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DESBORDES

*Translating Racial, Ethnic, Sexual, and
Gender Identities across the Americas*

María-Amelia Viteri

Foreword by Salvador Vidal-Ortiz

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To my late parents, Amelia Burbano and Rubén Viteri, who taught me how to never give up; to my sister, Rossana, whose example and strength led me to where I am now; to my beloved daughter, Simone, who has been the motor and sunshine of my life; and to David, a real *compañero*.

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Foreword

The boundaries between the study of migration and sexuality in the social sciences (and beyond) are, well, quite porous, as are the relationships between the fields of migration and sexuality. I am a sociologist writing for an anthropologist whose work cuts across racialization and gender studies; we are part of networks of queer migration and diaspora scholars,¹ with colleagues from the humanities, social sciences, communications, and international studies fields—in the United States and abroad. The gender, sexuality, and migration field is in reality a range of fields that partake in productive conversations and move the interdisciplinary study forward, as evidenced in work from at least the new century, if not before.

I have had the honor of working with María-Amelia Viteri in a number of roles. We have known each other for close to a decade as collaborators, and eventually as friends, and the task of writing a preface for her book comes with pleasant challenges—not so much those of establishing critiques or formulating analyses relevant to this book, but to do justice to the work in your hands and explore future avenues for fruitful research and theorizing. I will enclose in quotation marks categories like “Latino” and “queer” just as Viteri does in order to center the discussion on the same grounds she has offered. I also enclose “where” we are, as I expect the locations to be varied, and for people to rethink, like the interviewees in this book, where they are (which might be an unstable place, as queer might signify the instability of certain categories).

This book is necessary. It is a primer for the research we seldom see in a “Latino” context—often dominated by Chicano/Mexican American, Puerto Rican or diasporic Boricuas, and Cubans and Cuban Americans—and outside of the New York, California, Illinois, and Florida hubs of Latina/o presence. It is a crucial piece of scholarship for those interested in complicating the relationship between constructs like *Latinidad* with those of sexualities and gender identities, often othered. But even before that, it is a must to think about Latina/o people in ways that reorder the logics of *Latinidad*, so that Central American and Andean sexualities are taken into account and not merely integrated into the common “trilogy” of “Latino”—meaning Mexican/Cuban/Puerto Rican. Latino sexuality scholarship has increasingly problematized notions of Latino as immigrant; Viteri adds to that contribution by showing a diasporic sense of identification that goes beyond a “here” and “there” while basing her work in local spaces and contexts.

The book you are about to read respects no boundaries. While seriously anchored in her discipline, the work analyzes the queer migrants in ways social sciences ought to apply in their own work. As well, Viteri is addressing the challenges of living: thinking, resisting, or articulating gender, sexuality, citizenship, and understandings of the self that go beyond identity. Data for this book comes from LCentro, a nonprofit organization that focuses on Latino immigrant support in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area; it also comes from El Salvador and Ecuador, successfully making the research multilocal in scope. We see the excess of genders and sexualities not easily contained in identity frameworks—certainly not those that follow neat boundary maintenance between gender and sexuality, although there are others—and we see gender and sexual conformant narratives. We also imagine a sense of citizenship that moves beyond the “papers” and into the forming of communities, of spaces, where thinking themselves with a foot “here” and another “there” continues to impact the ways citizenship itself is defined.

To set the reading of this book, I start by looking at the forms *desbordes* takes, in making lots of things travel (hegemonic ideas, gender, cultural constructs, etc.); citizenship is in and of itself central here. I also note the role of language in queering the queer

immigrant. And I close with a general discussion of political systems and human rights.

Uses of Queer, Queering “the Immigrant”: On the Limits of Citizenship

This book pushes the limits of the uses of the term “queer” in relation to immigrants, when placed in a U.S. context of “gay and lesbian” activism. If one simplifies the mapping of activism among so called “LGBT communities,” two distinct poles emerge: the neoliberal gay and lesbian agenda for gays in the military and same sex marriage, sponsored by the Human Rights Campaign (and the like), and the Against Equality antiassimilationist activists whose work attempts to move in and through intersectionality. The position of the Latina/o LGBT immigrant is located within that temporal binary structure; such location is about *both* assuming U.S. LGBT categories (say, when they arrive, or even before, when seeking the “American” gay dream) and then rejecting them as an antiassimilationist strategy (to both U.S. Americanness and a gayness that is structured in such a binary).

The liminal location of immigrants in that designated LGBT/queer binary demands the mobilization of oneself in all of these multiple spheres simultaneously, to act among them, and “grow” within them. From a U.S. activist perspective, the appropriation and recognition of oneself as American serve as an entry point to assume, then disavow, LGBT, and assume queer not simply as white American but as part of progressive, antiracist movements. That is, one has to come into the discourse of identity in the United States with some nomenclature—in many instances, LGBT—then see the radical possibilities in queer movements, and assume the “queer” nomenclature, even though queer is so often racialized as white, and thus American, as Viteri notes. So, that move to assume queer is a move that destabilizes the notion of American altogether, and it is a queer move against LGBT. But it is also an always already incomplete move, as the U.S. imaginary of queer is not “of color” but white.

In this sense, to become American is to act as part of the fabric of U.S. politics (gay and otherwise), that is, to assume a part in the mainstream civil society—and a mobilization against its liberalism. So, it is a lot to be an outsider to the system of knowledge production that situates the immigrant figure as external to the nation, to then arrive and assume the part in a liberal strategy that shows off insincere acceptance, to then distance oneself from it in order to radicalize one's politics. In other words, Latina/o "queer" immigrants are caught in a loop of assuming an (LGBT) identity, then face it the context in which they live (and such context and community's understanding of that identity), to then encounter a radical set of politics that dismiss their preconceived ideas about Americanness and LGBT identities altogether. Many U.S. citizens cannot do it; they don't "succeed" in this imbricate set of processes.

Latina/o LGBT immigrants could of course be, and indeed are, part of revolutionary queer politics, when queer is not merely about being LGBT but evolves to become a series of acts against normativity or is used as a coalitional platform. (In the latter case, to queer politics is to think through the State's regulation of women, people of color, and transgender people and to think about issues from health care, to homelessness and housing, to critiques of the prison industrial complex, to lack of education and employment, and so on.) Latina/o LGBT immigrants are often part and parcel of these mobilizations and coalition attempts, and Viteri's work gives us a glimpse of that. It takes not just assimilation (a rather passé word these days in the social sciences)—to the United States as home and to gay identification—but a true sense of immersion in both gay assimilationist and queer activist practices. Latina/o LGBT immigrants disidentify from such practices, and Viteri's work shows the myriad ways they do so every day.

Language, Identity, and the Uses of Queer

Wanting to resist the label "queer" might emerge for many reasons, some of which were noted before. Yes, the challenge of lack of

translation poses an initial level of resistance to queer; some of the data shows this to be the case. This method of compartmentalizing identity through geopolitical region (Latin America, Central America, or El Salvador) should not be taken lightly: in an era of forced globalization, we see activists and LGBT immigrants whose choice is to disassociate from the intrinsic U.S. Americanness of being gay, which some see within a new iteration of queer, and most definitely see as white. In some instances, such as TicoV's, interviewees resist learning about what they think is yet another identity framework that already reinforces whiteness—and being in the United States TicoV resists queer as gay and gay as white. In doing so, the privilege of gayness is displaced onto this less known element called queer, in order to juxtapose the queer (or gay) as White to the Latino (as neither gay nor queer). These exercises in oppositional identification are practical, in that they solidify both "Latino" and "White" through privileged sexuality markers.

One of Viteri's male to female transgender interviewees is named Jade. For Jade, moving across nomenclatures between sexual orientation and gender identity (with terms like "trans" and "loca") is accompanied by a slippage between languages to enunciate queer choices (where queer is about the movement across these seemingly distinct ways of organizing gender and sexuality). In doing so, Jade articulates an immigrant's relationship to English as foreign to her reality but uses it to "trouble" assumptions about gender and sexuality both "here" (about not allowing gay and trans to be articulated as a mixture of sexual identity—instead of sexual orientation and gender identity) and "there" (where queer is the language that permits those movements presumably inaccessible to her back home). In similar ways that "loca" acts inherently as her identity, queer serves as her description of newer processes of nonbelonging in the United States. Loca and queer might be more alike than not, but not as ways of identification; as Viteri astutely shows, they are vectors for movements (migrations) across gender and sexuality that cannot be contained in identities.

Queer and loca do not have the same currency to travel elsewhere, however. This is another contribution from Viteri's

work to the relationship these terms have, in a geopolitical sense. And this currency allows interviewees to adhere or refuse to put into use some of these categories. Put another way, this quest for finding language that “fits” ironically is also productive in terms of naming what “spills over” or falls outside the purview of identity. Carlos, another of Viteri’s interviewees, resists the term “queer” and proposes “estereosexual” to offer an account that operates in excess of identity. In doing so, he too makes use of the intent of queer as destabilizer, even though, in the intent of switching, he resists queer as identification.

Viteri’s work in this area of language use and its implication for sexuality provokes me to ask questions in a number of (different) directions. Further questions based on her research may include: Is there resistance to anything past the term “gay” in Latin America? It seems that gay achieved an acceptance that queer might not (even though both are associated with “the north”). Localized acceptance (in some activist or academic groups) of queer “here” and “there” does not imply acceptance of the principles embedded in what queer is meant to do. One could ask instead: Is the rejection of both gay and queer something that happens for these communities in Latin America, whereas only the rejection of queer is something that happens in the United States? Is that rejection to both gay and queer more localized to certain countries, and not others? Finally, in yet another direction, one wonders if, given the circulation of terms like *homosexual* and *loca*, are these terms remaining central to the ways in which Central American and other Latin American LGBT activists prefer to reference themselves, and each other?

It is significant that while many “queered” their lived experience, except Francisco, a student in Ecuador, all other interviewees adhered to a disassociation with queer as an identity. The reason queer resonated with Francisco was, like so many others, because of his understanding and appreciation of queer theory—and because queer allowed him to understand the place gender had in his sense of a sexually minoritized identification. Moreover, the bridges produced in the discussion of Francisco’s story in terms of interrogations based on queer theory go beyond the sexual and gendered, into issues of normative ethnicity, class, gender expression, and race.

And yet we have, in the D.C. metro area, Estrella, a transgender woman, who simultaneously takes on the figure of the Latina as spitfire (self-racializing in classic Latina movie star ways), and produces, through that opposition, whiteness as lack. It is perhaps here where the sense of *desbordes*—of excess, of spilling over—takes a full hold. *Desbordes*, not so much in the queer sense of gender presentation—she, and others who are not trans, mind you, seek to enact gender expressions that are seen as normative—but in the immigrant sense of “having more flavor, move movement,” as Estrella says. In and through this, *mestizaje* is also used to queer race. And Viteri’s own self-reference in the field makes for an ample view to the uses of *mestizo* in rethinking race “here” and “there” as well.

Human Rights and “Progressive” Governments

Any immigrant (or any person who comes in contact with a U.S. American, elsewhere) often faces the question: Don’t you want to come to the United States/live in the United States/be a citizen? This is too a question posed to LGBT people elsewhere. Never an innocent question, it sets up a hierarchy: making the United States a most pleasant, desirable place to live, and by default, the migrant’s country of origin as lacking, or less progressive. Human rights struggles often get set up on these imaginaries that produce a benevolent host country and an oppressive other. Democracy is often framed as the referent.

While a lot of the work in Viteri’s book comes from LCentro in the D.C. metro area, political status in countries from Central America and the Andean region is also a factor. The general, lay view on human rights presumes democratic countries as most accepting of LGBT rights as human rights, often conforming nondemocratic countries as more homophobic. Now-a-days, countries with a communist political organization (Venezuela, Cuba) have begun to rethink their antihomosexuality stands, especially as a global human rights agenda pressures them to conform to international standards of basic respect for sexuality as a human right. It becomes harder to blame any internal political structure for homophobia.

And yet the picture is much more complex: I see this tension in so called democratic countries like Colombia—contradictory in its quest for a public, international view as most accepting of LGBT agendas, while struggling with gender-based rights and overall human rights in a country still in the midst of conflict. (Indeed, often when I see a country flagging for its progressive stand on LGBT rights, I want to find out the reproductive and gender rights in that country—which to me are more tangible markers of the state of the country in terms of human rights.) In time, it will become clear that democracy does not set up a privileged site to LGBT migrants to flourish any more than it hinders their opportunities for growth and acceptance. The commonly accepted narrative of escaping violent upbringings for a better life in the United States has gotten old, and Viteri shows us some of these elements in her research.

The politics of political asylum are important in this regard. General work on LGBT immigrants presumes the quest for establishing residency in the United States and the need for asylum. Viteri's contributions move beyond, since neither she nor those she interviewed are invested in the traditional sense of citizenship. For starters, the racialization of LGBT migrants makes them face discrimination, irrespective of their citizenship or residency status. Second, and as important, the specificity of LCentro and Latina/o LGBT migrants demonstrates that for some, the term queer encompasses an unwelcoming becoming: becoming "American" (or white, for some of those she interviewed), and within those discussions, there is a real resistance from many of them to "assimilate" in such frameworks that are simultaneously about gayness and whiteness. And for others, being "American" is being part of the movement of immigrants who marched and fought for immigrant rights in 2006—and continue to fight. We see a texture to the simplistic earlier view that an immigrant would only wish to become a resident; here, it gets elaborated through the markers of sexuality and racialization. As Viteri says, "the two categories of immigrant and citizen become more fragile when intersected with those of gender and sexuality." It is this meeting point of all of these markers of social experience what makes this book a great contribution.

In closing, *desbordes* will challenge some of the assumptions about the quest for "a better life" of Latina/o LGBT immigrants. It will also unsettle some assumptions about racial experience and racialization in the United States. But it also returns to inherently human questions of identity and experience in geopolitical terms. For instance, the challenges posed by the use of so called foreign constructs (such as queer) in these communities are but an invitation for future work to be read in relation to Viteri's contributions. Here, we have a lot, and within it, we also have a lot of space to further this still relatively recent scholarship of migration and gender/sexuality. In reading the pages that follow, aspects such as queering citizenship and belonging, reracializing oneself as Latina/o, and challenging norms of identification based on gender and sexuality all come together to illustrate an initial view of the potentiality of all of these *desbordes* as critical sites of action. Viteri's work will give many in the academic, activist, and immigration advocacy circles much to talk about. I look forward to the conversations, debates, and rethinking brought forth by the troubling of such categories and experiences.

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This book is made of *travesías* filled with diverse voices that materialized in committed people who made all this possible. It's made of and with hope. This journey has taken me to four cities, three countries, and through South/North and North/South trajectories with no final destination in sight. Within those cities there are more people to acknowledge than there is room on this page. I'm thankful for the insightful feedback on this book project and honored by the inspiring friendship of William Leap, Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, Carlos Decena, Lawrence La-Fountain, Amy Lind, Hugo Benavides, Santiago Castellanos, Diego Falconí among many others.

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Introduction

To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

Guille is in his mid-thirties and self-identifies as an LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) activist. He came to the United States from Managua, Nicaragua. While living in Managua, Guille identified himself as “gay.” During his teenage years, Guille was persecuted for his sexual identity as well as for his activism on behalf of the gay community in Nicaragua. In addition, Guille was an active participant in left-wing politics in Nicaragua, including the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN by its acronym in Spanish). To escape the persecution he faced, he decided to leave Nicaragua. Once in the United States, Guille became more aware of immigrant inequality, and he realized a common ground existed between Latino¹ lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, and heterosexuals. This common ground lay in the struggle for survival as immigrants that ranged from challenges such as obtaining legal papers and finding a job to avoid violence and deportation. This realization prompted Guille to push conversations beyond sexual, gender, and leftist identity to incorporate an immigrant positionality. This allowed Guille to join the various struggles under a heteronormative umbrella where being homosexual did not exclude him from other types of structural violence. In his manifesto written in 1986, Chilean writer, performer, and activist Pedro Lemebel calls attention to left-wing parties’ uneasiness with nonheterosexuality; in a parallel