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## Bicultural Living: Maria Luisa Mainou's Experience with Immigration and Cultural Change

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"Bicultural Living: Maria Luisa Mainou's Experience with Immigration and Cultural Change"

## **Introduction**

This essay provides a brief glimpse into the life of Maria Luisa Zamudio Mainou, a Mexican immigrant living in the U.S. as a legal permanent resident (LPR). Maria Luisa lives in an American home in the Midwest. She works at Illinois State University in the bicultural-bilingual studies department, a career that puts her into frequent contact with Latino students and other people interested in important issues relating to the Latino community. Her work gives her particular reason to want to be involved in this study, and her story offers rich insights into the ways in which a bicultural perspective can bring together the diverse viewpoints of two separate nations. She enjoys her life as an American resident and retains a strong link to her Mexican heritage through displaying Mexican artwork at her home and through maintaining close connections to her family living in both Mexico and the U.S.

## **Assumptions and Early Hypotheses**

At the beginning of this research, I did not want to approach the subject with any poorly-formed assumptions. I was born and raised in New Mexico and surrounded by a mixed population of Latino and White ethnicity. This experience has automatically prepared me to disregard any stereotypes towards Mexicans that are advocated by the media and that appear in off-hand conversations with some of my peers. Overall, generalizations about Mexican people seem to revolve around food, culture, language, and family. Many people assume that Mexicans cook Mexican food exclusively, adhere to Mexican culture without deviation, speak fluent Spanish, do not know English well, and live with their families well into adulthood. While an element of truth underlies some of these suppositions (for example, in Mexico, college students customarily live at home while attending university), most originate in mistaken ideas about what it means to have Mexican heritage.

A substantial body of research exists regarding Mexican immigration to the United States. Anthropologists focus in particular on issues involving transnationalism, the importance of kinship ties, and adaptive strategies of immigrants and their families. They use analyses gathered from statistical surveys to inform much of their research, a strategy that I used in this project as well. Questions asked in these surveys include why immigrants move here, why they stay, and how they adapt to American life. Research gives first priority, however, to first-hand accounts from Mexican consultants who share their story and explain how they identify with or differ from the results from other studies. In this project, Maria Luisa, a first-generation Mexican immigrant to the United States, shared with me her personal immigration story and helped me to understand it in context of her life as a legal permanent resident.

Before meeting her, however, I read journal articles from the past ten years and online survey reports to develop an understanding of important issues involving Mexican immigration. One article in particular that provided vital information about the history of Mexican immigration

was "Mexican immigrant replenishment and the continuing significance of ethnicity and race" by Tomas R. Jimenez (2008), which was published in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Jimenez examines how the continuing cycle of immigration between the United States and Mexico has led to the perpetuation of ethnic boundaries between Mexican-Americans and white society. Tamar Diana Wilson's article "Strapping the Mexican Woman Immigrant: the convergence of reproduction and production," published in *Anthropological Quarterly* (2006), looks at the effects of migration of Mexican women to the United States on the perceptions and policies towards Mexican immigration in the United States.

Vilma Santiago-Irazzary's article "Transnationalism and migration: locating sociocultural practices among Mexican immigrants in the United States," published by *Reviews in anthropology* (2008), yields much information about transnationalism, a term used to describe the back-and-forth of cultural exchanges between Mexico and the United States resulting from the transborder passage of Mexican immigrants to the U.S. "The Making of Mexican migrant youth civic identities: transnational spaces and imaginaries," published in *Anthropology and education quarterly* by DeJaeghere and McCleary (2010), serves as a good example of research conducted within a transnational framework. Finally, an online report published in February, 2013 by the PEW Research Hispanic Center entitled "The Path Not Taken" provides up-to-date statistics regarding Mexican legal permanent residents in the U.S. This report clarifies much of current immigration policy and introduces some of the core issues in the social realities of Mexican immigrants.

This secondary literature provides vital information about U.S. immigration policy, the history between the U.S. and Mexico, and motivations for Mexican immigrants to move to the U.S. However, these sources tend to treat the population of Mexican immigrants as a group, creating the kinds of generalizations I initially set out to avoid in my research. Therefore I gave first priority to my interviews with Maria Luisa and used her perspective to frame my conclusions using the information from secondary sources.

## **Ethnographic Methods**

Maria Luisa Zamudio Mainou was born in Mexico and came to live in the United States in 2000 at the age of thirty-two. She currently works in the bilingual-bicultural program at the College of Education for elementary ed at Illinois State University in Normal, IL. She holds permanent resident status and lives in Bloomington, IL, Normal's sister city. During the course of this research, she expressed a strong desire to apply soon for dual citizenship in the U.S. and Mexico.

I met Maria Luisa via email when she showed interest in this project, and we arranged to meet for an interview at the Hansen Student Center on the campus of Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, IL. At this first interview on February 8, 2013, she told me her immigration story and I asked her some prepared questions about her reasons for moving to the U.S. and acquiring dual citizenship. We did not begin employing visual research methods until our second meeting.

At our second interview on February 17, also in the Hansen Student Center, we co-edited the notes I had taken at our first meeting. By reviewing my interview notes, we introduced a collaborative aspect to the project that lasted through the rest of our correspondence. We also looked at two or three albums of photographs from various stages of Maria Luisa's life. These pictures helped Maria Luisa to articulate her story to me with the help

of visual aid and gave us some ideas of what to focus on when we took photos for this essay. We studied images of her as a child along with images of her parents and siblings in Mexico, and then went on to view images of her as an adult with her friends in America. These images helped me to place her current life in the context of her past, and through them I gained an essential understanding of how she has grown comfortable living in America without losing her identity as a Mexican.

At our third interview, which took place on March 3 at Maria Luisa's house, I took the photographs that I incorporated into this essay. While we shared a meal together, we looked at more pictures and Maria Luisa continued to share her story and culture with me. The location provided an ideal opportunity for me to observe specific ways in which Maria Luisa lives as both a Mexican and an American. I also continued to take notes and to share them with her. In **Figure 1**, Maria Luisa and I look at some pictures on her laptop computer at her dining room table. We spent at least a couple of hours total looking at these images while she explained the background to each photograph.



**Figure 1:** "Methods"

Sitting at the dining room table, we view images from photo albums saved on Maria Luisa's laptop. The information that we gathered from these photos helped me to understand her immigration story within the larger context of her family history.

The dual process of interviewing Maria Luisa and looking at pictures helped me to identify important issues and highlight them in the essay. My goal is to share Maria Luisa's story, with her full collaborative input, and to analyze parts of it in from an anthropological perspective. Any mistakes in the account belong entirely to myself.

### **Presentation of Data**

At our first meeting, Maria Luisa and I immediately spoke about her immigration story, which she related to me in as much detail as possible. Maria Luisa moved here in 2000, initially just to stay for two months in order to learn English. This was not the first time she had been in the country, however. At the age of nine, she moved with her family to Houston, TX for approximately nine months. "We moved when I was nine years old because Dad worked in an oil company in Mexico and they moved him to Houston, Texas," she explained to me. "He lived there for two years and then decided to bring his family. After nine months, we moved back." While in Houston, Maria Luisa and her siblings went to a private Catholic school which had no bilingual program. Without anyone else to relate to and few people who spoke Spanish, Maria Luisa described her experience at the grade school as "painful."

After returning to Mexico, Maria Luisa finished the rest of her schooling and went into banking for eight years. In 2000, however, a disagreement occurred between her and the bank she worked for, and she decided to use the money she had invested to return to the U.S. in order to learn English well and get a different job. She knew a professor at Illinois State University in Normal, IL, a family friend who offered to let her reside at his house during her stay. She applied to ISU and was accepted to study English in a two-month program. In order to attend the university she needed to also apply for her F-1 visa. To complete the application process for the visa, Maria Luisa had to visit the American Embassy in Mexico City with the appropriate paperwork. The trip to the American Embassy did not go as planned, however, as Maria Luisa recounted to me:

I was sitting there and the consular sees me and says, what do you need, and I told her the truth, I have my tourist visa and that I was planning on staying with family friend (a professor), and I don't need a whole year, just two months. So she looked at me and she said, 'No, what you want to do is get married there. I'm canceling your visa for life and you're done.' She sent me back with no visa whatsoever. It was a five-minute interview. She just canceled just like that. I was like, what just happened here? I was really shocked because I didn't understand what was going on.

A misunderstanding occurred between Maria Luisa and the consular because the consular assumed that Maria Luisa wanted to marry the family friend that she would be staying with, and Maria Luisa did not have the necessary paperwork to prove otherwise. Having sent her check to ISU and made plans to attend there in the summer, she found herself wondering what to do next. She went home and called the embassy to ask how she could prove that she wanted to travel to the United States for educational purposes. The advisor on the phone suggested that she make an appointment with a different person at the embassy and return with paperwork that clearly demonstrated her intentions to study at the university. Maria Luisa followed the advice. During the second visit, she was asked why she had not been successful the first time, and she simply responded that she did not think she had brought all the

paperwork. She volunteered only as much information as necessary to obtain her visa, having learned from the first visit that any extra information might be used against her. She did succeed this time in obtaining her visa and came to live in the United States.

After two months, she felt that she needed more time to adequately learn English and decided to stay for the fall semester as well. Soon, it became clear that the fall semester also didn't provide enough time, and she obtained another visa in order to stay for the rest of the year. The opportunity arose to apply to the master's program at ISU in literature and culture, so she applied and was accepted. During her time as a graduate student, the university hired her as part of a bilingual-bicultural program in the College of Education, where her expertise with both Spanish and English and her professional experience as a banker made her a valuable member of the department. She graduated in 2004 and received her work permit, enabling her to intern for one year in the U.S. to practice her degree. ISU offered her a full-time position, and she accepted on the condition that the university sponsor her in her application for an H1B, a three-year visa. She had to return to the American Embassy in Mexico City in order to obtain the H1B, and although memories of her first experience made her nervous, this time the visa came without any trouble.

Two years later, ISU agreed to sponsor Maria Luisa's application for a green card, or a document enabling her to reside permanently in the U.S., before the H1B expired. "A university is very high on the priority list of sponsors," she told me. "To have a person with a PhD, a professor, as a sponsor is a huge asset." The process went through very quickly this time; she applied in September, and by July was a permanent resident of the United States.

A lawyer, paid by ISU, called Maria Luisa when she received her green card to say that she could use their services should she want to apply for citizenship in the future. "After you get your green card, you have to wait for four years and nine months to get your citizenship," she explained to me. In 2012, she passed the required number of years and became eligible for citizenship, and she expressed an interest in applying for a dual citizenship in the U.S. and Mexico. When I asked her what motivates her to stay as a citizen, she responded immediately:

Voting. That's the main reason. I have seen things happening with Latinos and Mexicans - the good and bad. It's something that has helped me make my decision to get a PhD. I have learned, since I'm here, about what brought people to this country in Mexico (NAFTA, free trade, etc.) - all these things that helped people make these decisions to come to the U.S. For me it's important to have a voice, vote, understand the issues.

In this last comment, Maria Luisa demonstrated a strong interest in living in an American way while not losing any of her responsibilities as a Mexican citizen. In her daily life as well, visible evidence exists to show how she integrates Mexican and American customs, creating a fully bicultural perspective.

The house where Maria Luisa resides (see **Figure 2**) sits on an ordinary American street in Bloomington, IL. Its outside appearance does not distinguish it from any other well-kept home on any of the adjacent streets. Whitewashed walls surround a spacious front porch where I took this photograph.





**Figure 2:** "House"

Reflected in the window pane of the front door, one can see Maria Luisa's car and neighborhood, a typically American sight. Maria Luisa lives in a whitewashed home very different from her previous family home in Mexico.

A reflection in the window pane of the front door shows where Maria Luisa's car sits in the driveway. One can also glimpse the street that the house faces, a view Maria Luisa sees every time she leaves home. Upon my visit to her home in early March, I asked Maria Luisa if it resembles in any way her previous house in Mexico. She shook her head and replied that the two homes are very different.

Once I entered the house, I immediately noticed the decor in the living room, dining room, and kitchen. A variety of artwork filled the house, most of it Mexican; paintings, sculptures, ceramics, pottery, tapestries, lamps, and other more unique pieces all caught my attention. I began to take as many pictures as I could, and for the purpose of brevity have only included some of them in the next two photographs (see **Figure 3** and **Figure 4**). In **Figure 3**, Maria Luisa holds a ceramic jar and explains to me the significance of the design on the outside.



**Figure 3: "Artwork"**

Maria Luisa stands in the foreground, holding a ceramic jar from Mexico with a design that has been created using natural dye from plants. In the background, I assembled four other Mexican art pieces that are displayed around her home. Each has particular significance due to its construction and origins in Mexico.

Behind her, I assembled a collage of other art pieces from Mexico that Maria Luisa has displayed around her home. A piece of Mexican folk art made using bark paper and paper cutting technique sits in the upper left hand corner of the photo. The two paintings on the upper right, copies of works by Mexican artist Diego Rivera, hang on the wall above a table next to the kitchen. In the lower left hand corner, another paper cutting drapes over a light fixture Maria Luisa purchased from Ikea. Finally, the statue in the lower right corner is a replica of a larger, well-known statue of La Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexico.





**Figure 4:** "Pictures"

The upper image depicts a copy of a Diego Rivera that hangs on the wall in the dining area. The lower image shows one of few non-Mexican pieces of artwork, also on the wall in the dining area. The presence of both pictures demonstrates the importance of art as an expression of culture in Maria Luisa's home.

**Figure 4** shows two paintings which hang on the walls of Maria Luisa's home. The top image depicts another copy of a Diego Rivera, and the lower image shows the only piece of American art that I saw, a painting of flowers in the dining room. The presence of these and other artistic items around the house provides Maria Luisa and visitors to her home a vibrant link to her past life in Mexico.

One item in particular, however, provides the most concrete metaphor for the integration of past and present that has occurred in Maria Luisa's life. Pictured in **Figure 5**, a well-worn scale sits on a brown shelf in an accessible part of the kitchen. The scale, Maria Luisa told me, belonged first to her grandmother, who used the counterweights (shown on the lower right of the image) to measure out an appropriate amount of beads for artistic purposes. As a little girl, Maria Luisa remembers playing with the weights and experimenting with the scale's balance. In the left hand image, Maria Luisa demonstrates to me how she used to play with the scale as a child. She and her grandmother shared a close relationship, and when Maria Luisa moved to the United States, she took the scale with her as a keepsake. Now, she uses it to measure out food for cooking, as depicted in the upper right hand corner of the photograph. The scale, once an important part of her past, has taken on a relevant role in her present life, both in the way she uses it and in the way it brings back fond memories. In this way, the scale could be said to physically represent how Maria Luisa's Mexican heritage has become a vital part of her life and career



**Figure 5: "Scale"**

The scale in Maria Luisa's kitchen once belonged to her grandmother in Mexico. Now, she keeps it as a memory of her childhood and uses it in a relevant way in her current life.

At the same time, Maria Luisa has fully embraced an American lifestyle. She bikes, runs, socializes with a close circle of friends, listens to a wide variety of music, and travels. She occasionally has to deflate other peoples' assumptions about her habits, particularly in the area of cooking. In the next photograph, **Figure 6**, Maria Luisa poses with a frying pan of beef fajita, an ingredient in the dinner we shared the same evening. While she prepared the meal she pointed out to me that people often ask her if she cooks Mexican food all the time. She replies to such questions that she makes any kind of food, and we seemed to have found the appropriate moment to show a moment of the American side of her life.



**Figure 6:** "Cooking"

Maria Luisa poses with a frying pan filled with beef fajita, a dish neither exclusively "American" nor "Mexican." She often is asked whether she cooks Mexican food all the time, but as this pictures shows Maria Luisa cooks any kind of food like most other Americans.

From her decision to learn English in the United States to her current position as an American resident with an academic career, Maria Luisa has adapted to a number of major changes in culture and environment. Her process of becoming an American has involved both positive and negative experiences, all of which have helped her learn how to make both the U.S. and Mexico her home. If she had to choose between the two countries, she would choose to live in Mexico, but with the option of dual citizenship, she seems to prefer the bicultural lifestyle which has become her norm.

### **Data Analysis**

As a member of the Mexican immigrant demographic, Maria Luisa shares some characteristics in common with other members of this group. In an online survey published by the PEW Hispanic Center (2013), a number of Mexican immigrants were asked why they had chosen to move and/or stay in the United States. Many of them cited reasons that align with



Maria Luisa's, such as moving for better career opportunities and staying because they identify as American and want to gain the right to vote. Maria Luisa fits into the section of the Mexican immigrant population that the survey qualifies as being under the age of fifty, speaking good English, being currently employed, and having a higher family income. The results of the survey suggest that those who share these qualities are more likely to become naturalized citizens to be able to acquire civil and legal rights than otherwise.

Maria Luisa's personal experiences appear to align with those of other Mexican immigrants in the area of kinship networking as well. Many immigrants count on social networks of family and close friends to provide psychological and economic support in the move to the United States (Bastida, 2001, p. 555). In Maria Luisa's case, a close family friend offered residency to her during her first two months in the U.S., giving her the stability she needed to make a new start in a different country with someone she could rely on who spoke Spanish. Without this connection, Maria Luisa told me, she would not have made the move to the United States. Since coming here, she seems to have formed other close connections with American friends, developing an extended family with whom she remains very close.

The most important way in which Maria Luisa relates to the larger demographic of Mexican immigrants, however, appears to be in the transnationalist perspective her life has assumed since her move to the United States. Immigration studies in anthropology have increasingly focused on the concept of transnationalism, or cultural exchange across the borders of countries, as a framework within which to conduct research. The traditional model, assimilation theory, assumes that once subjects migrate to a new country, they take on the customs and language of the receiving country while giving up those of the country of origin. Global culture has proven to be much more malleable than this, however. Culture behaves like a fluid agent that alters both the sending and receiving societies of migrants. Anthropology professor Vilma Santiago-Irizarry (2008), who specializes in Latino studies, encourages researchers to conceive of culture as a "malleable, contested, fluid, agentic [*sic*], contradictory repertoire of ideas, processes, and practices rather than, as sometimes understood, a neat, coherent, structured, cohesive, homeostatic system" (p. 18). Understanding culture as fluid helps to place stories such as Maria Luisa's in a larger context of cultural flow across the United States-Mexico border which has been ongoing since immigration first began to have a large impact on American society in the mid-1800s. Maria Luisa provides a perfect first-hand account of a bicultural perspective that works because it integrates both the host and origin nations' customs and languages without appearing to assign greater or less value to either.

Mexican immigration occupies a unique position in American history since the U.S. constantly receives new migrants every year. Unlike immigration from Europe to the U.S., which has greatly dwindled since the 1920's, movement across the U.S.-Mexico border continues to occur. Proximity, economic necessity, and political unrest provide enough reason for people to continue making the decision to move. The ongoing reception of first-generation immigrants into American society has the effect of replenishing Mexican culture in the U.S. in a way that does not apply to other ethnic groups. While the population of Mexican-Americans grows in response to the flow of immigration, so too does the prevalence of people who identify with Mexican culture more strongly than American culture. At the same time, second and third-generation immigrants tend to distance themselves from the sending nation while identifying more with the receiving nation, leading to an ethnic dichotomy within the demographic of Mexican-Americans (Jimenez, 2008, p. 1530). In this context, transnationalism becomes even more relevant than before, since immigrant replenishment also creates new



elements in the receiving nation's culture.

With these complexities of cultural change, a bicultural perspective such as Maria Luisa's provides order to seeming chaos. Maria Luisa manages a truly transnational life, with equal influences from both of her homes, Mexico and the U.S. She has adapted to many changing circumstances, and her story offers a unique perspective. Throughout this research I learned many ways in which we are different, but I also found that we share more things in common than otherwise and these commonalities enable us to understand one another.

## **Conclusions**

In this research, I learned one individual's immigration story and applied it to a larger picture of what it means to leave one country for another. I brought a number of biases to the research which should be considered while reading this essay. First and foremost, I have no personal history with immigration, and I come from a family with Caucasian ethnicity. Also, having lived in New Mexico for part of my life, I had close experience with only one group's way of living out a Latino heritage in the Southwest, which might contain many differences to the ways in which Latinos in the Midwest choose to express their heritage. Although I intentionally kept an open mind, biases from the media and my peers had an effect as well on the ways in which I interpreted the research.

Further studies can address many questions that this research does not include. For example, Maria Luisa and I did not speak very much about the ways in which her move to the U.S. affected her relationship with her family. We also did not speak extensively about how she relates to other Mexican immigrants. Nor did we spend much time discussing larger issues such as the effectiveness of the U.S.'s immigration policy. Finally, we only briefly touched on Maria Luisa's experiences with "nativism," or the antipathy of native residents of a country towards immigrants, and we did not establish any connection between that issue and her current life in the U.S.

All of these issues should be explored in further research. I think that working individually with people like Maria Luisa can provide a powerful framework within which to address large questions about the lives of other Mexican immigrants. It may be found that, as I learned, generalized conclusions about a large group of people cannot compare to the insight gained from the perspective of one individual.

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