I received my invitation to the citizenship ceremony in the mail, I was at home alone and I cried. I could not understand why I was crying. Was I not supposed to feel happy after such a long wait? In a way I felt that by strengthening ties with this, my new country, I was betraying or abandoning my old one and moving further away from my parents, siblings and extended kin back in Mexico. I felt better knowing that I could keep my Mexican citizenship and be a citizen of both countries. Having a dual citizenship explains better who I am now: I am a new Canadian who was

born and raised in Mexico. The woman I am now is different from the Mexican woman I used to be because of my experiences of living in Canada. Now, when I visit my family in my Mexican home I usually feel like a guest. In Canada, I feel at home most of the time, except when I am really homesick, or when something that everyone sees as normal or easy makes no sense to me until somebody explains it.

After six years in Canada, I feel like I am not seen as “exotic” or as interesting as I was seen before. When some people meet me, they assume that I am Canadian, because I act like I know what is going on—especially when I do not talk much and they can barely recognize an accent. But most times my dark skin and black hair, or my “Spanglish” slips or pronunciation prompts people to inquire about my origins. Recently a woman riding with me on a bus from Calgary asked me where was I born, and that made me happy because I could then reply that I was *born* and grew up in Mexico. But then I feel the other sting, the urge to utter, “But I am Canadian now!” I have earned it, I live here and have learned your language and ways so that I can be part of Canadian society and life.

Negotiation of people’s changing identity could be seen as happening in what has been called a third space (Kooy & de Freitas, 2007; Wang, 2004). To understand where that third space is I like to borrow the title of the documentary about mixed racial identity “Between: Living in the hyphen” (Thompson, 2005). The people featured in this documentary talk about the difficulty for the “white Canadians” to accept people of mixed heritage and to recognize them as “real” Canadians. Paralleling their sentiment of not being from one or the other origin, but living in the hyphen of their identity, the women I interviewed, as well as myself, are also constructing our identity in an in-

between “interstitial” space by belonging to different communities, trying to *be part of* this something called Canada, while maintaining belonging to our *old* groups.

Sara, the Salvadorian woman in this study, called me the day of my citizenship ceremony because she saw me at City Hall. I had not seen her then and she was in a hurry, so she phoned me later that same day. She inquired if it was me who she saw and if I was there for my citizenship ceremony. I said yes, and Sara congratulated me and told me that she was happy I was now a Canadian citizen and that “it is so very important to do.” I was moved by her call to congratulate me, but after we spoke I realized that *until that moment* I did not have a sense from our interview and previous conversations that Sara thought having Canadian citizenship was important.

I revisited the interview transcripts and my notes to find out what the other women said about being or becoming a Canadian citizen. I realized that all five of them have received their Canadian citizenship status, or in other words, have been Canadians for a few years already. The way they talked about what this meant for them varied quite a bit. Variations went from answering “yes” to the question: “Are you a Canadian citizen?” to emotive narratives about the citizenship ceremony and what it meant to them. During one conversation, I revealed to Marina what I thought becoming a Canadian meant to me (see chapter “Constructing self-identity”). The concept of belonging in our narratives appeared together with explorations of *home* and *identity*, and was constructed through “the story we tell of ourselves...which is also the story others tell of us” (Sarup, 1994, p. 95).

Maria spoke specifically about the memories of her citizenship ceremony, and I chose some excerpts from her narrative to present here. She makes reference to learning

English, and becoming more involved in Canadian society, as what had helped her most to feel she belonged to this place “*sentirnos parte de aqui*” (Maria 500). She also said that leaving Guatemala is a sad memory that hurts her because she never thought she would have to leave her country. When they were forced to leave, because their lives were in danger, she left part of her heart there: “*Deja uno, ahora si que parte de su corazón ahí*” (Maria 530).

Maria (personal interview, March 1, 2007) listed some of the benefits of living in Canada, including affordable health care, which she never had either in Guatemala or in the United States of America, in addition to a safer life away from war, and the improved living conditions that her parents have as seniors. After this, Maria revealed that her gratitude to Canada for all these things contributed to her decision to become a Canadian citizen:

y tuvimos
todas esas ventajas y agradecidos estamos en Canadá
y a los tres años
a los tres años de completar nuestra...
el tiempo de residentes
“nos hacemos canadienses?”
“Sí, tenemos mucho que agradecerle a Canadá”
y en realidad sí
porque sabemos que no vamos a regresar a Guatemala
la situaciones no...
han mejorado en cierto punto
pero en otro no.
Entonces
ya no hay tanta pelea con la guerrilla
ya no como había
porque hace varios años firmó la paz la guerrilla
con el gobierno firmaron la paz
y se cerraron mucho lugares especiales que tenía el ejército o el Gobierno
pero
a base de cerrar muchas cosas
también hubo mucho desempleo
entonces hay mucho latrocinio en Guatemala

de repente uno esta
 en realidad uno tan pobre de que ya no hay mucha seguridad
 (Maria 550-574)

and we had
 all those advantages and we are thankful to Canada
 and at three years
 at the three years of completing our...
 time as residents
 “do we become Canadians?”
 “Yes, we have so much to thank Canada for”
 and in reality yes
 because we know that we are not going to go back to Guatemala
 the situation hasn’t...
 well, it has improved a little bit
 but not all together.
 Then
 there is not so much fighting with the guerrillas
 not anymore, how it used to be
 because a few years ago the guerrilla signed a peace treaty
 with the government they signed the peace treaty
 and they closed many special places that the army or the government had
 but
 because so many things closed there was lots of unemployment
 then there is a lot of theft in Guatemala
 suddenly one is
 in reality so poor that there is not much safety any more
 (Maria 550-574)

Maria was very eloquent expressing her feelings: she still misses her country but had no option but to leave; she chose to leave Guatemala under circumstances that forced her to make that decision. Once out of the country, and as time went by, she and the rest of her family decided to make a *home* of Canada and do not plan to return to Guatemala. As Sarup (1994) puts it, *home is where the heart is*, and the idea of home is “(often) associated with pleasant memories, intimate situations, a place of warmth and protective security amongst parents, brothers and sisters, loved people” (p. 94). As we can see from Maria’s story, being forced to leave one’s old home, one can identify with a new home in a new safe place, but not without a sense of loss and “broken-heartedness.”

Maria is happy in Canada and thankful to be here because if her family was to return to Guatemala the situation would never be as good for them as it is here. She started her citizenship application with gratitude to this country for embracing them in a time of uncertainty. For Maria becoming a Canadian citizen means becoming part of something else, having a new home to belong to. Belonging to Canada means to have a new home when the possibilities to return to her original home country disappeared.

Recalling her citizenship ceremony she said:

¡ay! recibir la ciudadanía
 hace sentir...
 de oír el himno de que estas recibiendo la ciudadanía de otro lugar
 ¡ay no se puede cantar!
 no puedo
 era tanta la emoción
 la tristeza
 ora si que
 alegría la tristeza
 las dos al mismo tiempo
 un alboroto ahí
 (Maria 835-845)

Oh! to receive the citizenship
 makes you feel...
 to hear the anthem that you are receiving the citizenship of another place
 oh, one cannot sing!
 I cannot
 it was so much emotion
 the sadness
 this and that
 joy sadness
 both at the same time
 a commotion inside
 (Maria 835-845)

Belonging to a new group implies becoming something more or something different to what we have been until now. The citizenship ceremony could be seen as an initiation, a rite of passage that “officially” marks the change we are going through. This

is a formal, social recognition of belonging. Preparing to become a Canadian citizen implies learning a language that informs the candidate of the benefits (or rights) and expectations (or responsibilities) that the citizen-to-be is expected to adopt. As forms of social organization and their social and political consequences are defined and contested through language (Weedon, 1987, p. 21), the official discourse that informs immigrants about, and prepares them for what *it means* to become a Canadian citizen is also a *language* that they can use to describe their experiences.

According to feminist poststructuralism, the individual is always the site of conflicting subjectivity, as each is exposed to “new languages” that provide alternative ways of constituting meaning of oneself. A sense of responsibility derives from the old sense of oneself (as women, Christians, world members, foreigners, guests, etc.). As an individual enters new circles of experience, she acquires new *languages* to give voice and meaning to her experience and to understand it according to particular ways of thinking (Weedon, 1987, p. 33).

The citizenship booklet, “A Look at Canada” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2006), states that Canadian citizenship implies assuming freedoms and responsibilities. After explaining some of the basic values that Canada holds, such as democracy, equality, respect for cultural differences, freedom, peace, and law and order, the booklet encourages the reader to reflect on these values and to “ask yourself which **responsibilities** you will take on when you become a Canadian citizen” (p. 7, emphasis in the original). The responsibilities that new Canadian citizens are expected to assume are formalized in the “Oath of Citizenship” that every new Canadian recites during the citizenship ceremony:

I swear (or affirm) that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, Queen of Canada, Her Heirs and Successors, and that I will faithfully observe the laws of Canada and fulfill my duties as a Canadian citizen (p. 40).

In becoming a Canadian citizen, or belonging to this new group, new Canadians are expected to live by the values that uphold these *freedoms and responsibilities*, and will be held accountable in so doing. There are also the ideas of multiculturalism and respect for differences that include the right to keep the values that each new Canadian holds from her or his original socio-cultural background. However, each person seems to have to negotiate his or her sense of identity between old and new values to fit into Canadian society. As Kooy and de Freitas (2007) explain, migration disrupts the *identity and sense of belonging* of immigrants, and immigrants find themselves creating new forms of belonging to make sense of their lives. Immigrants' sense of belonging is altered as they renegotiate their "nomadic identity" when they find themselves living in a dialectic between "globally dominant paradigms" and "localized lived experiences" (Kooy & de Freitas, 2007, p. 866).

In the chapter "Constructing Self-identity," I present the excerpt from Silvia's interview where she addresses the responsibilities newcomers have to be "good guests" in this country. She talked about the importance of not imposing *your own ways* and learning to integrate into Canadian society by adapting to the Canadian way of doing things, while at the same time taking the opportunity to "share" your culture of origin when invited to do so. Silvia's narrative reminds the reader that being a new Canadian or immigrant is like being a house-guest trying to discern what is fitting or appropriate to be

welcomed without over-staying the visit. As a guest she might be asking herself: What am I expected to do? How much of my culture does my host expect me to share? What are appropriate ways to show my gratitude to my hosts?

Part of an individual's identity (self-definition) is founded on the relationships the individual establishes with those from the groups he or she belongs to, and with people who belong to other groups. Berry (2001) explains that the term *cultural identity* has been used in the psychology of immigration to refer to:

“a complex set of beliefs and attitudes that people have about themselves in relation to their culture group membership; usually these come to the fore when people are in contact with another culture, rather than when they live entirely within a single culture” (p. 620).

A change in context, such as immigration, might create awareness of those beliefs, as well as conflicts that promote exploration and changes of the sense of identity (who we are and who we are not) and belonging (which groups we are part of or which define who we are.)

Agnew (2005a) suggests that immigrant women's identity or self-perception changes when trying to learn how to get along in their new society. The immigrant women's self-perception is challenged when her own concept of self-identity, social and cultural belonging are confronted with the way Canadians understand, recognize and confirm immigrants' ethnic, cultural and gender identities. Constructing identity and belonging consists of constructing new (and multiple) definitions of self. Negotiating self-perceptions and self-definitions include a negotiation of multiple aspects of the self that include the choices and volition of the individual, as well as political acts and

behaviours of “others” towards the immigrant. In Hawley’s (1997) words, the migrants’ self-defining issue may be “Who [they]...expect to be, who they are allowed to be, and who do they choose to be” (cited in Agnew, 2005a, p. 5).

In explaining personal identity, individuals use different names that identify them with groups having certain shared characteristics, beliefs, and ways of doing things. The understanding of the affiliation with a certain group is different for each member of the group, as well as for each of the “outsiders,” at different times. The way we *understand* belonging to a certain group shapes the relationships and connections that we establish with other members of such groups and with “others.”

I have been using the term *Latino-American* through my study as an umbrella term that includes women born and raised in various Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas. However, in my personal experience the majority of immigrants identify more readily with their country of origin. For example, I use the term *Latino-American* usually in three different situations: when I’m not sure where the person is from but I know Spanish is their first language; when the group I’m referring to includes people from different nationalities, for example *Latino-American women* in this document refers to a group of women from Guatemala, El Salvador, Colombia and Mexico; and when referring to Spanish-speaking people living in a foreign context, in this case English-speaking Canada.

These three uses of the term *Latino-American* could be characterized by their functions: in response to *ambiguity* or lack of information; as a tool for *inclusion*; and as a creator of strength in *collectivity*. In each one of these cases the multiplicity of meanings that the term holds is contextually constructed, as well as affected by the

relationships that the *user* of this term has with others: For example, when someone calls him-self or her-self *Latino-American* versus somebody of *another* affiliation using the term on someone else. Even though I am limiting my exploration to the term Latino-American, identity is multifaceted and the re-construction of identity and the multiplicity of belonging has to be renegotiated with many other groups and associations that immigrants might identify with; for example, indigenous, ethnic or cultural groups; urban or rural areas in their countries of origin; the receiving cultural group; gender, socio-economical, political or other affiliation groups.

The women I interviewed rarely used their national extraction to describe themselves, and often used *Latino-American* in the interviews as a term that includes “us” both (me and the speaker). Later on, I realized that the use of this term was not directly explored in my interviews, so I searched the transcripts to find out how these women used the term *Latino-American* to refer to them-selves or “us.” I found that Maria (personal interview, March 1, 2007) used the term *Latinas* spontaneously to refer to a group of women from El Salvador and Guatemala that she works with, as a term that points to some of the characteristics and affinities they share, such as gender and language.

de por si todo el día me paso hablando inglés
y solo en la comida que nos reunimos con un grupito que tenemos ahí de latinas
y hablamos nuestro poquito de español
(Maria 313-315)

I speak English all day anyway
only during meals that our little group of Latinas gets together
and we speak our little bit of Spanish
(Maria 313-315)

Maritza (personal interview, March 5, 2007) used the term also to refer to a group of Spanish-speaking people that she met during her first year in Canada through her English as Second Language classes. Silvia (personal interview, March 9, 2007) started her interview by explaining that she has been thinking about her experience as a Latino-American woman living abroad, reflecting on the things that she would like to be different for other newly arrived immigrants. She started thinking of her own experience and the things that were difficult for her, and how the experience might be easier for those coming after. Silvia self-identifies with a group of Latino-American people who she does not know: She mentions that she *is* Latino-American and would like it if there was more unity within the people from Latin-America, but after four years in Lethbridge she still does not know many *Spanish-speaking* people.

It was not clear for me if using the term Latino-American was common for them or they were possibly using it in response to my own use of the word in the invitation to participate in this study. I decided to ask them during our supper together (see chapter “Research as a Relational Activity”) if they would have used the term *Latino-American* to describe themselves had I not introduced it in the title of my study, and if they have used it before. Their response was that they used it sometimes, especially when talking to a “white person” that was inquiring if they were Native, or East Indian, or Philippino, “guessing by their looks.” The reason the women replied by using the term Latino-American is because it is a term that *Canadians understand*.

These women used the term *Latinas/Latinos* because it encapsulated significant commonalities such as their first language, geographical area of origin, and some shared cultural values, but in their own minds they were very aware of the differences between

themselves and other Latino-American people. By their stories I learned that these women have adopted the terms *Latino-American* as a way to describe themselves that can be understood by their Canadian counterparts. Usually the term *Latino-American* meant for them Spanish-speaking, including a broad reference to place—from Central and South America. I found it interesting that the term is used to accommodate *others'* understanding of the women's origin. This becomes clearer in the anecdote Maria told me about some people who asked her where she was from. When she replied "Guatemala," they had no idea of where she was talking about, and assumed that it was "somewhere in South-Africa." Saying that she is Latino-American is a way to help some Canadians place her as belonging to a group they can identify, of whom they think they know something about.

The term *Latino-American*, as other names used to label ethnic groups "have conventionally been constructed in ways that homogenize their experiences and erase the many distinctions, such as those of social class and gender, within them" (Agnew, 2005b, p. 28). This homogenization emphasizes the commonalities of experience, but also de-emphasizes the differences that stem from the diverse group identities and individual experiences. The social construction of an ethnic group emphasizes particular aspects of the immigrant's identity (such as language or religion) but subsumes other attributes of its members. Yet it still blames the individual group members for the difficulties they encounter in integrating themselves in Canadian society (Agnew, 2005b, p. 29).

Each individual constructs his or her identity by identifying with certain characteristics of the groups he or she belongs to, and also by discovering the particular qualities or differences that render he or she unique as individuals. Each individual's

experience and understanding of what belonging to a certain group means is unique. The individual's experience of belonging to a certain group, his or her identity and the meaning he or she makes of the relationships with other individuals that belong to that group is also unique.

Below I explore the women's narratives about their relationships with the Latino-American community in Lethbridge, as well as with other groups and institutions. Their relationships with these diverse groups are part of their self-definition, and in that way help us better understand how immigrant women negotiate different aspects of their identity.

Belonging and Connections with the Latino-American Community

Even though the women respond to being called Latino-American by other Canadians, and sometimes use the term to describe themselves, their relationships with the Latino-American community in Lethbridge vary. Sharing the experience of being a newcomer may be the basis of strong friendships among immigrant women. Some of the women keep in touch with certain people who immigrated to Canada at the same time they did. One woman is active in a cultural club that organizes activities sporadically through the Southern Alberta Ethnic Association. Another woman is very involved in her Latino-American church that gets together every week for religious activities and services in Spanish.

Maria (personal interview, March 1, 2007) maintains relationships with other *Latino-Americans* in Lethbridge, mostly family members but also some coworkers and friends. But her story describes the realization that she and her family needed to learn English to integrate into Canadian society because the Latino-American community was

too “small.” Her attitude in general is that having relationships *only* with other Latino-American people would limit her development and integration into the broader (Canadian) community.

ya viniendo aquí nos dimos cuenta
 luego nos pusieron a estudiar
 nos dimos cuenta de que tan necesario era aprender el idioma
 porque si no nos podíamos comunicar
 y la comunidad latina era pequeña
 pero muchas veces uno evita las comunidades latina porque a veces
 diferentes caracteres
 entonces uno tiene
 para mi, mi idea
 nuestra idea es que uno se tiene que integrar a esta sociedad...
 a este país integrarse es
 al lugar
 no “nada mas quiero mi grupito latino” “yo solo quiero seguir hablando mi
 español”
 no
 esa no fue nuestra idea
 (Maria 271-285)

and coming here we realized
 that we had to study
 we realized how necessary it was to learn the language
 because other wise we could not communicate
 and the Latin community was small
 but many times one avoids the Latin community because sometimes
 different personalities
 then one has to...
 for me... my idea
 our idea is that one has to integrate into this society...
 to this country, to be integrated is...
 to the place
 not “I only want my Latin group” “I only want to continue speaking my Spanish”
 no
 that was not our idea
 (Maria 271-285)

Maria’s narrative shows that certain points of *affinity* (Haraway, 1990), such as socio-economical situation, provide her with a stronger sense of connection with other

people than place of origin or the Spanish language. In order to integrate and “move up” into the Canadian community immigrants negotiate their belonging and the associations they establish with people from various groups by weighing diverse factors and points of affinity. For some immigrants it is more important to maintain an ethnic or cultural affiliation with their group of origin, while for others social mobility and integration into the Canadian community prevail.

Similarly Silvia has few relationships within the Latino-American community. However, in her case, the main reason why she has not found people with particular points of affinity is based on the fact that her connections and social support networks are with people that she has met through her in-laws, her Canadian husband and friends, her (English-speaking) church, and her place of employment. The sphere of community where Silvia lives in seems mostly inaccessible to the majority of new immigrants to Lethbridge who do not speak English. Even though she expresses interest in connecting with other Spanish-speaking people, Silvia sees no need to move outside of those spheres to form and sustain relationships.

Reflecting back to my own case and my “belonging” to the Latino-American community, I realize a contradiction of terms by which I long to be closer and more involved in it, but at the same time I want to maintain my specialness by being one of them but different. As Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) writes: I am struggling with a sense of *specialness* and wanting to be one of the few that could “emerge above the anonymous crowd and enjoys the privilege of preparing the way for one’s more ‘unfortunate’ sisters” (p. 86).

It seems I am not the only one. Silvia feels offended by people attributing the stereotype of the “laid back Latino-American” to her before giving her a chance to show that she is not like that. Maritza not only wants to be very good at her two jobs but also the most reliable, trustworthy and hardworker. In her own way Maria wants to be part of a larger Latino-American community, because she adheres to the values about morality and family that she believes she shares with the community. But Maria, too, wants to be special, to integrate into the English-speaking Canadian community and move into spheres of Canadian life outside of the Latin-American community.

A change of context like immigration challenges “old ways” and values when trying to understand new situations and contexts from old paradigms (Kooy & de Freitas, 2007). Belonging to each specific group requires re-defining and negotiating many aspects of personal identity, including the relationships within the group, and with other groups in the larger community.

Belonging to Institutional Communities

Some other groups to which the women belong are structured institutions. Almost all of them mentioned being affiliated to church communities or congregations. Maria also mentioned being part of other organizations or “sisterhoods” dedicated to charitable activities that help “improve the community.” These institutions provide other spaces of belonging (as well as a sense of continuity) for the women, with clear roles and expectations to follow in order to fit in at different hierarchical levels. As with any other group, their participation in these organizations varied with time.

As Silvia completed high school in Colombia, and was trying to figure out a career and life path, she came to Canada to study English in an Ontario high school.

Silvia was able to set up her stay and activities in Ontario through connections that her church in Colombia had with church members in Ontario. Belonging to the church has always provided Silvia with a support network. After a year back in Colombia she returned to Canada to study in a Christian university; her first professional job was as a teacher in a Christian elementary school; and she met her husband at the church she was then attending. Silvia commented that if she ever needed any support services she would seek counselling through her church.

Maria (personal interview, March 1, 2007) finds more value belonging to other organized groups for integration into the community than belonging to the Latino-American community. Maria and her family have a strong involvement with their church community. Maria's church has functioned as a ritualized space where she knows what is going on even without having the language. Maria and her family have also developed their community networks by belonging to diverse charity groups such as the Shriners and the Eastern Star.

a base de pertenecer a todo esto
 mis papás
 mi papá y mi hermano entonces
 nos hemos introducido mas
 ósea que nos hemos
 identificado mas con lo canadiense
 mas por eso
 conocemos latinos pero muchas veces
 es muy difícil tratar de mantener una buena relación
 porque a veces
 así
 somos tan diferentes
 que muchas veces
 en lugar de ayudarnos nos hundimos
 entonces eso
 hasta eso nos ha ayudado de no quedarnos ahí
 por ejemplo porque hay muchas personas que han hecho eso
 hemos tratado de integrarnos en la sociedad canadiense

(Maria 377-394)

belonging to all of that was the base
 my parents...
 my father and my brother...then
 we have entered ourselves more
 in other words we have
 identified better with everything Canadian
 mostly because of it
 we know Latinos but many times
 it is very difficult to try to maintain a good relationship
 because sometimes
 that way
 we are so different
 that many times
 instead of helping us we push down each other
 then that
 even that has helped us, no to stay there,
 for example, there are many people that have done that,
 we have tried to integrate ourselves to Canadian society
 (Maria 377-394)

Belonging to some of these organized institutions provides ritualized exchanges that guide the women's involvement in their new Lethbridge-Canadian community. Maria's story shows how even before she understood English she started attending a Catholic church, where she felt at home because the rituals it follows were the same as the church "back home." Even if she did not understand what was being said she could recognize the music and the liturgy. As well, her participation in the charitable organizations is regulated by a series of clearly laid out rituals and interactions. Being part of institutions and organizations with explicit, familiar and clear hierarchical organization provides immigrant women with structurally understandable spaces for interactions, as well as a sense of continuity. This belonging also gives purpose and provides specific goals for integration into Canadian society.

Marina's (personal interview, March 16, 2007) story varies slightly from the others. Immigrating with her family as a child, Marina participated in most family activities (including going to church) but not necessarily in the decisions about those activities. In her narrative Marina tries to recreate from the present the reasons of the past: the way she understands how and why "they" (as a family) did something. In her story Marina explains that during their transitional time in the United States of America the church they attended was one of the strongest supports for their family, as it was formed by many immigrants and they all understood what her family was going through. After arriving in Canada the family joined the same church denomination, but their belonging to this church community was different because the congregation was not composed primarily of immigrants. Their relationship seemed to be more with the institution than with specific people in the congregation. Now, years later, Marina and her family only attend church for special occasions such as baptisms or weddings, but Marina does not feel that they have ever been as involved as when they were in their church in the United States.

Different understandings of belonging have been explored in this chapter. Official belonging to the state through Canadian citizenship; belonging to ethnic-cultural groups, in this case being Latino-American; belonging to other institutional communities such as churches and sisterhoods. In each case, belonging is a process of storying ourselves and creating new meanings of our own identities. With this re-negotiation of personal identity there is also a new understanding of the group or community, and of the relationships and connections we have with other members and non-members of those groups.

Maritza's Story

Maritza contacted me via e-mail: one of her friends at the university saw my sign and she was wondering if I still needed participants for my study. When we talked on the phone, Maritza told me that she has gone through things in Canada that she never thought she would have lived otherwise. Maritza's voice over the phone was enthusiastic and energetic and I felt really excited about her contacting me and being able to listen to her story. I told her a bit about myself, my study and that I was still looking for some participants. She said she could arrange for her sister to meet with me if I gave her some time for doing some phone calls. Maritza then arranged to have a meeting for the three of us at their parents' house.

During that first meeting, I presented to them the consent letter and explained my project and they filled out the questionnaires. After listening to some *El Divo* music we had been talking about and I hadn't heard yet, Maritza offered to give me a ride home, and that became a little adventure in itself. A few blocks from her house I saw my husband going by in our car, and we turned around to catch up to him. We laughed as we commented that we felt like we were on a movie chase. (I found out later that my husband knew I would be walking home and decided to cruise from our house to the house where he had dropped me off to see if he could pick me up).

Next time we met was at Maritza's apartment to record the interview. She had just arrived home after exercising and welcomed me into her apartment while she had something to eat. We visited while she ate, and she also received a few phone calls from work and from her daughters. I kept thinking that I really enjoy seeing how busy, happy and bubbly she is. Maritza is a short, dark skinned, 47 year-old woman who wears

lipstick in colors as intense as her personality. She wears glasses and her hair is short and very black. To start recording the interview I set up the video-camera in the tripod and we sat in her living room.

Maritza started her account reminiscing about how it was her sister (who is still in Guatemala) who suggested to her to move to Canada, where their parents and siblings had been living for a little while. Maritza and her partner decided to move to Canada with four teenagers: their two daughters and two sons from his previous marriage. Maritza's father and brother helped out by finding a sponsor and support from the Catholic Church. Maritza remembered the whole process as something really hard, especially for her, as she was interviewed because it was her family who had come as refugees. She had to talk in detail about the threats they had to their lives and re-live some of her feelings of fear and worry. After a year of paperwork and other standard immigration procedures such as medical check ups, they were approved to come to Canada. Saying goodbye to her sister and nephews was a sad time for Maritza and her daughters. The separation from her sister was hard because during seven years they had been alone—“*solas ella y yo,*” by themselves supporting each other, since the rest of their family had emigrated from Guatemala. At the same time she recalls crying with happiness when meeting her parents and her sister, Maria, whom she hadn't seen for about eight years.

Maritza described with detail and humor their trip to Canada. She felt mistreated by some of the immigration officers; especially in the airport in Miami where she felt humiliated because people watched them closely and treated them as if they had committed a crime. Finally in Toronto the Canadian officers spoke Spanish and offered them help in contacting their families in Canada. That phone call was very emotional;

they all were crying and she realized that it was at that moment that her parents felt assured that she was actually moving to Canada. Once in Lethbridge she said she was in shock, asking her mother *¿dónde está el humo de los carros?* because she did not see as much smog as in her big city in Guatemala.

Maritza and her family lived for a full month with her parents, until the immigration office called on their sponsor to provide them with more economic support. Both Maritza and her husband started taking English classes. She wanted to go back to study but her husband would not allow her to do so and made her work. Their relationship became more and more abusive as he started to control Maritza more. Finally Maritza found support from her family and moved with her daughters to the women's shelter. At the end of her first year in Canada Maritza decided to leave her husband.

Maritza decided to follow her dream to study, encouraged by a friend that she made at the shelter. She took English and upgrading classes at the local community college, and applied to the Child and Youth Care program at the same college, but she was not admitted because she needed to be able to understand English better. So she continued studying English and applied again the next year. After studying Child and Youth Care at the college she enrolled in a distance education program at the university to get her bachelor's degree, which she completed while working (more than full time) in two different jobs.

Maritza commuted to work between a couple of the smaller communities because she couldn't find a job in Lethbridge. In the meantime she wanted to meet a new partner but nothing was working for her with the men she'd met through an internet service. She decided to stop looking for a partner and get a pen-pal instead. She started corresponding

with a single man who lived in the Calgary area. Her pen-pal was also tired of looking for a partner and had decided to find a friend instead. They wrote to each other and later on decided to meet. After dating for some time they finally decided to live together and to get married. They compromised on a location, found jobs and moved to a smaller community halfway between Lethbridge and Calgary. When their jobs in that community ended Maritza and her husband moved back to Lethbridge because she wanted to be closer to her daughters and the rest of her family. Maritza is currently employed in a human services agency doing a job that she enjoys but it is not exactly the one she prepared for.

Her relationship with her ex-partner has improved now that he also found a new partner. Maritza loves living in Lethbridge as she thinks that it is a beautiful city. She specially appreciates the feeling of safety, which she never had in Guatemala. Having her parents and sister close by as well as her daughters makes this place feel like home. She is planning to visit her sister who is still in Guatemala next year. That would be her first visit since she came to Canada almost 15 years ago.

Experiences as Newcomers

Moving to Lethbridge

Most immigrants to Canada settle in large cities, where they hope to find economic vitality and, in general, better opportunities to access immigration services, social supports, and networking through compatriot communities (Krahn, Derwing, & Abu-Laban, 2005). Smaller cities and communities have greater difficulty time attracting and retaining newcomers, given their reduced or nonexistent services for immigrants and lack of established ethnic or compatriot communities. Secondary migration, or relocating within Canada, is a common phenomenon. The first reason why immigrants relocate is employment opportunities; the second is moving to live closer to friends and/or family (Clemenson & Pitblado, 2007).

In an attempt to direct immigrants to smaller urban centers and rural communities in Canada, the initial destination of refugees is determined by their sponsors, whether government, through the federal Department of Citizenship and Immigration, or private (Houle, 2007). Once in Canada they are free to either stay or move, as any other Canadian (Odland, 2007).

Lethbridge, Alberta, the geographical area where this research took place, corresponds to the characteristics of a smaller urban area, or third-tier city as Krahn et al. (2005) categorize it. Three of the women I talked to were either assigned to this area, or chose it from a few options as they entered Canada with landed immigrant status, or were given refugee status on political and compassionate grounds. Two of the other women moved to Lethbridge to be closer to their families.

Sara, her husband and three little children applied to come as permanent residents through a refugee program. They were assigned to Lethbridge directly from El Salvador.

Maria and her parents moved to the United States of America, where they were hoping to get their residency. As time went by and they had no resolution to their request they also applied to Canada. When they were accepted as refugees into Canada they were assigned to Lethbridge. Two of Maria's brothers stayed in California where they expected to be approved to stay as family class immigrants, as they had married citizens of the United States of America.

Maritza's parents and a brother and sister had been living in Lethbridge (where they had been assigned as refugees) for about seven years, and her reason for moving to Canada was to reunite with them. She remembers their reunion when she finally arrived as very emotional, with *un montón de lloradas* (lots of crying), as she saw her parents again and they met her daughters who were very little when her family left Guatemala.

Marina was only ten when she left Guatemala and her family was trying to get a green card to stay in the United States. They also applied to Canada, and Marina remembers that when their application was accepted her family was offered two possible places to go, one was a community in Ontario and the other Lethbridge. Marina's father chose Lethbridge because the only person he knew in Canada lived here: another immigrant from Guatemala that Marina's father met while in the United States.

Silvia had lived in Ontario for a year when she was 17 years old. She went back to Colombia for a year and decided to return to study for her university degree in Edmonton. She moved to British Columbia because she found employment there as a teacher in a Christian school. After teaching in British Columbia for about two years, Silvia and her

Canadian husband decided to move to Lethbridge because her husband's family lived here. When they were ready to "start a family" they decided to move close to "at least one of our families." Silvia told me that she and her husband find it more valuable to be close to family than having good jobs. They used to say, "Why have children if they are going to be far, far, far, from their grandparents?"

In this chapter, I present some of the difficulties that the women found as newcomers to Lethbridge and how they incorporated them into their narratives. I also present an exploration of the resources they used and services that they accessed to try to overcome these difficulties.

Difficulties in the New Country

A report in the Lethbridge Herald ("Most immigrants," 2007) points out that according to Statistics Canada the most common problems faced by immigrants to Canada are finding an appropriate job and dealing with the language barrier; this is followed by getting used to the weather, missing social or family support from their homeland, adapting to a new culture or values, coping with financial constraints, getting credentials or work recognized, lack of social interaction or new friends, gaining access to professional help, discrimination or racism, and finding good quality housing. My story and the stories that these five women shared with me reflected these reported trend.

Facing the language barrier. A lack of fluency in the English language skills is a difficulty that each one of the women mentioned during the interviews. The women worked hard to learn English and overcome some of their communication difficulties. They shared in their narratives different aspects of, and moments in, their language acquisition and the importance of being able to communicate in English and to

understand the world around them. As Peirce (1995) proposes, it is through language that a person “negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time” (p. 13), and second language acquisition—as well as language in general—plays a role in constituting and being constituted by the learner’s social identity.

Silvia moved to Canada initially as a high school student to get some life experience. She said that the hardest thing during the first year was learning the English language. Silvia remembers that during her first three or four months in Canada she had a constant head ache as she was trying really hard to understand what people told her and kept trying to translate and understand everything she heard. She said that not everybody wanted to talk to her because they wanted her to understand everything quickly. She remembers that it was hard, but she took it as a challenge; she had completed *bachillerato* in Colombia, but she enrolled in some equivalent high school classes to learn English.

Marina, who arrived to Canada with her family at age ten, remembered being put in school immediately. A couple of Spanish-speaking classmates were sent to her table to explain what the rest of the class was doing. She said that once she and her siblings started learning English they spoke it all the time, because they wanted to do well in school. She laughed as she told me that she is still angry that the school held her back one grade. She said she did not mind at the time, because she really did not know what was going on, and she understands why they did it; but the memory of that event still makes her angry, almost 18 years later. Marina, as with other immigrants that arrive at an early age, had an easier time than adults to learn the language, values and social situations of a new cultural environment, an assimilation aided by “direct contact and participation in the educational system” (Leon & Dziegielewski, 1999, p. 73). Marina was the only one of

the participants who requested to do the interview in English, as she has been in Canada longer than she had lived in Guatemala. Even though she can still speak Spanish and understand it, she has a hard time finding the right words, as she only uses it to address her parents and her extended family when she visits them in Guatemala.

Sara (personal interview, February 20, 2007) mentioned some of her interactions with the English language and how learning it contributed to her relationships with other (Canadian) people, with her own children—who learned it very fast—and with others in her workplace. I chose the excerpt below because in it Sara talks directly about the importance of learning English. However, in the complete transcript this theme is interwoven with how important it is to continue speaking and teaching Spanish at home to preserve the culture and create a link with family remaining in the homeland (see excerpt in “Constructing Self-Identity” chapter).

el inglés, pues era nuevo para nosotros
 yo inglés nada mas sabía lo que había aprendido en la escuela
 que yo no estudié
 nada mas hasta el noveno grado
 lo que aprendí cuando estaba en séptimo octavo y noveno
 que era una hora que nos daban
 no sé si a la semana o diario
 no sé, no me acuerdo
 pero yo no aprendí nada
 y luego llegamos acá, y sí, yo tuve que ir a la escuela
 y mis hijos también
 (Sara 103-113)

so, English was new for us
 I only knew the English that I had learned in school
 'cause I did not study
 past the ninth grade
 what I learned while I was in the seventh, eight and ninth [grades]
 that was one hour that they gave us
 I don't know if weekly or daily
 I don't know, I don't remember
 but I did not learn anything

and then we arrived here, and yes, I had to go to school
and my sons also
(Sara 103-113)

y, bueno, así fue pasando el tiempo, fue pasando el tiempo
y, claro, cada día, pues, uno esmerándose para aprender mas la la lengua,
¿verdad?
porque aún yo tuve una compañera
que ella me decía
“Sara ¿te gusta leer?”
le decía “a mí me gusta leer, no soy aficionada a la lectura
pero si, verdad, lo necesario”
y me dice “¿tu lees en español o en inglés?”
le digo “pues en español”
me decía “pues haces mal”
le digo “¿por qué?”
“Porque tu estás en una cultura diferente donde tenés que entender la lengua”
y le digo “Pero a mi se me hace mas fácil el español”
me dice “Sara no, quítate la idea
tu lengua es el español,” me dice, “pero tu ya vives acá”
me dice, “y te vas a quedar acá quizás todo el tiempo acá tienes que...”
y me hizo pensar un poco
y reaccionar de que, sí tenía razón
(Sara 138-155)

and, well, that’s the way time went by, time went by
and, of course, every day one was doing one’s best to learn more of the language,
right?
because I even had a workmate
she used to say to me
“Sara, do you like reading?”
I said “I like reading, I am not a big fan of reading
but yes, right, whatever’s needed”
and she asks me “Do you read in Spanish or English?”
I tell her “in Spanish”
she tells me “well, what you are doing is wrong”
I say “why?”
“Because you are in a different culture where you have to understand the
language.”
and I tell her “But for me it is easier in Spanish”
she tells me “Sara no, get rid of that idea
your language is Spanish” she tells me, “but now you live here”
she tells me “and you are going to stay here maybe all the time here you have
to...”

and she made me think a little
and react that, yes she was right
(Sara 138-155)

In the following section Sara is talking about her first job. She had never been employed until she started this job in a daycare. Midway in her narration there is a slip into her family life at home, which she noticed when I showed her the transcript. She remarked that once she separated from her husband she *had to* do many things that her husband used to do, which has helped her to improve her English, not to be so shy and to be willing to ask for help. This transformation exemplifies the fact that human subjectivity—understood as “thoughts, emotions, sense of herself and ways of understanding her relation to the world”—is not static, but multiple, evolving, a site of struggle and subject to change (Weedon, 1987, p. 32). Once Sara realized that she could not depend on her husband any more, or that she needed to be more independent, she changed her attitude and started attempting to speak and understand English in new situations.

pero si tuve dificultades
pero lo único es que la señora sabía que no hablaba muy bien el inglés
y no me daba muchas responsabilidades, como decir platicar con los padres,
¿verdad?
pero si me dediqué a mi trabajo y yo sé que lo hice bien que duré once años
cuando el tiempo fue pasando yo fui aprendiendo mas el inglés
no lo he aprendido como yo quisiera
pero si yo me defiendo
y ahí dure once años
y ya claro cuando tenía ya mis siete años
yo ya me sentía ya con mas valor, verdad?
entonces sí, yo ya escribía, dejaba notas, o me dejaban notas, ya respondía el
teléfono
cosa que al principio para mí cuando sonaba el teléfono yo dejaba que mi esposo
lo contestara, ¿verdad?
porque decía yo “no voy a entender”
Osea que no me daba el valor a agarrar el teléfono y escuchar, verdad?
porque decía “Yo voy a contestar y no voy a entender y voy a quedar lo mismo.”

pero no uno con el tiempo va agarrando valor y va aprendiendo por supuesto,
 ¿verdad?
 hasta—como le digo yo—duré once años ahí
 y cuando salí de ese lugar yo ya me sentía con mas valor para irme a buscar otra
 clase diferente de trabajo
 (Sara 267-288)

but I did have difficulties
 but the only thing is that the lady knew that I did not speak English very well
 So she didn't give me responsibilities, such as conversing with the parents, right?
 but yes I devoted myself to my job, and I know I did it so well that I lasted eleven
 years
 as time went by I learned more English
 I haven't learned it as well as I would like to
 but I get by
 And, of course, when I had been there seven years
 I felt braver, right?
 Then I could write, I left notes, or they left me notes, I answered the phone
 Something that at the beginning, when the phone rang I let my husband answer,
 right?
 Because I would say "I'm not going to understand"
 So I didn't give myself the courage to pick up the phone and listen, right?
 Because I would say "I'm going to answer, and I am not going to understand, and
 I will remain the same."
 But with time one takes courage and learns of course, right?
 until—as I told you—I lasted eleven years there
 and when I left that place, I felt brave enough to go searching for a different kind
 of job
 (Sara 267-288)

In this last excerpt Sara uses her English learning accomplishments as a way of measuring her *valor*. She incorporates her English-speaking abilities as a sign of personal development, and with it transforms her social identity and her sense of self. When she recognizes herself as a *mujer de valor* she conveys the two meanings that the work *valor* has in Spanish: value and courage.

Maria (personal interview, March 1, 2007) compares her experience in Canada with her experience living in the United States, where she did not need the English language because she was immersed in a large Latino-American community and Spanish

resources were easily accessible. Once in Canada she realized that in order to integrate into this new society she would need the English language and took English as Second Language (as well as Career Advancement) classes at the Lethbridge Community College. Her narrative about her language acquisition portrays integration into her new community as her main motivation to learn the language. Some elements of difficulty with learning the language were not about her own personal experience, but about her elderly parents.

viviendo en Estados Unidos
 no teníamos problema con el Inglés
 yo lo hablaba pero muy poco
 y por lo menos lo entendía bastante
 pero con tanto
 televisión
 radio
 viví en Nueva York y también
 no lo necesité mucho el inglés por que la mayor parte hablan español
 y entonces así se pasó el tiempo con...
 y hasta se podía en algo...
 tan fácil porque en Canadá obtener los papeles es muy diferente
 “vámonos”
 y decidimos los cuatro
 los tres
 mis papás y yo hablamos
 “si nos vamos”
 ya viniendo aquí nos dimos cuenta...
 luego nos pusieron a estudiar
 nos dimos cuenta de que tan necesario era aprender el idioma
 porque sí, no nos podíamos comunicar
 (Maria 254-274)

living in the United States
 we had no problem with English
 I spoke it, but only a little bit
 and at least I understood quite a bit
 but with so much
 television
 radio
 I lived in New York and also
 I didn't need English that much because the majority of people speak Spanish

and time went by...
 and you could even...
 so easy because in Canada it is very different to obtain the documents
 “let’s go”
 and the four of us decided
 the three of us
 my parents and I spoke
 “yes, we’ll go”
 and coming here we realized...
 that we had to study
 we realized how necessary it was to learn the language
 because other ways we could not communicate
 (Maria 254-274)

el cambio de California para acá fue muy bueno
 muchas ventajas
 por lo menos a mi
 porque mis papás ya son señores grandes
 ya son mas difícil
 pero sí mi papá si lo entiende bastante escrito porque el es
 sordo
 entonces usa dos aparatos y
 de por si para la persona que
 no oye bien es muy difícil lograrlo un idioma
J–aprender un nuevo idioma
M–sobre todo el Inglés que tienen tanta pronunciación tanto...
 es muy difícil
 pero si lo entiende bastante escrito
 y mi mamá pues si lo entiende mas o menos
 pero para mí, me di cuenta de que yo me ví forzada
 en cierta forma
 me ví forzada a aprender el Inglés.
 (Maria 414-431)

The move from California to here was very good
 many advantages
 at least for me
 because my parents are elderly
 it is more difficult for them [to learn English]
 but my father understands it [better] in written form because he is
 deaf
 he uses two hearing aids and
 anyway for the person who
 cannot hear very well it is very difficult to acquire a new language
J–to learn a new language
M–especially English that has so much pronunciation, so much...

it is very difficult
 but he understands a lot when reading
 and my mother understands it more or less
 but for myself, I realize that I was forced
 in a certain way to learn English.
 (Maria 414–431)

Entonces me emociona porque gracias a
 mi otro idioma yo he hecho cosas diferentes
 que si a veces me mantengo ocupada porque teng... tenemos algunas actividades
 dentro de poco tengo tenemos un té que estamos organizando
 tengo que... eh... cenas que hacemos
 a mi me gusta eso porque
 me siento bien
 se que estoy con personas que...
 estoy superándome
 estoy mejorando mi Inglés
 mi Inglés
 me estoy involucrando dentro de la sociedad canadiense
 no me aísló
 y es lo que nos gusta con mis papás
 ósea no aislarnos
 sentirnos más parte de aquí.
 (Maria 480-495)

Then I get quite excited because thanks to
 my new language I have done different things
 but sometimes I keep myself busy because I have...we have some activities
 soon we will have a tea that we are organizing
 I have, hum, dinners that we make
 I like that because
 I feel good
 I know that I am with people that...
 I am improving myself
 I am improving my English
 my English...
 I am getting involved into Canadian society
 I'm not isolating myself
 and that is what we like with my parents
 not to isolate ourselves
 but to feel more part of here.
 (Maria 480-495)

For Maria learning the English language is very important because this literally
 allows her to integrate into Canadian society. From her narrative we can see a preference

relating with Canadian people of the same “status” politically, and the same religious views and socio-economical level rather than relating to Spanish-speaking people from a “lower” extraction. As observed by Warren (1986) in her own research with immigrant women in Canada, learning the language of the receiving community is a necessary step in order to be able to *interact* with those in her new community, “to develop a different sense of community and to achieve a revised or expanded sense of self” (p. 8). For Maria the English language is a necessary tool for social mobility in her new community, while staying isolated and interacting only with Latino-Americans would hinder her participation in the broader community and her personal development.

Maritza (personal interview, March 5, 2007) moved to Canada, with her partner and four teenage children, to reunite with the rest of her family (her parents, brother and sister) who had emigrated from Guatemala seven years before. Even though she could communicate in Spanish with her family members, in her narrative learning English is what allowed her to pursue her dreams of completing a university degree and to become more independent. During her first year in Canada she decided to separate from her partner. Her lack of English during that time was buffered by the support she received from her extended family. For example, her sister made the phone calls to set up the services that she needed at the women’s shelter.

estuve viviendo en el *shelter* como mes y medio
y ellas me ayudaron mucho
y ah... yo ya yo no hablaba mucho Inglés pero iba practicando
y entonces ya... después de eso ya ellas me ayudaron yo conseguí asistencia
social
me hice amiga de algunas señoras de ahí y con una señora nos hicimos muy
amigas y nos fuimos a vivir casi a la misma área
pero ella estaba
en diferente casa no vivíamos juntas pero vivíamos cerca y nos ayu...ella me
apoyó mucho, me ayudó mucho, una gran amiga

especialmente ella me ayudó a que yo tuviera el valor de hablar mas el Inglés
 y me hacía que yo hiciera llamadas y que yo hablara y que me explicara
 me ayudó mucho y yo se lo agradezco mucho a ella
 entonces mi Inglés...
 y ella
 ella iba a entrar al *college* y me dijo ¿por qué no entras tú?
 y yo le dije “no porque yo no puedo”
 le dije “yo no tengo suficiente educación”
 y ella me dijo “no necesitas tener una educación, si hablas más el Inglés” me dijo
 “puedes tomar exámenes y entonces ellos te pueden aceptar y meterte en el grado
 que te corresponde”
 entonces ya me llamó atención entonces dije “bueno, entonces voy a probar”
 fui a probar
 el último grado que tuve en el ESL fue de grado cinco nivel cinco
 cuando yo...
 y después de ese tiempo
 yo estuve tomando clases de Inglés en la noche
 y cuando yo tomé el est...
 el (mientras vivía con mi esposo)
 y cuando yo tomé el CATEST en el *college* mi nivel era nueve
 ósea que subió cuatro niveles en solo casi un año
 que yo estuve practicando en la escuela yendo en la noche
 y trabajan... y trabajando practicar el Inglés
 y yo ponía el *closed captioned*
 oía en la radio y practicaba y practicaba
 leía todo con tal de aprender el Inglés
 porque a mi no me ha gustado depender de la gente
 a mi me gusta ser independiente
 entonces yo casi al año ya hablaba bastante Inglés
 (Maritza 291-328)

I was living in the shelter for about a month and a half
 and they helped me so much
 and hum... I didn't speak much English but I was practicing
 and then... after that they helped me and I found social assistance
 I became friends with some of the ladies there, and with one lady we became
 good friends and we went to live almost in the same area
 but she was
 in a different house, we didn't live together but we lived close by and we help...
 she supported me very much, she helped me lots, a great friend
 specially she helped me to have the courage to speak more English
 and she made me make phone calls and made me speak and explain myself
 she helped me very much and I am very grateful to her
 then my English...
 and she
 she was going to study at the college and she told me “Why don't you come?”

and I told her, "No, because I can't"
 I told her, "I don't have enough education"
 And she told me "you don't need to have an education, if you speak more
 English" she told me
 "you can take the tests and then they can accept you and put you in the grade that
 you should be in"
 then it caught my attention, then I said "well, then I am going to try"
 I went to try
 the last grade I had in the ESL was grade five, level five
 when I...
 and after that time
 I was taking evening English classes
 and when I took the...
 he (while I lived with my husband)
 and when I took the CATEST in the college my level was nine
 that means that went up four levels in only one year
 that I was practicing at school, going [to class] in the evenings
 and work... and practicing English while working
 and I will set the closed caption [when watching movies]
 I listened to the radio and I used to practice and practice
 I read everything to learn English
 because I have never liked depending on other people
 I like to be independent
 then in almost one year I was speaking a lot of English
 (Maritza 291-328)

y después de
 de estar ahí estudiando logré sacar mi mi diploma
 ya mi Inglés avanzó bastante
 cuando apliqué la primera vez para mi programa no me aceptaron porque mi
 mi Inglés era bastante bajo mi *reading comprehension* so
 y entonces eh ellos me dijeron que yo tenía que esperar otro año
 entonces me tuve que esperar un año y saqué *general studies*
 y apliqué al siguiente año y entonces ya me aceptaron
 ya mi nivel había subido bastante
 por que saqué bastantes cursos en Inglés y en *reading*
 y entonces estaba muy feliz porque al fin, ya lograba...
 entonces ya en 1995 saqué mi diploma en *Child and Youth Care*
 (Maritza 356-367)

and after
 after being there and studying I was able to get my my diploma
 my English advanced quite a bit
 when I applied the first time for my program they did not accept me because my
 my English was very low, my reading comprehension, so
 and then, they told me that I had to wait another year

then I had to wait one year and I completed the General Studies program and applied the next year and then they accepted me my level had already gone up so much because I took many courses in English and reading and then I was so happy because finally, I achieved... then in 1995 I got my diploma in Child and Youth Care (Maritza 356-367)

The selected excerpts show Maritza's determination as a learner to achieve a level of spoken English that would allow her to transform the conditions of her life. Learning English is for Maritza a way to gain her independence, as well as access to other possibilities and perspectives for her career. Her story does not focus on the difficulties of not speaking English, but in her intention to learn the language, and the process to attain it. Maritza's story talks about success based on hard work, but more importantly the role that support and encouragement have had throughout her experiences. By reuniting with her family Maritza recovered the social support that she lost when they left Guatemala. Also, a new network of friends and professionals (new friends, counsellors at the shelter and her social worker) empowered her to change the conditions of her life and to see English learning as one more tool to achieve a better living situation.

Reviewing the stories the women shared about their language learning we can recognize Vijay Agnew's (2005b) image of acquiring a new language as one more crossing of the many frontiers that immigration requires:

Learning and adopting a new language changes the individual because all languages permit slightly varying forms of thought, imagination and play.

Crossing frontiers might be arduous, and there are innumerable risks but the quest to do so transforms the individual, shapes identity, and enables him or her to

realize his or her strengths. The individual changes and his or her presence changes the society. (p. 45)

Employment and education difficulties. Even though the immigrant population is often more educated than the average Canadian-born population, immigrants, regardless of their country of origin face significant difficulties integrating into the labour market. As Lamontagne (2003) points out, the problem of underemployment and non-recognition of qualifications is an irony when seen in contrast with the shortages of qualified labour in Canada. In his article, entitled “Seduction and Abandonment,” he also presents some of the challenges faced by new immigrants, including lack of recognition of prior experience and qualification, less proficiency in the language of work, poor knowledge of practices and standards in the work world, as well as, other cultural barriers such as discrimination.

Marina arrived as a ten-year-old to Canada, and she recalls having a hard time at her elementary school because she lacked English proficiency, and how she was made to repeat one grade; since then, all of her education, including university, has been in English in Canada. The difficulties she is facing in finding adequate employment are similar to those that the rest of the community face in smaller urban and rural centers in Canada.

Likewise, Silvia’s teacher credentials are recognized because she studied in a Canadian university. However, in her narrative, she talks about feeling at a disadvantage competing for jobs with other “Canadian” teachers. She worries about being discriminated against because her English is not as good as that of her competitors. Silvia spoke of the difficulty in getting her education recognized internationally—although in her

case she was talking about Canadian credentials recognized in Colombia—and this contributed to her choice to stay in Canada to complete her studies. Silvia has had employment as a teacher for a short period of time, but she is currently working as a store clerk. This decision to not use her professional preparation emerged from the family decision to take care of her two young daughters during the day. Silvia works during the evenings and some weekends, when her husband is home from work and can take care of their daughters. Silvia also commented that she would like to sponsor her mother and father to immigrate to Canada, but she has not done this because her father's medical degree and years of experience would not be recognized when he immigrates, which will mean that he has to either take a different job—underemployment—or go through a lengthy process of study for recertification in Canada.

Maria's narrative shows underemployment as one of the common "solutions" to some of the most common difficulties that immigrants face: not having the language level required for employment in either of the official languages in Canada and getting their education levels recognized and/or certified with Canadian equivalents (Rose & Desmarais, 2007, p. 54). Maria was a secretary in Guatemala. Once in Canada she had to study English as well as the technical preparation she already had, as an office assistant, at the local community college. Currently Maria works as a janitor in a health facility because she can not find a job in Lethbridge as an office assistant. Some authors suggest that immigrant women end up working as cheap labour because of "stereotypical attitudes, ethnocentrism, and a tendency to view immigrant women's ethnic and cultural differences as problems (Naidoo, 1988, as cited in Wittebrood & Robertson, 1991, p. 171).

Before her immigration Sara was a young stay-at-home mother of three in El Salvador and—she never had employment before coming to Canada. In her narrative she describes herself as lucky for getting a job in a daycare centre even without enough English because her boss really liked her. Later on, when she decided to find a better job, she started working as a janitor in an office building, because she finds this job less physically demanding and it offers her better pay and more employee benefits. The only thing she does not like about her current employment is that she does not have chance to continue *superándose*, which for her means improving her English. Sara talks about Canada being a land of opportunities where you can do “whatever you want;” her examples of this are: “washing dishes,” “washing washrooms,” and “cleaning buildings.”

Ng (1990) proposes that there are processes by which labour market categories such as “immigrant women” are commodified and constructed socially. In her study she shows that job counselling and placement are mechanisms through which minority women are organized into the “lower echelons of the labour market” (p. 96). Immigrant women with a certain set of skills are enabled to reach certain job openings but not others. Once in the circuit of low-skill occupations, immigrant women seem *bound* to do a certain kind of job, partly because in this kind of occupation they do not have the “necessary linkage to other jobs or occupations representing social mobility” (Boyd, 1986, p. 51), and partly because now they have recognizable *Canadian experience* in a specific area of employment.

Maritza’s narrative about her employment includes working as a housekeeper for elderly clients, and later on, commuting for employment and her practicum at a women’s shelter while studying in Lethbridge. Maritza wanted to work in Lethbridge, but opted to

move to a neighboring community when she could not find employment locally.

Currently Maritza holds a couple of jobs broadly related to her area of preparation, but not specifically what she studied, as she decided to come back to Lethbridge to be closer to her family.

In my own experience getting my studies recognized by Canadian universities was a long and expensive bureaucratic process. Obtaining certified documents from my university in Mexico is a very different process than how it is done in Canada. In general the university in Mexico requires me to apply in person for my documents, but sometimes I used a power of attorney certified by a notary public. I obtained most of my documentation between visits, whenever I was in Mexico visiting my family. Once I had the documents there were costs involved in getting them translated by an official translator. Finally, the Canadian university evaluated my degree for equivalency to the same degree from a Canadian university to ensure that it covered all the requirements for enrollment. I also had to write the TOEFL examination to prove that my English level was good enough to enroll in a Canadian program. This once again took preparation time and money, but I figured it was part of the process and needed to be done. I am happy to say that after all this my undergraduate degree in psychology was recognized and I was able to register in a Master's program.

At present I am seeking employment as a counsellor. The main reason I am not being hired—at least what my interviewers have told me—is my lack of Canadian experience. This has been very frustrating, because without getting employment “in my area” it is very hard to obtain experience. Some ways I have tried to supplement my “lack of Canadian experience” is by volunteering while being underemployed.

Underemployment is a common experience for immigrants, and while being underemployed it is difficult to develop other activities—for lack of time, network connections, and resources—that will open the doors to those jobs that immigrants are trained and qualified to do.

Canadian immigration policy differentiates between three kinds of immigrants: those who possess economic and human capital, those who have family ties to Canada, and those who are in need of humanitarian assistance (Bauder, 2005). In a study about the labour market and employment strategies, Bauder (2005) proposes that skilled and capital-rich immigrants have an advantage in the Canadian labour market given their knowledge of labour market rules and conventions. While this difference might contribute to the access of “better” employment by those immigrants with better understanding, preparation and experience in the Canadian labour market, this point of view places the responsibility for employment in the (unrecognized) abilities, skills and capacities on the immigrants.

Stereotypes and discrimination. Racism and discrimination have been defined by Brand and Sri Bhaggiyaddatta (1985) as a “system of ideas, laws, practices that regulates the presence, aspirations, actions, and livelihood of non-white people in Canada” (cited in Wittebrood & Robertson, 1991, p. 174). Weedon (1999) explains that in societies where whiteness is hegemonic there are structural and institutional practices and discourses about social and cultural differences that confine the individuals to explicit and implicit definitions of whiteness and otherness. Canada attempts to combat racism and “preserve the principles of equality, justice, and rights of all its people” at federal and provincial government levels through the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the 1988

Multiculturalism Act (Wittebrood & Robertson, 1991, p. 174). As pointed out by Wittebrood and Robertson (1991), despite these efforts the larger society still tends to view ethnic minorities and the values they hold negatively.

None of the women used the word *discrimination* in their narratives, but they recalled being treated badly based on assumptions that people made about them. Sara explained to me that “adapting to the system is hard because the cultures are very different and people are very different,” and she recalled that in the beginning, many people were very *desconfiados* (distrustful) of her. Maria recalled classmates at the college, as well as nurses from the hospital where she works, being rude to her, but she said it is because they are ignorant, and she would much rather remember all the wonderful people that extended their arms to her, offering support and understanding.

“Racist ideas and imagery take two main forms. There are those that define difference in purely negative terms and those that, in fixing the nature of others, celebrate their difference from a white Western norm” (Weedon, 1999, p. 153). These could also manifest as stereotypes. Silvia remembered that she used to get very upset at the stereotypes of the “laid back Latino-American” who “does not care about the clock” and “leaves everything for tomorrow.” She often felt that it was not fair that people assumed that she was like that before even meeting her. She said that now she takes it less seriously and just thinks of it as a joke.

Separation from family support and social networks. One of the difficulties that immigrants encounter is that they lose the support networks that they had in their country of origin in a time of changes where they could use them the most. Social networks are usually formed by family and friends and provide individuals with interpersonal

transactions that involve one or more of the following features: emotional concern, provision of goods and services, and informational support and advice (Wittebrood & Robertson, 1991).

It has been shown that immigrants use long-term ties with loved ones in their homelands as an emotional resource or coping strategy during their adaptation to their new places (Wittebrood & Robertson, 1991). Even though immigrants might recognize the importance of maintaining such connections with the social networks they had in their country of origin, sometimes this is very difficult or even impossible to achieve (for example, in the case of refugees migrating due to socio-political instability). The way by which these relationships continue is affected by various factors such as economics, communication infrastructure, the situation of the families in Canada and in the country of origin and time away from the country. In their narratives, the women principally spoke about the emotional difficulties of separating from family members who stayed back in their country of origin and the difficulty the women had in returning to visit them.

Maria said that it was especially hard during the first years, because she never thought she would have to leave her country. Maria did not leave alone, she was with her parents, and two adult brothers, but she left behind her two sisters, and her nieces and nephews. As Maria and her family established new support networks in Lethbridge through friendships, their church and employment, the sense of isolation diminished and their sense of belonging to their new community increased.

Maritza stayed back in Guatemala for seven more years before deciding to emigrate to join Maria and the rest of her family. Maritza recalled that the relationship between her and her sister, “the only two who stayed” from the whole family, became

very strong and they helped each other all the time. Their children grew up together and it was especially sad for them to be separated. Maritza and Maria (and their parents) maintain communication with their sister in Guatemala via e-mail and phone her at least once a month. They also send her economic support, but as they point out it is very expensive to travel, so neither has she visited the family in Canada, nor have they been able to go back to Guatemala.

Sara phones her siblings and saves as much money as she can to go visit them; so far she has been able to go three times in the 18 years she has been in Canada. Sara dreams of going back to El Salvador to live with her family (siblings, nieces and nephews) and to take her mother back home. However, she knows that a part of her heart would stay here, as she knows her three sons will probably stay here: “They have a life here, and they don’t know how to live in El Salvador. I would not like them to live there.” Sara’s most recent visit to her family in El Salvador happened after the sudden death of her father. Sara and her mother took her father’s remains “back home,” so that he can rest there, where the other members of the family can pay him visits and honour him.

Marina’s experience is more similar to a second-generation immigrant due to the early age at which she immigrated. Marina’s connection to her extended family in Guatemala is mostly through her mother: “She talks to them and tells us what is happening, she is the one who keeps the family connected.” Marina recognizes that she has many cousins with whom she barely has a relationship and feels she does not know them anymore.

Silvia used to communicate with her parents via telephone and internet. Now that her own family is growing, Silvia finds it very important to create connections between the two generations, her parents and her daughters. Silvia uses the internet and a webcam, so that her parents can see her little daughters playing; as often as possible she sends drawings that the girls made, or other presents to the *abuelitos* (grandparents) in Colombia because she knows “how much they miss the girls” and would like to be closer to them. Their economic situation allows Silvia and her family to visit Colombia every few years, and Silvia cherishes those opportunities for her daughters and husband to become closer to her parents.

My own experience as a new immigrant is that communicating with my parents and siblings that live in Mexico helped me understand and make sense of my new experiences. When I first arrived to Canada I used to talk to my parents very often over the phone, maybe every two weeks, but this was very expensive and eventually I had to cut it back. I also used to e-mail them very often about all the new things that I was finding in my experience (both difficulties and novelties). As time went by and my relationships in Canada developed, my communications with my family in Mexico have also slowed down.

Factors such as language limitations and cultural differences enhance the difficulties to create and sustain new support networks in the community. As a result immigrants usually have smaller support systems when compared with those of Anglo-Canadians (Wittebrood & Robertson, 1991, p. 177). As seen in the narratives shared in this section, when the relationships with old support networks continue, even across the distance, the sense of emotional support reduces the immigrant’s sense of isolation.

However other factors could also create stress, such as feelings of guilt for friends and family left behind (specially in dangerous situations), and stress derived from the changes and cultural transformations that the immigrant goes through.

Resources and Services

After looking at some of the primary difficulties that the women identify about their immigrant experiences, in this section I explore their narratives to identify resources and services which these women used to try to overcome their difficulties and solve their dilemmas. Resources are those *internal* characteristics that allow the process of adaptation, those personal characteristics and qualities that the women used to cope with and overcome their difficulties. Supports are the *external* elements that are accessed in this process, including relationships, the supports and services available in the community, and institutional support systems. All of the women found it easy to identify the services they used or would have liked to be able to use, but talking about their own resources was a little bit harder, even though they all felt that they were strong, resourceful women who have been able to overcome most of their difficulties.

The women found it difficult to talk about their qualities, but some of the resources that they identified in them-selves were: inner strength, learning abilities, tenacity, willingness to adapt, strong character, resilience and previous life experience. By asking them to tell me what their resources or qualities are I was asking the women to choose a static definition of them-selves and their characteristics that will help me understand *who they are*. The women's interactions with hardships and difficult situations confront them with the frustrations of feeling ambivalent towards their own capabilities, and the situation and the attitudes of others they interact with along the way.

In retrospect, and from a change in my conceptualization of the question I realize that they could not pinpoint their inner resources because, just as their identity, they change over time and space and are constructed in each contextual situation (Peirce, 1995). The situations where they identify themselves as being strong or weak, dependent or independent, assertive or shy, cannot be understood in a vacuum, but should be explored as a socially constructed within each context where it happens. The women's qualities or inner resources are a dynamic response to a world where they are negotiating their experiences and identities as women, mothers, wives, workers and immigrants in each daily encounter (Dyck & MacLaren, 2004).

Poststructuralism conceptualizes social identity as multiple, a site of struggle and subject to change (Peirce, 1995; Weedon, 1987). From this perspective identity is not a monolithic structure that can be described by itself, but a variety of ways of interaction that change depending on the situation and the elements of the relationships imbued in it. Following this approach I will present some of the coping strategies, resources and services that the women used during their transition as specific to the situations they shared in their narratives, instead of concentrating on the personal characteristics or personal attributes of the women.

Following poststructuralist conceptions of social identity as multiple, a site of struggle and subject to change (Peirce, 1995; Weedon, 1987), instead of concentrating on the personal characteristics or attributes of the women, I will present some of the coping strategies, resources and services that the women used during their transition as specific to the situations they shared in their narratives.

One of the women's coping strategies is their faith and religious affiliation, which the five women mentioned as one of the *sources of strength* in their narratives. Leon and Dziegielewski (1999) observed that believing that their fates are at the mercy of God or divine intervention often times works as a positive sense of strength for Hispanic immigrant women.

The relationship with their religion and church communities varied a great deal among the five women, from Maria who, even without understanding English, attended church from the beginning because it was something she knew; to Sara who told me that she never had a strong faith and was not very involved in church before her immigration, but after meeting some of the people who supported her during her separation from her husband found support, faith and hope through her spirituality. Silvia said that even though she did not know what awaited her once she decided to stay in Canada, she has always "known who takes care of me" and that God directs her to what would be best for her. Marina does not go to church anymore other than for special occasions such as weddings and baptisms, but said that they (she and her parents) have always had "some kind of religious sense" and always knows that God will help them. Maritza said she has always had her faith, she is Catholic and always praying to God for direction, especially in the difficult times, and this has always given her strength.

Religion and spirituality function for these women in various ways. Explicitly in their narratives, the women described how religion and spirituality has provided them with a sense of strength through the difficult times. Secondly, the church was a place where they established relationships and built new networks that connected them with a community.

As has been noted before by feminist scholars, women have a special reliance on networks of family and kin and take special care to nurture and maintain such networks (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 20). Networking happened also by meeting other immigrants initially at their English as Second Language classes, and eventually at their work place or educational institutions. Some of their relationships with other immigrants, family members, new friends and other women were a source of support in trying to solve their difficulties and learning about their new environment. It was through networking that these women found and accessed some of the services they used.

New immigrants often do not access the services that are available for Canadian citizens. Services such as counselling might not be utilized or might be underutilized for reasons such as language difficulties, values and beliefs about problem solving, lack of services in the place of origin and subsequent lack of familiarity with them. Immigrant women underutilize community mental health services and receive services in less quantity and of inferior quality than the non-immigrant population (Wittebrood & Robertson, 1991). I expected to corroborate this with my research; however, I learned that three of the five women that I interviewed had used counselling services and two of those also used the women's shelter.

Four of the women came to Canada under refugee protection as residents, which meant they received English as Second Language classes, and government support for settlement. The youngest of them arrived at age ten and received some ESL classes at school, but mostly learned English in the regular classroom and by interacting with her peers. She remembers that her parents both received English classes and social assistance because even though they both had jobs, the money was not enough to support the

family.

It is important to consider that these are women were willing to talk to me—a stranger—about their lives. I found the women that eventually participated in my study through community networking. The fact that I am also an immigrant woman could have contributed to their sense of affinity with me and to their desire to *support* me in my research. In retrospect, the fact that they all had some contact with social workers and/or counsellors allowed them to recognize the benefits and support that they received from counselling services. Their exposure to these services also means that they might be more comfortable with the use of services and institutions than other immigrants.

The women's narratives about the use of counselling services reveals, however, that all of them were worried, scared or unsure about using these services when they were first offered to them. Maritza also used her family and support networks to learn where the charities, counselling, immigrant services, and food bank were and how to access them. Maritza mentioned that when she decided to leave her husband she hesitated and wondered if this was the right thing to do: would they send her husband back to Guatemala if she used the shelter services? Maria got individual counselling through the student counselling services at the community college she attended, but when her counsellor suggested it was time for her to go to a special therapy group she got really scared and decided not to go for a while.

Sara recalls that during a time when the abuse from her husband became threatening to her and her children's safety, she wanted to find someone who would tell her what to do and give her advice. Because her English was not very good, she requested help from a Spanish-speaking person who was strongly involved in spiritual leadership in

the community. When that help was denied after he found out that she was attending two different churches, Sara felt rejected. Sara's story shows her approaching the church community first as a place to find social support. When that did not happen for her she sought advice from other sources, such as her English as a Second Language teacher and another woman from her ethnic and cultural community. As we can see, another resource for Sara was persistence in her search of social supports, admittedly when the abuse from her husband had become threatening.

Marina's family never used counselling services, but she believes her parents must have had a social or immigrant settlement worker.

Silvia was the only one who did not use counselling or immigrant services. She has received most of the support she needs through her church network. She came to Canada with a connection from a missionary group in Colombia and lived with a host family for a year. Most of her transactions for her student visa, work permits and finally her residency and citizenship were through citizenship and immigration national programs, and she was unaware of many of the programs that are available in Lethbridge. When I asked her about these services she said she has not needed them, but if she did she would probably find help through her church. She knows that her church has connections with a Christian counselling centre. She had, however, been thinking about this issue since our first meeting and started her narrative account by saying that she would have found it useful to have other Latino-American people to connect with for support during her transition from school to employment and her career. She contacted some educators and teachers to talk about her struggles and to request mentoring to help her understand her career. But she could not receive what she was looking for because

they were “too busy” for her. She would like to see that happen for different professionals who are from other countries as well as from Latin-America, as “anyone who is used to working in a different country has a hard time starting here.”

When I came to Canada I had this feeling that because I had my Canadian family for support I should be able to just “plug in” to the normal life all Canadians live. My husband’s family had no idea about how to help me figure out paperwork, find employment or enroll in university. They were supportive, however, in figuring out that even though Yorkton (where we were living at the time) did not have immigrant services, Saskatoon did, and they directed me to them to answer my questions, help me with translating university documents and creating a “Canadian version” of my resume.

The way Silvia accessed services seems to differ from the rest of the women I interviewed. When Silvia first arrived to Canada it was on a temporary basis; she was a student visiting for one year. She decided to become an immigrant, first by enrolling in university as an education student, and then later deciding to stay when she married a Canadian man. From then on most of her interactions were with the national citizenship and immigration offices (and not with local community services).

Immigrant studies point to the fact that different type of immigrants access services differently. For example, family class immigrants might never use settlement services, and immigrants that come under “skilled workers” categories might never seek employment and settlement services (Bauder, 2005; Boyd, 1986). The networking through which different types of immigrants find and access such services is also different. In the few examples I presented here we can see that Silvia, Maritza, and myself, being family-class immigrants created our social support networks through our

family members and by expanding the networks our families already had. For both Silvia and myself this means broader connections and relationships with “Canadians” given that our husbands and their families are Canadian. Refugees usually receive settlement services from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, which might offer opportunities to connect with more people from the same ethnic and cultural background, as well as with other immigrants receiving the same services.

Marina's Story

When I told a classmate that I was looking for participants for my study she told me that she had a friend who came from Guatemala. I asked her to tell her about my study and if she would be interested in participating. Next time I saw my friend she gave me a phone number and e-mail address that I could use to contact her friend. I left a couple of messages on her answering machine and sent her an e-mail. Marina replied to my e-mail and finally, after a few attempts to meet (that failed for miscommunications), we met at a coffee shop.

When Marina and I met for the first time I explained what my study was about and she filled out the questionnaire. Originally she assumed that she would be together with the other immigrant women participants, and now she realized that she would be interviewed individually. We agreed to meet at my house to record her interview. Marina asked if it would be okay to speak in English, because it is easier for her. She is 29 years old and she has been away from Guatemala for almost 19 years, since her family had to flee in 1988.

She started her immigration story by telling me that she remembers having a happy childhood in Guatemala, and everything was very nice. When the civil war started a lot of people were murdered and there were a lot of problems in Guatemala. When Marina's parents started receiving threatening letters and phone calls they decided that it was time for the family to leave.

Marina said that her father was able to get his papers to legally go to the United States of America, but the rest of the family did not. They arrived illegally to the USA and for a few months stayed there until they were accepted to come to Canada. While in

the USA, Marina's father had met another person from Guatemala that came to Lethbridge, so when given the option between somewhere in Ontario and Lethbridge, they chose to come to Lethbridge because they knew that one person.

Marina constantly spoke in the first person plural, because she came as a ten-year-old with her mother, her father, her two brothers and her sister. I asked Marina how aware she was of the situation at the time. She said she does not remember seeing corpses or anything in Guatemala as her parents did, but she always heard the stories of people dying in the streets and she remembers being scared of what might happen to her father and brother, and scared for everyone in her family. Also she said that being a child she didn't have a say in the decisions, so when they decided to emigrate that is what she did.

She remembered that while they were in the United States a lot of people were helping them to try to acquire their immigration papers and supporting them with food and clothing. Marina also remembered going to school and receiving classes in Spanish. She said she didn't know any English until they came to Canada, nobody in her family did, and they found that really hard. Marina told me that the lifestyle and doing things differently was also hard, for example not having access to their own food and having to buy at the supermarket instead of the *mercado*, as they were used to doing in Guatemala. Not knowing the language made it hard for her to make friends at school. She also mentioned the fact that her city in Guatemala had a lot more people, but here in Lethbridge they did not know who their neighbors were, and it was hard to know where to meet people from her own country.

Once they started learning English, Marina and her siblings started speaking it all the time because they wanted to do better in school. Now she communicates mostly in

English with her family. She still uses some Spanish words and uses her Spanish when visiting family in Guatemala. She has had the opportunity to visit her family there a couple of times; one time she traveled with her siblings, and on another occasion she accompanied her mother. Marina said that her mom and dad are the ones who maintain the communication with the rest of the family in Guatemala, and she feels that she has lost that communication with aunts, uncles and cousins because it is so long between their visits to Guatemala.

I asked Marina how her life would be if she had stayed in Guatemala and, laughing, she said that she would probably be married with at least two children. She said that her parents had a couple of businesses in Guatemala and that she would probably be working in those. She also thought that she probably would have studied something in Guatemala. Even though her mother and father only studied to grades four and five, they wanted Marina and her siblings to get an education, and Marina talked about some of her cousins in Guatemala that are studying social work and medicine and how proud the family is that they are studying.

Marina told me that the principal supports she had through her immigration experience were her mother and father and some kind of religious sense that God will help them. I asked what her qualities are and she said inner strength and that she can be confident at times. Currently Marina is studying social work and told me that she is aware that as immigrants they went through difficult and hurtful things, and that many other people as well have hard times, and with this job she could give something back, help people in whatever they are going through.

I inquired about services that her family used and she recalled economic support from immigrant services, as well as welfare, because it was difficult for her parents to get jobs. She remembered that the people of their church in the United States would always help them because there were many immigrants there and they understood what they were going through, but once they started going to the church here that didn't happen. They only were there on Sundays and didn't really talk to anyone. Now she only goes to church for special occasions.

Marina said that when coming to Canada the sense of independence is greater and the society just wants you to take care of yourself. She said that even though you have your family you should always think about what is best for yourself. But in her family they still remain very close, they talk all the time and see each other almost every weekend. Marina lives with her brother and his wife and children; during the week she is busy with school and work, some evenings she babysits her nephew, and most weekends the whole family gets together at her parents' for supper.

Marina is short, slim and has long straight black hair. Marina said that when people meet her they usually ask where she is from 'because they see my dark skin' and assume that she is not Canadian. She said that she always answers that she is from Guatemala, even though she has been a Canadian citizen for years.

She loves visiting her grandparents in Guatemala, but she knows that she could not live there, because she is used to the way of life here. She said her parents still talk about going back to Guatemala, but she does not see them doing it.

Research as a Relational Activity

I came home one afternoon to find a message from Sara on my answering machine. It was a short request for me to call her back because she wanted to share with me what was happening in her family. By the tone of her voice I knew it wouldn't be good news, and I immediately thought of our interview, when she shared with me that she still dreams of going back home, especially now that her parents are getting old, so that "when the time comes they can rest at home." Preparing myself for bad news I continued my day and called her after supper. She informed me that her father had died of a heart attack earlier that week and she just wanted to share the sad news with me. I felt honoured that she would call, and I was somewhat upset to realize I was so disconnected from the community that I didn't find out earlier to extend my support and condolences to her and her family.

Sara and I started our relationship as researcher and participant in this study, but since then our friendship has slowly developed. We meet infrequently, but we are always happy to run into each other, and we exchange phone calls periodically. This specific phone call, however, made me think about how our relationships began. Sara and I didn't know each other before this study, but even before meeting in person our relationship through familial and kinship networks had already begun.

I knew of Sara and her parents through some common friends who suggested that I call them as possible participants for my study. So far I knew Sara's name and had a phone number. Sara's dad was the first person in their family that I talked to when looking for participants for my research. The first contact was via telephone; the following is the note I wrote on my journal after the phone call:

Ayer hablé por teléfono con el papá de Sara. El me escuchó muy atentamente y me dijo en varias ocasiones que el estaba seguro, hablando en nombre de su esposa y su hija que ellas estarían en la mejor disposición de ayudarme. También (mencioné que [nuestro amigo] me dió su nombre) me dijo que si somos amigos de él, también somos amigos suyos y me pidió mi número para dárselo a su hija y esposa. (Notas personales: Febrero 15, 2007)

Yesterday I talked on the phone with Sara's dad. He listened to me attentively and told me a couple of times that he was confident, speaking on his wife and daughter's behalf, that they will be willing and happy to help me. He also told me (I mentioned that [our friend] gave me their name) that if we are his friends we are also their friends, and asked for my phone number to give to his wife and daughter. (Personal Journal Notes: February 15, 2007)

I found this excerpt difficult to translate because it is in the plural, *us* (me and my husband) as well as *they* (Sara's family) are connected *through* our common friend (and his family). The connections are familial, and *our* new friendship is an extension of our relationships with common friends. After this initial phone call I was ambivalent. On the one hand I was upset by the evident patriarchy, a man speaking for the women in "his" household. On the other hand, I felt safe, happy to know that this family and I had a connection through our common friend. Eventually Sara's mom chose not to participate in the study, and that made me feel better because it indicated to me that these women did have their own voice and choice. In hearing the words "if you are our friend's friend, you are also our friend" I knew that this family and I were linked to the network of relationships through a version of hospitality through kinship, which includes a commitment to support others (in this case me, in my research).

At the same time, even before going through the "research work" I felt compelled to find a way to later repay this attention and support in any way I could. It is hard for me to write this, the words do not seem right, because until now I have never had to articulate what I am trying to describe. For the sake of naming it, I will call this the *sense*

of community and familial responsibility. The companionship and support derived from friendship and family ties is a common characteristic of Latino-American communities and cultures with their extended families and kinship networks. Family and individual relationships grow stronger by the giving and “re-paying” of gifts (Mauss, 1967); as well, the relationship network grows through family and friendship connections. As Lokensgard (2001) points out, following Mauss, the importance of exchanging gifts does not reside in the “economical” value of the gift, but in the personal agency involved in the exchange and the forging and strengthening of the relationships between the participants involved in such an exchange.

After I had met with Sara and she had given me some of her time and told me her immigration story, I shared with her some of the Mexican cheese that I brought back frozen from my last visit to Mexico. The next time we met she brought me a little coin purse, “a little present.” My husband and I gave her a ride home so she wouldn’t have to call her dad and wait for him to pick her up. All of these *exchanges* contribute to my feelings of closeness to Sara, and I hope they also contribute to hers. Considering our meetings as an exchange of gifts sheds new light on the importance of the relationships between the participants of my study and myself. Their stories as gifts to me, and the repaying of those gifts by sharing my own story with them—and their stories with others—holds many interpretations and multiple meanings.

Our exchange of stories as gifts brings us closer together. By talking about our immigration experiences we share realities that “reconcile us as oddly familiar strangers” (Sandhu, 2000, p. 163). At the moment when we met, as well as later when our thoughts linger about our conversations, we feel a strong sense of connection with each other,

while in reality we might still be strangers. This sense of connection allows for a special *rapport*, or a sense of trust that contributes to the intimate climate of our interactions. Even though the women were originally answering to a specific request of “information” by a “researcher,” our relationships took on new energy when we met. During these encounters the women shared their personal stories, which I received as *gifts*. I consider them gifts because they were freely given to me as a demonstration of trust, without expecting specific compensation in return.

While meeting with Sara and the other women for this study, I felt compelled to *do something nice for them* in response to the gift of their stories. I wanted to reciprocate the *bienvenida*, or welcoming they gave me to their homes. As I related in the vignettes, Maria and Maritza received me at their parents’ home, where they introduced me to their family. Towards the end of our meeting they played some music for me on their stereo, and Maritza offered to give me a ride home. Sara and Silvia both opened the doors of their houses to me, and they took the time to explain their family photos that were decorating their living rooms. Marina’s candid question, “Oh, you mean I’m not going to meet the other women?” was her response after learning that each participant would be interviewed individually by me. This inspired my gesture to invite them to my home for a traditional Mexican meal.

Sara, Marina, Silvia and Maritza were very excited from the beginning and really enthusiastic about the idea of meeting the other women. Maria was more reluctant, a little bit worried about who the other people might be. As I noted in the chapter “Belonging and Connections,” for Maria, class connections were more significant to her immigrant experience than her Latino-American background. She has connected better with other

Canadians from her own socioeconomic, educational and religious background than with the Latino-American community in Lethbridge. I first proposed the idea to meet the other women participants in this study the day I met with Maria to show her the transcripts from her interview. She asked me to let her think about it and she wanted to ask her sister, Maritza, who is also participating in the study, what she thought of this. At this point all the other women had agreed to meet, so I gave Maria a quick overview of who they were, their names and where they were from. She smiled as she recognized a few names. She had actually already met everyone except for Silvia.

In a small community such as Lethbridge, it was no surprise that when we met as a group, the four women who had been in Lethbridge the longest already knew each other, and that Silvia—the young woman from Colombia who came to Canada on her own as a student when she was 17 and after four years in Lethbridge still felt isolated from the Latino-American community—did not know any of the others.

The day we met in my home I cooked *pozole*, a traditional Mexican dish typical of the state of Guerrero. This is the specialty dish of Chilpancingo, the city where I was born and grew up, and I felt that it was a good way to share some of my personal history and tradition. That day, as a host, I introduced the women as they arrived, and then I went back into the kitchen to make the final preparations for supper. I could overhear their conversation from the kitchen, and when I was done and the table was set, I joined them while they were telling each other a version of the stories they had shared with me during the interviews. In their short introductions to each other, they mentioned briefly when they arrived in Canada, what they did then and do now for employment, and where they came from.

The introductions turned into a lively conversation about the difficulty Canadians have pronouncing our foreign names. We talked about the transformation of our names from Spanish to an anglicized version, or to a similar English name in order to make them more recognizable to Canadian ears. As Alia (1994, p. 1) suggests, names not only identify individuals and represent their lives, but also express and embody power. Renaming, in the context of immigration, is usually a sign of cultural absorption, and a process of *normalization*. The receiving culture has the power to rename immigrants, while the immigrants have to tolerate this imposition. Thus anglicizing immigrants' names works as an "*opportunity* to be 'like all other Canadians'" as well as a "*requirement* to be like 'everybody else'" (Alia, 1994, p. 70). For people of the same language, with a shared experience of hearing our names transformed through immigration, talking about what our names really are—who we really are—is another way of strengthening our relationships and identifying our commonalities.

We talked about the transformation of the women's given names to their "Canadian version." We talked about how Maria lost her middle name, which usually was attached to it, and nobody in Canada called her by her family's pet name, because they could not pronounce it. Silvia changed the spelling of her name to the English version Sylvia, and Sara's name is pronounced in English (Sarah), but her family and Spanish-speaking friends still call her Sarita.

In our conversation I also shared the transformation that my name had growing up, even before thinking about coming to Canada. I told them about varying uses of my first and my middle name as they evolved from infantile versions or pet names towards more "serious" or "adult" versions: from Conita, Conchis, Conchita, Conis, Concepción

to finally making use of my first name: Judith. An important element in the transformation of my name—even in Mexico—has been towards increasingly easier pronunciations. Few people in Canada even know that I have a middle name, as I usually introduce myself as *Judith*. Some people just pronounce it in English, Judith, but those who try to pronounce it in Spanish, those who bother to know my name, sometimes write their own phonetic/mnemonic versions, such as Hoo-deet, Who-did-it, or Whodeet. Being an “immigrant not sure of [my] bearings in the new society” (Rao, 1998), I welcome their attempts to pronounce my name; to use Rao’s imagery, it is like music to my ears. Even if the sound is a bit out of key, it is an acknowledgment of who I really am.

Names are an important aspect of negotiating and understanding identity (Sandhu, 2000). The names immigrants use to introduce them-selves, and to define or talk about them-selves contribute to their definition and understanding of who they are. The use of a different name reminds the re-named of the changes she has undergone, and that the “world around her” is no longer the one she once knew and lived in. Immigrant’s names, like their stories, “are stifled and suppressed voices speaking truths about acceptance, tolerance, exception and resistance” (Sandhu, 2000, p. 162). In retrospect I realize that during our conversation we only talked about the use of given names and we did not even start to talk about the changes in family surnames¹. The changed use of family names,

¹ In Latino-American countries people have two last names, usually the paternal last name followed by the maternal last name. Traditionally, when women get married they “drop” the maternal last name to adopt their husband’s last name preceded by the “possessive” *de* meaning of. My name is Judith Concepción López Damián, if I would have decided to follow this traditional naming system, when I got married my name would have become Judith Concepción López de Anderson. If instead I would have adopted the Canadian tradition my name would have become Judith C. Anderson. Both systems are patrilineal and emphasize the permanency of males’ names and the concept of women as their property (Spender, 1995).

last names or surnames will also have an impact on identity and belonging, as well as on the understanding of women's places in their families during their immigration experiences.

Through our conversation, the women and I agreed that the names we use to introduce ourselves to others also have a certain expectation of closeness. For example, in relationships at work we use the formal, anglicized version of our names, but as friendships develop we introduce the new friends to how *we would like* to be called, with the name that better reflects both who we are and the closeness of such a relationship. As the American poet and novelist Rita Dove suggests in her novel "Through the Ivory Gate," we also learn to "listen how they say your name. If they can't say that right, there's no way they're going to know how to treat you proper, neither" (as cited in Maggio, 1996). Names people go by not only have great importance for identity negotiation, but they are also charged with meaning that describes one's relationship with others.

We continued our conversation at the table, after a brief description of what our meal was, how to eat it, what the condiments were and how to use them. As we ate together we also talked about food, how we have had to adapt some of the recipes in order to still cook "our" food. We exchanged ideas about what kind of ingredients we use to substitute for the traditional ingredients that we cannot find here. I also asked them some other "research related" questions. For example, I told them that I was wondering about their use of the term *Latino-American* to describe them-selves. I wanted to know if they were using it only because I had used it in my study description or if there were other contexts where they would normally use it (for more on this topic see chapter

“Belonging and Connections”). The response was loud and full of laughter. They primarily use the term *Latino-American* for the benefit of their Canadian audience to describe a group that includes themselves *and* other people who are from other Spanish-speaking countries. Their explanation seemed to parallel Le Guin’s (1987) story “She unnames them,” where a council of elderly female yaks agreed to be called *yaks* because the name was useful to others, even though “it was so redundant from the yak point of view that they never spoke it themselves” (p. 194). The term *Latino-American* emphasizes the commonalities (Spanish language) and differences (country of origin) that the speaker has with the rest of the people in the group being described. Just as the anglicized version of our names helps “others” refer to us easily, the term *Latino-American* is used by others to refer to us as a group, independently of the fact that we may or may not identify with such a name.

Another animated conversation followed this topic about when our difference from Canadians was no longer the language, but appearance. Some Canadians assume that Maritza is Aboriginal and others have asked her if she comes from the Middle East. I have been asked if I am from India or the Philippines. Maria recalled some people who asked her where she was from and then had no clue where Guatemala was, and thought that she was from somewhere in South Africa. Once more we were brought together by laughter, seeing the humour in sharing our common experiences of being seen as different. The general trend to try to classify strangers (or different-looking people) among Canadian minorities derives from the notion that “real Canadians” are the white descendants of nineteenth-century pioneers (Fanning & Goh, 1993), ignoring the fact that the story of Canada’s development is a story of immigration as well as the encounters

between those immigrants and the displaced peoples that inhabited the Americas. As Fanning and Goh (1993) suggest, this questioning, “Where are you *really* from?” more and more seems prompted by the desire to hear a story and to recognize that the story of the development of this country is a story of immigration. In other words, asking about someone’s origins might be a way to discriminate (implying that someone is not a real Canadian), but on the other hand, it might be an invitation for the person being addressed to tell their stories, and with that, build a relationship based on the richness of diversity and to “re-examine and even adjust our sense of who we are [as Canadians]” (Fanning & Goh, 1993, n.p.).

As we finished our gathering the women exchanged e-mail addresses and phone numbers, and we talked about the possibility of getting together another time, as it had been so pleasant to meet everyone. To date the group has not met again. During the summer Maria invited us for supper at her house, but work and holiday schedules made it difficult to find a time when we could all attend. My relationships continue with the individual women via e-mail, sporadic phone calls and quick chats when we bump into each other in the community. My relationship with each one of these women has developed in different ways, and the more things we have in common the closer the relationship seems to be.

I expected Marina and I would develop a strong friendship, especially considering that we are about the same age and we already had a friend in common. This has not happened and I believe that ours is the weakest relationship among the women I met through this study. Even though we share some commonalities, such as age, Latino-American origin, and even career fields, our outlooks on life are very different. While

pondering all that, I realized that our differences are striking, namely that I have been married for almost seven years, and being away from my family of origin my strongest friendships are with people who are either married or in “committed” relationships. Marina is a single woman whose significant relationships are still with her family of origin and other single women. While getting together with friends with whom I can converse in Spanish is a treat for me, for Marina it seems to be a chore, as her Spanish has weakened by living two thirds of her life in English-speaking Canada.

The strongest relationships I have are with Sara and Silvia. The element that has strengthened my relationship with Sara is a sense of closeness derived from our sharing common friends, and with Silvia it is that our lives have many commonalities. I have much in common with Silvia because we are about the same age, we came to Canada first as students, and later came back and married Canadian men. We both are close to our “in-law” families through marriage, and are both looking for ways to maintain strong relationships with our families “back home.”

My connections with Marina and Maritza seemed very strong during our meetings to exchange stories, and during their participation in this study. I admire Maritza and feel moved by Maria’s nurturing presence. However, as time goes by, I realize that we are all too busy—moving in different spheres within our communities—to maintain our possible friendships. Maria and Maritza have an extended family in town, they both have their parents as well as adult children that fill their lives. I am also busy with my own career (school and employment), family relationships and commitments.

If the exploration of my relationships with the women in this study parallels that of other immigrant women’s experiences, it could address the question: Where do we

find common ground? Speaking the same language, or coming from the same country of origin does not seem to be enough to develop closeness or long lasting friendships.

Common life experiences bring us together but such things as varied as living conditions, socio-economic status, education, age, personality and values seem to play an important role in keeping those relationships strong.

Independent of the fact that our actual relationships may or may not continue, meeting each other and exchanging stories as gifts has impacted our lives. Different kinds of relationships emerge from the intersections of our lives: these new relationships transform our understanding of who we are as immigrant women and how we make sense of our experiences. Identity is in continuous transformation, and our life experiences, including our relationships with others, enrich our understanding and negotiation of such an identity.

Relationships and Transformation

Conversations and discussions have been used as instruments for researchers to close the gap between research and practice (Carson, 1986). The learning that takes place by *experiencing* the conversation transforms the participants in such discussions, as well as their understanding and their approach to the topic being discussed. Gergen and Gergen (2002) propose that researchers embarking on the process of inquiry are already in previous relationships, with other authors, research participants, research supervisors and colleagues, as well as starting new relationships by entering the lives of those being studied and with those exposed to the findings of the research.

One way in which the participants might be transformed is through the start of a relationship that often times goes further than the interview. As Amia Lieblich (1996)

observed in her many projects as a narrative researcher, when asking people to cooperate with the researcher by sharing their stories in deep and meaningful ways, we as researchers and beneficiaries of this cooperation, become indebted to the participants in many ways. I will also add that by living in a small community such as Lethbridge, the researcher and the participants of the studies are bound to bump into each other later on, with or without those labels.

As I started doing my interviews I found myself thinking continually about what the participants said and comparing stories and responses in my head. By my third and fourth interviews, I noticed that I was addressing topics for inquiry that started to take shape in the narratives shared by the previous participants. Weber (1986) observed that by remembering people, interviews continue “long after the people we interviewed have departed” and that “a dialogue between two people may evolve into a conversation between three or more people....Through me, the ideas of participants are exchanged, challenged, tested” (p. 69). Through my inquiry and in my writing, relationships are formed among these women’s experiences.

Thus, we can recognize two main kinds of relational activities that occur during this research. One of them happens in “real life.” As I have shown here, there are previous relationships between the participants of the study as “real” persons. Some of those relationships were the result of historical events; for example, some of them met each other shortly after their arrival in Canada, during activities together as new immigrants learning English. Our gathering to share food and stories was not part of the original research plan, and therefore it was an “unforeseen outcome” of my research

(Lieblich, 1996), and an example of this kind of face-to-face relationship, by which the participants in this study had a chance to meet each other.

The other kind of relationships, which we could call *academic, theoretical, or mental* consist of the mental connections and conclusions that are drawn between these new narratives with previous knowledge, other relations, personal experiences and so on. I, as a researcher, try to describe these relationships in my writing. The women, as participants of this study, negotiate identity and belonging by sharing their narratives. Those reading about my relationships and connections with the women in this study, develop their own relationships with their mental representation and understanding of us as immigrant women.

Gluck and Patai (1991) identify a certain “concern with connection and collaboration” at the core of using oral techniques of research “due to the opportunity that it affords for interaction with other women in a setting that both overlaps and transcends the usual private sphere” (p. 5). In retrospect, I recognize that my decision to do this study was fueled by the desire to connect with others like me. In other words, I hoped these two kinds of relationships would happen: the *mental* relationships that would contribute to my understanding of my own experiences and to my academic career, and the *real life* relationships, by which I would have the chance to meet other women who might understand where I was coming from, and who might appreciate speaking in Spanish or reminiscing about the life back home. In other words, with this study I was looking for the materials for my research, but also for the relationships (and possible friendships) that could arise.

The vignettes and reflections that portray the women in this study are based on my relationship with them. The interviews that were transcribed and analyzed as I wrote the thesis are only a crystallized moment of our relationship and our changing identities. They represent one moment of convergence between each participant's story and my own. In Josselson's (1996) words "whereas what is written is static, life is always a process" (p. xv). As our lives continue, our relationships will also develop and change. Some of these *artificially* created relationships might continue *organically* in different ways. Outside of the study, for example, I have had other encounters with some of the women that I met through my research as I have shown here.

Silvia and I have found a common interest in meeting with other mixed families, (Spanish-speaking and English-speaking) and we have talked about getting together to organize something, "not sure what yet," where we could connect with other people who might be interested in maintaining the Spanish language and establishing new friendships. Marina and myself share friends through whom we often send greetings to each other.

However, I also foresee that with some of these women, even though we might not continue the "real" relationship, we will, in a sense, be changed because of our interaction. Some examples of change were already evident during our three research meetings. When we met to record her story, Silvia started by telling me that *en preparación para la entrevista*, (to prepare for the interview) she had been thinking a lot about what she would like to do differently in comparison to her past experiences. Maria mentioned during our third meeting, when I showed her the transcripts, that since our interview she has been more aware of how much she misses Guatemala; especially

remembering that Holy Week and the religious commemorations they used to celebrate back home were her favorite time of the year, full of all the traditions and festivities. By sharing her immigration stories with me, Maria is also reactivating those other mental relationships with herself, her country, her understanding of her own identity and becoming aware of her longings and desires.

It is hard to predict which relationships will continue and how they will develop, but transformation is happening within me. When I hear the women's stories and reflect on mine I feel less isolated. My interests in defining what is home for me are more evident. My relationships with these women have nurtured my desire to create viable spaces in our small community where we could cultivate *together* a sense of belonging and of difference at the same time.

Research as a relational activity connects me with the experiences of others, and connects others with my experiences. New *relationships* develop as well between the possible audience or readership of the resulting text of this research. The "readers" in turn establish their own relationships with me and the other women in this study. As a result of these new relationships—with me, with the research project, with the immigrant women—others who might hear about my work would also be changed as they incorporate these new relationships and understanding into their own identity negotiation.

Silvia's Story

Silvia phoned me one day saying that her mother-in-law told her that I was doing a study on Latino-American women and she wanted to know if I was still looking for participants. I was very happy about her phone call as at that time I was starting to get worried about the time going by without finding more participants. Silvia told me that she is married to a Canadian man and has two daughters that are two and four years old. We agreed to meet at her home a few days later when I would explain my study in more detail. When I arrived at her house she introduced me to her little girls, speaking in Spanish all the time. They shyly replied, in English, and sat down to watch a video while we met at the table with the consent forms and the questionnaire.

I felt at ease talking to Silvia as I found a lot of similarities between our lives: being married to a Canadian, feeling a bit isolated from the local Hispanic community and feeling still very new in the community (even though she has been in Lethbridge for four-and-a-half years). I could sense my own hopefulness for a long-lasting friendship and my worry about rushing too quickly into a friendship while meeting her as a “participant” for my study. After a very friendly conversation, in which I probably shared as much about my own life and experience moving to Canada as she did, we agreed to meet once again in her house to record the interview a few days later, conveniently during the girls’ nap time.

Silvia is 32 years old, and she left Colombia in 1992 to come to Canada to study English after completing her high school education and while trying to decide what to choose for a career. She is fair-skinned, has brown eyes and long dark hair, and if I had crossed paths with her on the street I would probably have guessed that she was Anglo-

Canadian. Most of the decorations in her house made me realize how central family is for the people living here: there were some quilted seasonal decorations on the wall, portraits of Silvia's wedding, and a Christmas snapshot of her young family. Some other decorations were a church calendar of activities and a prayer card by her kitchen entrance, and by the dinner table there were some crayon pictures drawn by the little girls, each with a day of the week written in it *lunes, martes, miércoles, jueves, and viernes*.

When I arrived at Silvia's house the day of the interview, I asked her while setting up the camera if she had any questions about our previous meeting. Silvia told me that she had been thinking a lot about her own life and experiences and what she would like to be different for new immigrants, not only from Latin-America. Something she would really like to see is more unity within the Latino-American community, more getting together to have cultural activities that could be shared with the large Lethbridge community.

I asked Silvia to start telling me a bit about her immigration experience and she told me that she came to Canada the first time when she was 17 years old, to live with a host family in Ontario to whom she connected through her church. What was hardest for her then was the effort to learn the language as she constantly had a headache from translating and trying to understand all the time. After one year of high school to learn English she went back to Colombia, but she missed her friends and the safety and order she felt in the small Ontario community. Her old Colombian high school friends had moved on, some had gone to different cities for university and others had gone abroad to work or study.

Silvia decided to come back to Canada and enroll in a Christian university in Edmonton, where she studied some general psychology classes, and after deciding to extend her student visa Silvia completed a bachelor's degree in education. During her university stay she felt appreciated, as the university had a small international group that made her feel welcome, but she found it hard to connect with other Latino-American people, as they usually had their own families with them. Being close to finishing her degree Silvia realized that many of the Canadian students spoke better English than she did and she was worried about being discriminated because of it. She would have liked to have a mentor to talk about her experience and thinks that a program that would connect immigrant professionals with immigrant students would be very useful.

Silvia found employment in a small Christian school in British Columbia and while living there she met her future husband at the church where both assisted. She requested a visitor visa to be in Canada because her work visa expired right before their wedding. After living in British Columbia for about two years they moved to Lethbridge to be closer to "at least one of the families." Silvia's desire to connect with the Hispanic community grew as she feels compelled to pass on her culture to her daughters; she wanted them to feel *orgullosas* (proud) and special for having another culture in their family.

Silvia has only one brother, who also lives in Canada and whom she sees sporadically. Currently Silvia is sponsoring her parents to come to Canada, but she feels very frustrated because her dad is a medical doctor and he would like to be able to continue working, but his credentials and all his years of experience won't be recognized in Canada. When I asked Silvia if she is different from the woman she was before coming

to Canada she said that she has become more punctual, organized, and as she has become that way her husband has become more laid back and relaxed; they both are on a better *punto medio* (middle point).

Silvia said that her respect for different cultures and doing things the way they do them here has helped her, and that she hasn't used immigrant services (other than for her visas) nor community services because she hasn't had a need for them. But she knows that if she needed them she would access them as other Canadians do, and most likely through her church. Silvia and her family would like to live in Colombia for a few years when her daughters get a bit older, but they know that it will only be for a short time, to get to know the country better, as they know that the life they want to live is in Canada.

After the interview I called Silvia to meet one more time to show her the transcript. By then we had found out that we had friends in common and made some preliminary plans to get together as friends, but also to talk and think about the possibility of organizing more reunions with other Spanish-speaking people that might be interested in getting together to speak Spanish, have cultural nights and meals and other such fun activities.

Narratives in Their Context

The stories the women shared with me were created as a result of our relationships, as a gift from each woman to me at a specific point in time when our lives crossed paths. Each of these stories should be understood within its context, or else they are in danger of becoming stereotypes (Conle, 1993). As Sandhu (2000) proposes, the (re)memories and (re)constructions of complex realities in women's narratives must be explored to find the truths about the acceptance, tolerance, exception, and resistance they embody. When "narratives are left simply as stories for the telling, they fail to articulate the understandings that shape and inform how identity is negotiated and the possibilities for alternatives" (p. 162).

Building on the *rapport* or trust between the participants and myself, another immigrant woman, the women I interviewed shared with me intimate details of their lives. The trust that the women placed in me renders them in a vulnerable position given the lack of inhibition that emerges from a trusting relationship (Miles & Crush, 1993, p. 89). However, they were not unaware of the fact that their stories would become "public" in my writing: the presence of the recording camera reminded them of being cautious of what and how much they were saying. In one of my journal entries I observed that the women were aware that in the small community we live whatever they say could "come out" and be known by others, and so they chose carefully how much to share with me and how to do it. Sara, for example, was willing to share her experience of feeling disappointment and betrayal when a church leader she approached denied her his help, but she was very careful not to name the church or the specific person.

Searching for My Own Narrative

As an immigrant woman myself, I am interested in finding out how other immigrant women's experiences are similar to and different from my own. This interest comes from the underlying belief or assumption that through understanding others' experiences I will better understand (and make sense) of my own. I'm writing this chapter as a response to the call from feminist scholarship to acknowledge and take into account the perspective of the researcher (in terms of gender, class, culture, disciplinary orientation), and my active participation in the authoring of the narratives presented here (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 201).

Some of the criticism that the study of lives and narrative research usually receives is that the seeker tends to filter the information, paying particular attention to those areas that "fit" with their preconceived ideas, and discarding those that do not. Acknowledging this criticism allows me the freedom to recognize this tendency not only as a possibility, but as part of my human subjectivity. And in recognizing that I am the interpreter of the narratives that the women shared with me, I acknowledge that it is my interpretive framework that structures my understanding (Josselson, 1996). In this chapter I clarify some of the beliefs and assumptions that have guided me throughout this research process, from the birth of the idea, through the transformations of the project and the development of relationships and results, to the writing of the thesis.

The first assumption is that what I am learning from these women's experiences is based on my own search. Even though I elicit the women's narratives and they are active creators of the stories they are sharing, my contributions to their narrative acts are many. One way in which I actively participate in the stories is by focusing on certain aspects of

their narrative. As Josselson (1996) suggests, often the narrator's interest, in this case the women, is on the particularities of their own stories, while the interpreter of those narratives, in this case me, is on a quest for what could be generalizable. Even though it is their stories that I am talking about, I am the one who chooses which excerpts of their interviews to include in the text, as well as it is my narrative about our relationship that I share in the vignettes. As Ceglowski (2000) recognized in her research, I take my power as a researcher to share *my* story, and even though I am asking another five women to share their own narratives, by choosing which excerpts "make it" to the final draft and how to organize the writing and topics of this document I should assume the final document as my sole responsibility and not necessarily an outcome that the participants will identify and endorse as "true" to themselves (Lieblich, 1996). In deciding how to present the stories that the women shared with me, I exercise control over the resulting text of this research project, and my writing is a reflection of *my* interests, choices and concerns (Chase, 1996, p. 51).

All along I have been balancing two basic underlying expectations: (a) my interaction with these women will teach me, allow me to understand and contribute to the sense making and reshaping of my own narrative and immigrant identity, and (b) sharing their experiences in this research will teach others what they need to know in order to better understand (my, their, and others') immigrant experiences.

From this second search to "teach" others another important area for inquiry appears: what it is I want others to learn and why. As part of the authoring of my writing there are ways in which I, as a researcher, participate in the construction of the portraits of lives I attempt to illuminate, what Gergen and Gergen (2002) call the "politics of

representation.” The desire to share something that I believe is unique but at the same time universal enough to be understood by everyone. My *agenda* (Patai, 1987) is to help alleviate for others the pain and difficulty that I found in my own journey and thus contribute to this imaginary community of newcomers who support each other and help better the experience of others.

Exploring the Women's Agendas

Ethically, a distinction should be made between what I want to communicate through my analysis and inquiry and what the women wanted to communicate by narrating their experiences (see Chase, 1996, p. 54). My agenda in choosing this research topic for my thesis is to give voice to immigrant women. By using my own voice to talk about the immigrant experience as a challenge, I want to portray immigrant women, including myself, as strong people in constant transformation: successful people that work with what they have to create a new identity for themselves.

Looking back to the beginning of my research, it is interesting to note that when I presented my project to the participants I never mentioned ways in which this study will be beneficial to them as participants (Chase, 1996). Instead both of us, assumed that the results of this research would be helpful to others (i.e., new immigrant women, counselling and immigration settlement professionals), and that by participating in this research the women were responding to a certain “duty” to help others. The women that responded to my invitation to participate in this study did it with their own agendas or motives for doing so (Patai, 1987; Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 202). Another area of inquiry, then, is What is their *agenda*? Or, What was the interest of each woman in sharing her narratives with me (and the possible readers or audience)? The following is

an attempt to explore, from my own perspective, what the motivation and expectations or “agendas” of participants were in deciding to participate in my research and share their stories.

As I explore elsewhere (see “Research as a Relational Activity” chapter), a sense of kinship or familial responsibility might have been the strongest incentive for Sara to participate in the study. From her narrative I get a sense that Sara wanted to use this outlet to recognize the support that she received from counselling services, her church community, and even our common friends that had been a strong economic and emotional support for her family, and to express her gratitude for their support. In sharing her story, Sara also created her identity as a strong woman, by describing her development into what she is now, *una mujer de valor*, a woman of value, because she has learned how to overcome difficulties in a new country, her family and her community, and she has shown courage in doing it.

Maria’s story also was infused with gratitude for being able to find a new home for herself and her family juxtaposed with the pain for leaving a country she loved. In her narrative, her way of being a good citizen has been to become involved, and the “moral” of her story seemed to be an invitation to other immigrants to get as involved as possible in the community, while maintaining the good values that they learned from their families and culture: Making this new place a home. An underlying theme in Maria’s narrative is “doing the best with what you have.” Throughout her immigration story, and her description of her personal life, Maria portrays herself as a woman who does not suffer the little stuff. In decisions she has been “forced” to take, such as to leave Guatemala, to separate from her son’s father or to learn English, Maria re-valuates her priorities to be

happy with her own life and as involved as possible in making this new place a home, even though *a part of her heart* stayed back in Guatemala.

Silvia's approach to my research was in a way that of an uninformed informant. Her attitude seems to be that even though *she does not really know* what services are available for immigrants in this community—because she has not needed to use them—she wants to share *what she knows very well*: her experience, what was the hardest for her as an immigrant, and her suggestions of ways to lighten that load for others. Silvia's narrative had an undertone of reprimand for the lack of unity among the immigrant people she has met along the way. Her participation in this study was a call for change, an invitation for other possibilities for services and networking within the immigrant communities to help improve the access to the Canadian labour market. It is also an invitation to other immigrants to integrate as much as possible into the Canadian community as a sign of respect and as a contribution to (Canadian) society.

Maritza's agenda for sharing her story might have been the opportunity it gave her to reflect on her life journey and achievements. The tone of our conversation was set in our very first phone conversation by her feeling eager to share in her narrative all the things she never thought she could experience. She is proud in sharing her story and re-creating her success journey. Her agenda is to use this space to share some of those events (both achievements and setbacks) that she has lived in Canada, such as completing a university degree in her second language, and after the separation from her first partner being able to create a new family through marriage. Maritza's narrative shows how she has made of Canada a "land of promise" where with enough effort her life dreams can become true.

Marina's approach to my research project seemed to be from a student perspective. I believe she was, just like me, interested in learning more about the other women's experiences. It was harder for her to tell her story, and easier to answer my questions. In terms of power relationships it is important for me to point out that I probably saw the previous four women as wiser than me, with more life experience, because they are older. By contrast I might also have reversed the roles with Marina during the interview and became her elder. This is especially evident towards the end of our conversation when I shared with her my own understanding of what being a Canadian citizen means to me (see "Constructing Self-Identity" chapter).

To continue with the topic of the agendas, it is important for me to include some reflections about women who were invited to participate in the study but decided not to. These women, whom I only briefly met, also impacted my understanding and feelings about the immigrant experience. They made me think about the different reasons why they chose not to participate. These women did not want to get involved for varied reasons; some felt that their stories are private, while others indicated that their story was not as important. One woman was willing to participate until she found out I would be recording the interview.

Any interpretation of meaning is socially and historically produced using the systems of language available to the individual. We give meaning and voice to our experiences according to particular ways of thinking and particular discourses that constitute our consciousness, and our subjectivity or sense of self (Weedon, 1987, p. 33). Following this poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity, the positions from where the subjects structure their actions and meanings are constituted by "images of how one is

expected to look and behave, by rules of behavior to which one should conform, reinforced by approval or punishment” (p. 99).

Some of the discourses that the women were using to structure their experience derive from the cultural and religious definitions of femaleness by which they are expected to sacrifice themselves for the well-being of others, be humble and thankful for what they have, and not to complain about the suffering. According to these ideals of behavior, the women structured their stories to portray such qualities, and other women, whose immigration experiences might have been more painful or difficult to endure, chose not to speak up, because this would place them in a site of conflict with the images of themselves as grateful women.

If Sara’s mother shared the same sense of family responsibility to be thankful for the support received as Sara did, why did her mother choose not to participate? Perhaps her struggle with immigration was not as “satisfactory” an experience as it was for Sara. Or perhaps because she felt that by presenting her story, which she labeled “not as interesting,” she might be vulnerable in some way to old events and feelings. From Sara’s narrative I learned that while her mother and father were accepted as immigrants to Canada, their adult son who has a disability was not. Sara’s mom decided to stay in Guatemala with him and continue appealing this decision until they were both accepted to Canada. This is a story I wanted to hear! And it seemed to be a story that she did not want to share. As I write this I wonder how much I am dishonoring this woman’s wish not to participate by sharing this information.

A woman I met at a gathering told me that she had been told by a friend about my study, and had considered participating, but when she consulted with her husband

decided not to. He warned her that this could be just like when she lived in Montreal, before moving to Lethbridge, when she participated in a survey once, and after that she was contacted repeatedly with requests for further participation. So she decided that she would rather be left alone and not risk this happening again.

For other people who found out about my study but decided not to participate, their motivations might range from those who felt that they had nothing to contribute to my study, to those who distrusted me. After all they could always wonder why would I *really* want to know their stories? Who might I tell their stories to? And why? And some could see me, as Chamberlin (2004) suggests, as a *traidora* (traitor) instead of a *traductora* (translator) (p. 14).

It surprised me that out of the five women I interviewed three had used counselling services and two of those had used the women's shelter. The other two had been educated in Canada and had either considered studying psychology or social work. As a group, each of these women were not only familiar with what a counsellor does, they had also had either positive experiences or concepts of them. They were responding to a sense of responsibility to contribute and collaborate to the well being of other immigrant women and/or the formation of the professionals that would offer their services to them. In agreeing to participate in this study the women were responding to a duty to support other women through helping me at a personal level and other immigrant women and professionals through my project.

I am at a personal level emotionally attached to these women. We have developed friendships, if not necessarily reciprocal (I seem to "benefit" more from the relationship than they would) at least a certain base of trust developed that I do not want to break.

They confided in me and shared their experiences. Some of them even changed their minds from using pseudonyms to deciding to keep their own names, which I believe they did based on their trust that they will be portrayed fairly by me. As a response, I had become more worried about certain interpretations. For example, I feel like Maria might be offended or take as a harsh criticism my comments about her feeling superior to other Latino-American people, especially if she does not agree with my comments about her class affiliation.

The stories shared by these women, as well as my story-telling about the research itself, are not fixed or constant. And they will evolve, and change their meaning, influenced by new life events. Personal narratives are “meaning-making units of discourse” by which the narrator interprets her past from the vantage point of present realities and values (Riesmann, 2002). As Mishler proposes, in considering our present we identify certain events as turning points, discover connections we have been unaware of, reposition our selves and others in the networks of relationships, and shift the relative significance of certain events (cited in Riessman, 2002). The stories presented here should be seen as a result of our relationships, as a representation of their journey as immigrant women from their present point of view, and their narrative acts as acts of identity negotiation that will continue their transformation.

Judith's Story: A Temporary Conclusion

I started this study wanting to learn about other immigrant women's experiences, hoping to learn more about myself through their experiences. When I first proposed this research I wanted to learn what kind of services the women accessed, what their attitudes were towards counselling and other community resources and why or why not they will use such services. As I met the women and heard their stories my interest kept changing into topics that were a lot more personal and subjective. Looking back at my writing there seems to be a thread of exploring different aspects of *my* identity through the different topics of inquiry into the women's stories.

I do not think of myself as a writer or an author, even though I have always liked to write. I started writing a journal when I was twelve or thirteen years old. My writing was never for other readers but for myself. I used writing as a stress relieving tool, a way to clear my mind and understand myself as well as a way to capture "for the future" situations and feelings that I felt I would like to revisit later on. In Spanish my writing was in either one of two separate realms: 1. the personal, about my own life, my feelings and what was happening around me. This mode of writing included letters and my journal. 2. the academic, which included essays and papers in response to specific requirement as part of my education. Once in Canada, and as a result of being enrolled in the Master's program, I started writing my academic papers in English, while my personal writing continued mostly in Spanish.

Using autobiographical reflection and critical inquiry to write my thesis has transformed the way I write. The writing process has been an exercise to explore ways to integrate *my* two voices: academic and personal, as well as to integrate *my* voice with the

voices of *others*. Through reflecting about my writing I have developed an understanding of the *relational aspects* of my writing. I see my writing as a way to relate and connect with others in two ways: (a) the intentionality to include others in my writing: the women's stories, other authors, and (b) the awareness that there is an audience, or possible reader whom I will be relating to through my writing. By developing a sense of audience, I intentionally work at trying to write in a way that would be intelligible and interesting for others.

The conversations with the women and my journal notes were written in Spanish, but my narrative and reflective writing was written mostly in English. I feel empowered by knowing that I was able to complete a big project in a different language and (hopefully) maintain the interest of my readers. Even though I could see a new identity as a writer in my second language develop, I still do not call myself a writer.

Reflecting on my journey during this study I realize that many of the assumptions that I had still underlie my writing and understanding of immigration experiences. Some of the assumptions I had were confirmed but many others were not. Some of my assumptions became clear to me, and some others continue to remain hidden from my consciousness. As I look back at the process of my research, for example, I realize the difficulty to consider an exploration such as this one ever finished. The more I think about the topics presented here the more they develop and my understanding changes.

Meeting each one of the women for this study I realized that an essential motivation for me was to create the space to meet other immigrant women—women who I could relate with by speaking Spanish and feel understood by them sharing stories. I came to understand that my research is an immersion in a series of relationships at

different levels. Some relationships have been temporary but the results from those encounters linger in my understanding of myself in relationship with them. Other relationships are just starting.

I thought that in order *to teach others* about the immigrant experiences of women I needed to use other people's stories to validate my experience. Now I realize that my need to identify others as special is a response to my own need to see my self and my personal immigration experience as special and different. In sharing my own experience as an immigrant, and my experience as a woman researcher, I seek to point out that *specialness* and to use it to contribute to improve the conditions for other "less fortunate" women that might come after me (Minh-ha, 1989).

During the year that I have been working on this research project different events and situations have contributed to the transformation and "ripening" of my writing. I turned 30 years old, I became a Canadian citizen and I got pregnant with our first baby. As these new events in my life are taking place, new conversations emerge about different rites of passage, first times, and changes of self-definition and family and professional roles. Some new questions emerge about how I understand who I am *now*, and in this continuous transformation *who I want to be* in the future.

My life is one more time just about to change. Our stay in Lethbridge continues to be uncertain, as I find myself struggling between wanting to move again and go onto a new adventure, longing to move back to Mexico so that my child can grow up close to my family and wanting to stay and settle into this small community. With my family growing new branches I find myself thinking about ways to remain connected with the

trunk and roots of my family back in Mexico. I find myself wondering about the notions of home and identity, more and more.

It has not been easy to complete this project. At different times I have let it sleep for periods of time while busying myself with employment and family commitments. Sometimes I think that I was procrastinating, but other times I think I was giving it time to grow and mature (or giving myself time to be ready to continue this exploration?). As I complete my research project and with it my degree, I hope to have access to the employment I dreamed of when I first moved to Canada. In completing this project, I also hope that I will have more time to commit to working with other immigrants to network and support each other, and not only think and talk about getting more involved. For some reason this academic achievement feels like another rite of passage that I need to accomplish before I can move on. I am not sure move on to what...

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Appendix A

Pre-interview Questionnaire

The answers to these questions are for the researcher's information only, your personal identity information, (such as your name, etc.), will not be included in the final report.

Name: _____

Age: _____

When did you arrive to Canada? _____

Did you come alone? yes no

If not... Who came with you? _____

What was your reason (motive) for coming to Canada?

Did you know someone living here before coming? no yes

Who? _____

Have you lived in a foreign country other than Canada? no yes

Where and for how long? _____

Choose one option for each column

Did you know English before coming to Canada?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all | <input type="checkbox"/> I could not read or write in English |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I understood some English | <input type="checkbox"/> I could read some English |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I understood and spoke some English | <input type="checkbox"/> I could read and write some English |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I understood and spoke English very well | <input type="checkbox"/> I could read and write very well in English |

How much English do you know now?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not much | <input type="checkbox"/> I can <i>not</i> read or write in English |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I understand <i>some</i> English | <input type="checkbox"/> I can read <i>some</i> English |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I understand and speak <i>some</i> English | <input type="checkbox"/> I can read and write <i>some</i> English |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I understand and speak English <i>very well</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> I can read and write <i>very well</i> in English |

Occupation(s) in your country of origin: _____

Occupation(s) in Canada: _____

Describe the type of education you received in your country of origin, include other training (e.g. private or public, English classes, trades and skills).

Highest level of education from your country of origin _____

Highest level of education achieved in Canada _____

Services accessed in Canada (e.g. Counselling, Immigrant services, Social Services, ESL classes)

Cuestionario

Las respuestas a estas preguntas son solamente para informar a la investigadora. Su información personal de identidad (como su nombre, etc.) no será incluida en el reporte final.

Nombre: _____

Edad: _____

¿Cuándo llegó a Canadá? _____

¿Vino usted sola (a Canadá)? si no

Si su respuesta es no... ¿Quién vino con usted? _____

¿Cuál fue su razón (motivo) para venir a Canadá?

¿Conocía a alguien viviendo acá antes de su venida? no si

¿Quién? _____

¿Ha vivido usted en algún otro país además de Canadá? no si

¿Dónde y por cuánto tiempo? _____

Elija una opción para cada columna

¿Sabía usted Inglés antes de venir a Canadá?

No sabía nada

Entendía *un poco* de Inglés

Entendía y hablaba *algo* de Inglés

Entendía y hablaba *muy bien* Inglés

No sabía leer ni escribir en Inglés

Sabía leer *un poco* de Inglés

Sabía leer y escribir *algo* en Inglés

Sabía leer y escribir *muy bien* en Inglés

¿Cuánto Inglés sabe usted ahora?

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> No mucho | <input type="checkbox"/> No sé leer ni escribir en Inglés |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Entiendo <i>un poco</i> de Inglés | <input type="checkbox"/> Sé leer <i>un poco</i> de Inglés |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Entiendo y hablo <i>algo</i> de Inglés | <input type="checkbox"/> Sé leer y escribir <i>algo</i> en Inglés |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Entiendo y hablo <i>muy bien</i> en Inglés | <input type="checkbox"/> Sé leer y escribir <i>muy bien</i> en Inglés |

Ocupación(es) en su país de origen: _____

Ocupación(es) en Canadá: _____

Describa el tipo de educación que recibió en su país de origen, incluyendo otros tipos de aprendizaje (por ejemplo: privada o pública, clases de Inglés, oficios y habilidades).

¿Cuál es el nivel de educación más alto que completó en su país de origen? _____

¿Cuál es el nivel de educación más alto que completó en Canadá? _____

Servicios utilizados en Canadá (por ejemplo: Counselling, Immigrant services, Social Services, ESL classes)

Appendix B

Interview Questions in English and Spanish

The objective of the interview is to hear and record the narrative of the women's immigration experience. The starting question will be an invitation:

Tell me about your immigration experience

Cuénteme acerca de su experiencia de inmigración

If clarification is needed this version of the question could be asked:

In as much detail as you can, tell me the story of your immigration to Canada

Tan detalladamente como sea posible, cuénteme la historia de su inmigración a Canadá

Where and when necessary, I will use probes to develop the narrative from the women's stories, inviting them to expand on the story and details.

That sounds very interesting, could you expand a bit more?

Eso me parece muy interesante, ¿podría profundizar un poco mas?

Could you tell me more about...?

¿Podría decirme un poco mas acerca de...?

Earlier you mentioned....Could you tell me more about it?

¿Podría decirme un poco mas acerca de ... que usted mencionó anteriormente?

As the conversation takes place, some of the main topics for the inquiry will naturally be part of the women's stories. In the case that these are not present, I might use some of the following questions to elicit some of the topics.

1. How do these women incorporate their immigration experiences into their sense of identity?

1a) *What have you learned about yourself through your experiences as an immigrant?/¿Qué ha aprendido acerca de usted misma de sus experiencias como inmigrante?*

1b) *How have things changed for you because of your immigration experiences?/¿Qué cosas han cambiado para usted por sus experiencias como inmigrante?*

2. What are the issues (difficulties or challenges) that Latino-American Spanish-speaking immigrant women identify as crucial in their immigration experience?

2a) *What are some of challenges you faced?/¿Cuáles son algunos de los retos que encontró?*

2b) *What has been the hardest in your experience as an immigrant?/¿Qué ha sido lo mas difícil en su experiencia como inmigrante?*

3. How did they solve these challenges? Which challenges persist?

3a) *How did you deal with these challenges?/¿Cómo enfrentó esos retos?*

3b) *What things do you still find hard/difficult?/¿Cuales todavía le parecen difíciles?*

4. Which resources (internal) and supports (external) do they identify as having accessed?

4a) *What kind of help or support did you use?/¿Que tipos de apoyo o ayuda utilizó?*

4b) *Which qualities in yourself helped you to figure things out?/¿Cuales de sus cualidades personales le ayudaron a resolver lo que se le presentó?*

5. Which kind of use, if any, these immigrant women have made of counselling services.

5a) *What do you know about counselling services available for people going through difficult times?/¿Qué sabe acerca de los servicios de asesoría o terapia disponible para personas que están pasando por momentos difíciles?*

5b) *Did you use any of these services? And why or why not?/¿Utilizó algunos de esos servicios?¿Por qué o por que no?*

6. Identify the change in roles that these women go through.

6a) *How have you changed since you came to Canada?/¿Cómo ha usted cambiado desde su venida a Canadá?*

6b) *How is your role in your family different, how does it remain the same?/¿Cómo es su papel en la familia diferente, cómo se mantiene igual?*

6c) *How have your relationships within your family changed?/¿Cómo han cambiado sus relaciones dentro de su familia?*