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Fractured Nostalgia: LGBTQ+ Immigrants, Family Lessons, and Transnational Ties

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by

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## ABSTRACT

Fractured Nostalgia: LGBTQ+ Immigrants, Family Lessons, and Transnational Ties

by

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How do self-identified LGBTQ+ individuals with familial migration histories understand their intersecting identities in relation to transnational, 1 discourses and networks? While scholarship has explored the overlap of sexualities and migration, few have specifically examined the influential roles of the family and nationhood in their analysis. Using semi-structured interviews with 33 self-identified LGBTQ+ people who have migration histories within their families, this research documents how sexuality emerges as a way to conceptualize feelings of belonging to nation-states in their lives. My findings introduce *fractured nostalgia* as a framework through which belonging, assimilation, and (trans)nationalism can be understood in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals with migration histories.

## INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is a key organizing factor throughout social life (i.e., Cantú 2009; Shah 2011). Despite this, sociological scholarship on migration often misses the experiences of sexual minorities, while sexualities scholarship does not always account for migration histories and journeys. The sociological exploration of LGBTQ+ migrant experiences is an underdeveloped but necessary subfield (Ayoub and Bauman 2019; Carrillo 2017; Carrillo and Fontdevila 2014; Lee 2018; Luibhéid 2004, 2008; Luibhéid and Chávez 2020), as migrants in particular offer an entry point to the construction of sexuality as newcomers into existing institutions, social worlds, and hierarchies. As discourses of LGBTQ+ acceptance or rejection trend globally, it will be necessary for scholars of sexuality to unpack the often multiple and compounding factors facilitating individual and transnational understanding of sexuality. Through analyzing the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals with migration histories, it becomes possible to discern transnational patterns of mobility, sexuality, and conflicting and converging discourses around what it means to be a migrant and what it means to be LGBTQ+ on an international stage. This messaging is not inconsequential, for it shapes not only individual identities but also, national attachments and transnational feelings of connection.

Scholarship explicitly exploring the impact of non-heterosexual sexualities upon U.S.-based migration has emerged over the past couple of decades (Cantú 2009; Carrillo 2017; Carrillo and Fontdevila 2014; Epstein and Carrillo 2014; Luibhéid 2004, 2008; Luibhéid and Chávez 2020; Thing 2010). Scholars have also analyzed the role of sexuality within migrant family belonging, finding that sexual identity does shape the experiences of children of immigrants, particularly their relationships with their families which are often

made tense by their sexuality (e.g., Ocampo 2014). The emerging body of queer migration scholarship has primarily explored the identity negotiation process of recent LGBTQ+ migrants. That is, few sociological studies analyze the experiences of migration histories beyond the first generation (for a notable exception, see Ocampo 2014). Further, the scholarship that does exist tends to be bound within specific migration pathways or regions (i.e. Mexican migrants arriving to the U.S.) or based within subsets of the LGBTQ+ community (largely, gay and bisexual men).

This scholarship has brought into crucial consideration the role of sexuality within and across migration contexts, for “every social institution, however asexual in appearance, relies on and enforces sexual boundaries and divisions” (Gamson & Moon 2004:52).

Previous scholarship has displayed the ways LGBTQ+ sexuality is racialized and classed (Han 2015; Heaphy 2011; Hunter 2010; Moore 2006, 2012; Ocampo 2012), which then further shapes those with migration histories, especially from the Global South. My work builds on this body of scholarship, bringing queer migration scholarship into explicit conversation with scholarship on sexualities, nationhood, and family. By centering on the many ways LGBTQ+ individuals with migration histories navigate their communities and identities, it becomes apparent how intersecting identities are affected by the complex negotiations that occur outside of a single individual and in relation to broader communities within and outside a particular nation-state.

My research explores this tension, the careful line between identification and disidentification, belonging and outsider status, assimilation, and refusal. I argue that sexuality should be analyzed as an axis of power that can push for attachment or detachment from the nation-state, and that these modes of belonging are constructed by families across

national borders. This research asks: How do self-identified LGBTQ+ individuals with familial migration histories understand their intersecting identities in relation to transnational discourses and networks? How is coming out as a process influenced by transnational attachment to multiple countries? How do LGBTQ+ individuals learn how to navigate their intersecting identities and experiences, given the discursive dominance of U.S. sexual exceptionalism? And lastly, what key forces shape their understandings of sexual and national belonging?

Utilizing interviews with 33 self-identified LGBTQ+ individuals whose families migrated to the United States, I show how sexuality is negotiated alongside the family and nationhood. I argue that LGBTQ+ individuals with immediate familial migration histories develop ideas of “proper” sexual and gendered behavior through family policing. Through these lessons, family networks serve as primary learning sites wherein cross-national belonging is created and mediated by sexuality and gender. In the case of my participants, sexuality and national belonging are constructed alongside each other through family narratives of belonging.

In this thesis, I begin by outlining key concepts surrounding family and sexuality, within sexuality and geography studies, and the scholarship on queer migration. I place my findings within these bodies of scholarship, bringing together various realms of sexualities scholarship to show how transnational belonging and sexual identification are best understood as co-constitutive in the case of my participants.

Employing Maghbouleh’s (2010) concept of *inherited nostalgia* alongside Collins’s (1998) conceptualization of the family as an implementor of hierarchy and national belonging, I argue that LGBTQ+ individuals with familial migration histories learn their

place within nations through their families, learn lessons about sexual and gender acceptability, and inherit national nostalgia that is often laced with deeply homophobic and transphobic messaging. This inherited belonging is highly impactful, for many participants' family networks serve as a center-point of cross-national belonging due to their limited exposure to their home countries. If family construct and police about gender and sexuality, then perhaps the inherited nostalgia not only encompasses emotions, but additional lessons shaping understandings of belonging, power, and hierarchy.

I conclude by situating the experiences of LGBTQ+ people with familial migration alongside the key themes developed in my data to show how sexual identity management is enforced by family, and in the context of those with migration histories, constructed across national borders and belongings. My findings introduce *fractured nostalgia* as a framework through which belonging, assimilation, and (trans)nationalism can be understood in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals with migration histories. More broadly, this work contributes to our understanding of the diverse ways identities are negotiated in relation to communities, both local and transnational, and bridges bodies of scholarship examining sexuality, family, geography, and nationhood.

## **FAMILY AND BELONGING**

In a 1998 article, Patricia Hill Collins argued that the traditional family should be understood as an intersectional analytic unit. Rather than understanding families as neutral, she argues that family *as a site* holds power, which "lies in its dual function as an ideological construction and as a fundamental principle of social organization" (Collins 1998:63). Families, according to Collins (1998:64) play a central role in shaping understanding of identity and belonging, for "individuals typically learn their assigned place in hierarchies of



race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nation, and social class in their families of origin.”

Utilizing Collins’ framework, I examine the family as a site in two ways. First, like Collins, I highlight how family directly teaches and polices boundaries around sexuality and gender. Secondly, I outline how families serve as a shaping force in ideas of national belonging for individuals with migration histories.

Collins (1998) argues that family narratives and ideologies are fundamentally constitutive of individual belonging within the United States, as nations are often conceptualized as national families. Families, therefore, serve as a site of analysis to show how power, hierarchy, and ideology are constructed within nations that are then seen as natural. Understanding family as an analytic unit has direct implications for understandings of migrant sexuality, for the family household is where understandings of sexuality and gender are normalized (Cantú 2009; Collins 1998). Family serves as one of the first places where “rules of gender and sexual conduct and performance are taught on a daily basis” (Cantú 2009:27). In particular, families often teach and control sexual norms, leading to policed heteronormative family structures (Cantú 2009) embedded within heterosexism (Collins 1998). Further, migrants who seek legal safety and stability within the U.S. must reproduce and regulate sexual norms that attempt to reproduce the hegemonic norms of sexuality and gender (Huang 2020).

Other scholars have looked at the role of immigrant families in establishing cross-national belonging, displaying Collins’ claims indirectly. Maghbouleh (2010, 2017) conceptualized “inherited nostalgia” while studying the lives of second-generation Iranian youth as a framework for better understanding how Iranian youth form connections to Iran through fictive and emotionally based associations. From Maghbouleh’s perspective,

nostalgia is an inheritable emotional aspect that encompasses longing, homesickness, homeland attachment, and that is implemented (put to work) by families. Nostalgia allows the youth to construct linkages between themselves and Iran, investing in their transnational connections through intergenerational narratives about Iran. Maghbouleh's investigation of notions of nostalgia that shape Iranian youth's life in the U.S. offers a useful analytic approach focusing explicitly on "a relational, multi-generational and ultimately inherited, social form of expression and communication" (2010:204) that is instrumental in second-generation migrant identity.

Therefore, nostalgia in immigrant lives narrates possible transnational forms of belonging. However, this nostalgia is not always a neutral force. Placing Collins (1998) in conversation with Maghbouleh (2010, 2017), I theorize that the forms of nostalgia taught by immigrant families are potentially filled with lessons about hierarchy and belonging, particularly around sexual and gender norms. Utilizing LGBTQ+ immigrant experiences as examples, it becomes clear that families implement expectations about their countries of origin, ones that often exclude LGBTQ+ identities. When inherited nostalgia becomes laden with stories of nonbelonging (e.g., through homo/transphobia), fractured nostalgia emerges. However, these boundaries of belonging are not only enforced in the social world of the family, but across ideas of nationhood, place, and geography.

## **SEXUAL GEOGRAPHIES**

While we commonly assume that sexuality is an intimate negotiation, one of individual identification process and coming to terms with oneself, scholars have explored how "sexual identity formation and adoption is a *social* process influenced by multiple, intersecting axes of social experience within interlocking systems of power and privilege"

(Silva & Evans 2020:732, emphasis added). Building on this insight and discovery, research has shown that sexual identity is intimately connected with and shaped by place and geography (e.g., Browne, Lim, and Brown 2007; Brown-Saracino 2015, 2017; Carrillo and Fontdevila 2014). The role of geographic locality has been shown to shape identity. As Brown-Saracino (2017: 236) writes, “identity becomes salient, or becomes fully formed, only in and through place; it is nearly impossible to imagine identity or self that is unplaced... there is no identity without geography.” A social geographical analysis of sexuality therefore should examine the ways that geographic cultures, narratives, and discourses shape individual identification.

Moving between national contexts, Carrillo and Fontdevila (2014) outline the shifting identification categories of immigrant Mexican gay and bisexual men in the United States, carefully documenting the ways geography and migration shape processes of identification. Comparing pre- and post-migration, Carrillo and Fontdevila show that sexual identification and behavior shift based on location. While Brown-Saracino’s work (2015, 2017) displays the role of cities and sexual identification, displaying that local culture, place, and space do in fact define sexual politics, identity, and belonging, Carrillo and Fontdevila’s work (2014) examines how that process can be understood cross-nationally and from a transnational perspective. Placed together, this work highlights the crucial role of geography in shaping sexual identity.

Most work on queer migration deals with geographic identity negotiations, regardless of whether or not it is named as a geographic influence. However, this work largely centers on the influence of sexuality on migration pathways and possibilities (e.g. Carrillo 2017), particularly in the case of asylum seekers (e.g. DasGupta 2019; Lewis and Naples 2014;

Murray 2014). My research departs from this scholarship by examining the inverse relationship between migration and sexuality, focusing on migration and its impact on sexuality, rather than sexual migration. Foregrounding migration as an impact factor allows me to investigate the ways sexualities are constructed across time and space and, in the case of those with migration histories, across transnational borders of belonging.

Further, the work on LGBTQ+ individuals crossing national geographic boundaries focuses on those who leave their country of origin due to their sexuality, and who are in search of more inclusive environments. Much of that work then centralizes on how LGBTQ+ migrants navigate, make meaning of, and form belonging *to the countries they have migrated to*, which are often countries in the Global North (e.g. Altay, Yurdakul, and Korteweg 2021; Ayoub and Bauman 2019; Bacchetta, El-Tayeb, and Haritaworn 2015; Barglowski, Amelina, and Bilecen 2018; DasGupta 2019; Lai 2018; Lennes 2021; Murray 2014; Ota 2020; Sandoval 2018; Thing 2010). I instead focus on the negotiation process of belonging to the countries that individuals and their families *migrated from*.

Rather than exploring the experiences of those with clear lived experience in their country of origin and who later migrate (perhaps due to their sexuality), my work instead analyzes the experiences of those with migration histories uninfluenced by their sexuality to see how they then negotiate cross-national belonging to places they have limited exposure to. In other words, I am interested in imagined belonging, as opposed to lived experience as an LGBTQ+ person within their country of origin. If location shapes identification (Brown-Saracino 2015), being based within the U.S. must shape identity. These identifications then, for individuals with migration histories, occur across transnational contexts that shape how they connect to countries outside of the United States. Few other scholars have displayed the

ways in which transnational mobility as a process can shape sexuality for LGBTQ+ individuals within the United States looking back to imagined homelands.

## **AMERICAN SEXUAL EXCEPTIONALISM**

Scholars located largely within postcolonial scholarly traditions have critiqued the ways sexuality is often constructed as *nationally* geographic, wherein LGBTQ+ sexualities are assumed to be based within the Global North alone, or only socially and legally recognized within the Global North (Browne et al. 2007; Lee 2018; Luibhéid and Chávez 2020; Puar 2017). Geography in this sense becomes sexualized, as nation-states are imagined as places of particular forms of sexualities with various levels of acceptance. As Lee argues, contemporary discourse “often reproduce a liberationist narrative in which queer and trans people migrate from the “backward” and “uncivilized” Global South to total freedom in “modern” and “civilized” white/Western nation-states” (2018:63). However, this belief, that non-heterosexual sexualities only exist in the West, is an ontological failure (Rahman 2010) and erases the true sexual diversity of the Global South.

Additionally, there is a need to reframe binary thinking that positions non-Western countries as inherently homophobic and traditionalist while queer subjects are seen as only Western (Barglowski et al., 2018; Moussawi 2020). It is necessary to situate the lived realities of LGBTQ+ individuals with migration histories within contexts of colonial legacies (e.g., Carrillo 2017; Lee 2018; Luibhéid & Chavez 2020), for the roles of policing, gender and sexual regulation, surveillance, removal, and bodily discrimination are not only contemporary phenomena. Similarly, there have been calls for scholars to situate the violence LGBTQ+ people face in the Global South within colonial histories, moving towards decolonial and abolitionist frameworks instead of a vague "liberation" narrative that places

the Global North as the perpetual savior (Lee, 2018). Further, since global discourses trend toward claiming the U.S. as a site of sexual freedom relative to the rest of the world, these discourses could then shape understandings of national sexual belonging. Studying queer migrations, therefore, reveals not only the experiences of sexual minorities but also how normative sexuality is structured in relation to the colonial state. My research builds on this work by seeking to unravel discourses of sexual exceptionalism and to understand how those who are situated between nations learn to navigate conflicting and converging narratives about nationhood, sexuality, and belonging.

My work intervenes by exploring how individuals negotiate these larger national narratives around sexual exceptionalism. The academic framing of the United States as a place of exceptional sexual liberation has been thoroughly critiqued (Lee 2018; Puar 2017). Yet, how LGBTQ+ migrants in the U.S. make sense and use of the discourse of American sexual exceptionalism deserves more research. Therefore, I interrogate how individuals who are LGBTQ+ and placed within the heart of sexual exceptionalism discourse (the United States) understand their identity vis a vis their country of origin. Studying queer migration reveals not only the experiences of sexual minorities but also how normative sexuality is structured in relation to the family and by extension the nation-state.

My work expands on existing scholarship examining sexual identification by bringing familial and national contextualization into the conversation with identity management processes. Additionally, my work explores migration pathways that extend beyond two-country migrant pathways. Using the United States as the site of analysis allows me to develop insight into the ways that sexuality is constructed in the United States by individuals with origins outside of the nation. Centering on how LGBTQ+ individuals understand their

own transnational belongings beyond the boundaries of the United States allows me to contrast the ways that the U.S. alongside U.S.-based nationalisms are constructed relative (and in opposition) to the rest of the world.

## DATA AND METHODS

I rely on semi-structured interviews conducted with 33 self-identified LGBTQ+ individuals with experiences of immigration to the United States within their immediate families. All participants had experiences of migration, either through their own migration, the migration of their parents, or in a few cases, through their grandparents (detailed information in the tables below). I wanted to understand how LGBTQ+ people negotiate feelings of belonging to home countries when located *within* the United States, regardless of their individual migration entry point. Opening this research to anyone with an immediate familial relationship with migration history, rather than just migrants or children of immigrants, enables me to examine generational differences or similarities formed.

**Table 1: 1st and 1.5 Generations**

Country-Affiliation	Gender	Sexuality	Race/Ethnicity
<i>Individual Migrant</i>			
Haiti/France	Cis woman but is questioning	Fluid lesbian	Haitian, mulatto, mixed
China	Cis woman	Questioning, lesbian or pansexual	Asian
Syria	Gender fluid	Gay	Middle Eastern
<i>Individual &amp; Parent(s) Migrants</i>			

Philippines	Under construction	Queer	Asian American, Filipino
Ecuador/Spain	Nonbinary, demigender, demimale	Gay, queer, Achillean	White mestizx
Costa Rica/Brazil/Mexico	Questioning gender	Lesbian	Latina, Mexican/Cuban
Korea	Cis woman	Queer, bisexual	Korean, Asian
Mexico	Nonbinary	Queer, pansexual/bisexual	Mexican, Afro-descendant, mestize
China	Nonbinary, transmasculine	Pansexual	Chinese
India/UK/Canada	Transmasculine	Queer	Mixed (White/Indian)
El Salvador	Cis woman	Queer	White
Taiwan	Nonbinary	Bi, pan, unsure	Asian
Russia	Nonbinary trans woman	Lesbian	White
Ethiopia	Cis woman	Queer	Black, Ethiopian

**Table 2: 2nd Generation**

Country-Affiliation	Gender	Sexuality	Race/Ethnicity
<i>Both Parents Migrants - Interviewee Born in the US</i>			
Haiti	Nonbinary	Queer	Black, Haitian
Peru, Ecuador	Not sure, tells people cis woman but is questioning	Lesbian, queer	Latina
India	Nonbinary	Asexual, panromantic, queer	Indian, Asian
Mexico	Nonbinary, transmasculine	Nonbinary lesbian	White Mexican
Costa Rica	Trans, nonbinary	Lesbian	Mixed (White/Central American)
Mexico	Transmasculine	Queer	White Mexican



Vietnam	Cis woman	Bi, queer, demi	Asian
Japan, Italy	Questioning	Queer	Mixed (White/Asian)
Ireland, Jamaica/Lebanon	Cis woman	Bisexual	Mixed (White/Middle Eastern)
<i>One Parent a Migrant - Interviewee Born in the US</i>			
Iran	Cis woman	Lesbian	Mixed (Middle Eastern/White)
Germany	Cis woman	Bisexual	White
Korea	Up in the air	Queer/bi/pan	Mixed (White/Asian)
Italy	Cis woman	Bisexual	White
Guyana	Genderqueer	Bisexual or pansexual	Indo-Guyanese, Asian
Lebanon	Woman	Queer	Arab, Lebanese
Mexico	Not sure/questioning	Queer, bisexual, pansexual	Mixed (Mexican/Black)

**Table 3: 3rd Generation**

Country-Affiliation	Gender	Sexuality	Race/Ethnicity
<i>Grandparent(s) Migrant</i>			
China, Armenia	Not sure, questioning	Queer	Mixed (White/Chinese)
Italy	Cis woman	Queer, gay	White
Colombia	Trans woman	Queer, lesbian	Mixed (White/Latina)

I recruited individuals who self-identified as LGBTQ+ and had a family migration history to the United States, regardless of their country of origin. This is an intentionally broad and ambitious category. What unites participants in this research was an LGBTQ+

identity and family that migrated to the United States, for I am interested in analyzing the role of the United States as a site wherein certain ideas of gender and sexuality are constructed. My goal is to understand how the United States *as a site* develops narratives surrounding sexuality relative to the rest of the world, rather than focus on each country represented by my interviewees.

Allowing for multiple countries of origin to be represented in my sample enables me to document how powerful the discourse associated with U.S. sexual exceptionalism is, as my focus is the United States as a location. Representing individuals from multiple countries in my case allows me to show how widespread the discourse the United States constructs is, for regardless of country of origin, similar themes emerged. Rather than challenging the “truth” of acceptance of LGBTQ+ people globally and across the countries my participants come from, I show how individuals navigate and negotiate belonging across borders and document the specific influence of the United States as a center of sexual exceptionalism narratives has on those discursive negotiations.

For this research, I relied on online recruitment, snowball sampling, and outreach to organizations with community affiliations to migrant populations, LGBTQ+ populations, and other intersecting identity services. While snowball sampling is critiqued for valuing those who are more socially connected over those with fewer social networks (Erens, 2013), I believe that being referred to participants through networks created a deeper sense of trust and facilitated my research in a pandemic-restricted international context.

The interviews were conducted between November 2020 and September 2021 and lasted around 70 minutes on average. All interviews were conducted remotely, with 3

interviews conducted over the phone, 1 one on WhatsApp messenger<sup>1</sup>, and 29 interviews conducted over Zoom. Three of the interviewees reached out after the interview wanting to continue the conversation and were interviewed a second time for an additional hour. The participants formed a diverse population of individuals across sexuality, gender, and country of origin.

While it is common for qualitative studies to use pseudonyms, I alternate between pseudonyms and the participants' interview numbers when referring to individuals. This is in part due to the very diverse backgrounds of my participants. Many of my participants have culturally relevant or self-chosen names. As a cultural outsider to many of those cultures, it felt insensitive to assign them names that either erased their cultural background or held the possibility of cultural stereotyping. Further, due to the importance of chosen names within trans and gender non-conforming communities (Pollitt et al. 2019), and the nature of often gendered names across countries, it additionally raised complications in choosing names for participants. To address this, participants were given the choice to choose their pseudonyms. Those that did not choose a name are referred to using their interview number.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed through Otter.ai, a transcription software program. Each transcript was then read, edited, and revised to account for any program errors. I am influenced by Timmermans and Tavory (2012) who proposed an abductive approach, which aims to generate theoretical insights through developing a deep theoretical understanding of the subject while maintaining sensitivity to surprising data and inductive reasoning. This process required creating initial themes across interviews based on

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<sup>1</sup> The interviewee did not have a strong internet connection but wanted to participate

the interview data, revisiting the data with background understanding, and allowing for new themes to emerge that were then theorized as familiarity was gained.

### *Positionality*

I am influenced by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011:76), who state write that “no field researcher can be a completely neutral, detached observer who is outside and independent of the observed phenomena.” Instead, the relationship formed between the researcher and the community researched is an opportunity to show complexity and subtlety (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw et al., 2011). Rather than attempting to be a detached and unbiased observer, assuming responsibility and creating participatory relationships enables richer work (Emerson et al., 2011). I am additionally inspired by Burawoy’s (1998:14) push for sociologists to implement a “reflective science,” an approach that “elevates dialogue as its defining principle and intersubjectivity between participant and observer as its premise.” Rather than seeking the rumored impartiality a researcher supposedly has, Burawoy (1998) argues that being reflective about the researcher’s position and influence within their observed community is crucial.

As such, I understand this research as fundamentally impacted by my own identities. As a queer person of color who grew up in a mixed immigration status household, I am personally invested in understanding the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ migrants through an intersectional and nuanced lens. Thus, I do not seek to claim impartiality as a detached researcher. I understand that my relationship with these topics, identities, and communities influences my perspective and relationship with the participants in this research because of our shared intersubjectivities, but also shapes some of my analysis as well.

Many participants informed me they only felt comfortable speaking to me because of our presumed shared experiences, some explicitly naming that they would not have done the interview otherwise. This was further boosted by my previous involvement in immigrant and LGBTQ+ rights advocacy. During and after the interviews, several participants informed me that they had never told the stories they shared with me before. Therefore, I understand that my positionality enriches the research and provided access to a quality of data shared by participants in this study that not everyone may have been equally able to collect.

## **FINDINGS**

Across all interviews, my participants named the tensions they felt between their immigrant histories and their sexual identity. Individuals shared that their identities were often conceptualized as completely separate in their minds; as if existing in two separate worlds. I begin by outlining how individuals conceptualized their identities as “Between Two Worlds.” This section addresses the ways individuals conceptualized their sexuality in contrast to their migrant histories as conceptually incompatible. As I analyzed my data, I wondered *why* individuals understood their identities as contradictory. In the following section “Family Lessons,” I address key reasons the separation occurs. I outline the role of families in my participants’ lives and the influence families had in developing national belonging, particularly around sexuality. Through these narratives of identity separation, family lessons, and cross-national feelings of belonging, it becomes clear that participants inherit deeply complicated notions about their identities.

As Maghbouleh (2010, 2017) theorizes it, inherited nostalgia helps those with migration histories understand their identities through passed-down narratives about their home countries. But those understandings are necessarily partial and can have diverse sets of

consequences. As individuals learn what it means to belong within varying national contexts, this identity development process is influenced by family, sexuality, and inherited nostalgia. In the case of LGBTQ+ individuals, this inherited nostalgia was shaped by their sexualities. I propose “fractured nostalgia” as a framework to understand why and how migration affected sexualities and shaped participants' identification transnationally.

### *Between Two Worlds*

“For a long time, it was the part of me that tethered me to this place, to America, and that tethered me to a culture here.”

Sana, a young U.S.- born asexual and panromantic nonbinary person whose parents are from India, shared this with me in an interview. But Sana was not alone. Many of my respondents with migration histories from all around the world shared surprisingly similar sentiments about a sexual identity forming the basis for their feelings of national belonging in the U.S. Sentiments similar to Sana’s appear in nearly all of the interviews I conducted. Here is how Sana continued on after sharing the feeling of their sexuality “tethering” them to the U.S.:

“It’s definitely a work in progress, for me to be okay with being South Asian and gay. And I definitely over quarantine, like, hit a point in my life where I was like, ‘I am going to reject all parts of my culture and just pretend that I’m not... Indian.’”

As they came to understand their identity, Sana describes a separation between their Indian heritage on the one hand, and gender and sexual identities on the other, to the point of wanting to reject their Indian background completely. As Sana describes their experience, “South Asian” and “gay” are presented as identities they perceive as intrinsically at odds with one another. In this context, Sana shared that queerness provided an anchor, symbolically connecting them to the United States and with a national identity. Across all the interviews,

similar threads of narratives emerged, wherein participants shared feeling a strong sense of separation between their migrant and their sexual identities, regardless of where their families migrated from. Similar to Sana, Meiling, a 24-year-old Chinese-born woman who migrated to the United States as a teenager shared,

“I don't think about being queer in the Chinese language if I think about it. Like being queer is purely like, the American part of- well, I'm not American, like citizenship wise, but the American culture part of my identity, being queer is purely that part of my experience. Yeah, like, I don't- I don't usually put like, "Oh, I'm from China, and I'm queer" even in the same sentence because that feels... wrong.”

Across nearly all the interviews I conducted, my interviewees spoke of an identity fracture – of feeling that their queerness *made them* American and caused them to separate themselves from their home countries. Through this framing, non-heterosexual sexuality is seen framed as inherently “American,” as the cultural connection between the participant’s sexual identification and the country in which they now live. This separation, for Meiling and others, felt so extreme that even thinking about the two identities, being a Chinese migrant and queer, felt antagonistic. Interview 15, a college-educated Italian lesbian, shared a similar process of identity separation that was reflected even in the language she used to describe herself. She shared,

“I feel like my queerness maybe made me step a little bit away from my Italian identity. I never... I don't think of myself as a queer Italian. It is interesting to like, think about myself as a queer Italian, or a queer Italian American. I don't... I don't think I've ever said those words together until now. And I always- I'm thinking about it now. The way I list it is like, "I'm a queer Jewish woman, and I'm a second-generation immigrant." And I don't often say "I'm a queer, second-generation immigrant," at all, actually.”

Others shared similar sentiments about diverse nations all around the world — many shared that they never even spoke of their migrant background and sexuality together until

the interview. Regardless of country of origin and possible country-based discrimination or acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities, across my sample, queer sexuality was presented as a nationally-based phenomenon, wherein queerness was American, and heterosexuality was inherent everywhere else. This occurred across nearly all interviews, regardless of their country of origin, further displaying the strength of the narrative. Even participants from countries that we might traditionally consider more LGBTQ+ inclusive (such as France or Germany) shared similar narratives.

This also impacted the levels of cultural learning individuals felt comfortable taking on. Interview 23, who identified as bisexual, queer, and demisexual (in that order), felt incredibly disconnected from Vietnamese traditional spaces and culture due to her sexuality. As she explained it,

“I’m kind of scared because I don’t really- with the Vietnamese community, aside from Vietnamese Americans who are also queer, I’m very closed off about my life. So... I’m- I’m just kind of scared to like, cross those two worlds of mine [pause]. I’m just- I keep my two worlds so separate, that like, I’m really sure that my identity is keeping me from reaching out and talking to traditional Vietnamese people more, or going into, like, more traditional Vietnamese spaces.”

Although Interview 23 has come out as bisexual in her professional and social life, she has done this separate from her Vietnamese background and community. Although she was in a five-year committed relationship with a woman, no one in her family knew. The two separate world experiences appeared in most interviews, wherein participants not only conceptualized their identities as completely independent, but additionally, navigated their lives in ways requiring them to separate immigrant spaces and LGBTQ+ spaces.

This also limited some participants’ ability to engage in their cultural, religious, and national practices. Interview 23 shared that she felt sad that she could not connect with Vietnam more, as her sexuality limited her perceived access to “traditional Vietnamese”



people and spaces, and the boundary was described and perceived as uncrossable. Many interviewees shared a similar process, one of stepping back from their cultural and national identities once they came to terms with their sexualities, implicitly (and often explicitly) situating the two identities as logically contradictory. Isabella, a trans woman whose grandmother emigrated from Colombia, directly addressed this tension, sharing “When I think about like, my queer identity and being Colombian, it feels like there's a lot of dissonance. Like the two things don't feel like they can necessarily exist together.”

Katie, a U.S.-born college-educated bisexual woman shared that although she would love to move to Korea permanently — the country both of her parents were from and where she lived as a child — she hesitates to do so. When pushed, she stated,

“In Korea, there's so much homophobia, transphobia, everything... and that's the part that I think I really struggle with, like, should I be suppressing my bisexuality? That's the part that is really hard. It makes me feel like I can't completely throw away my American heritage... I feel like I'm rejecting Korea, I feel like I'm rejecting my Korean culture, my Korean identity as a whole. That's what it feels like...if only I was not bisexual, then I could go back to Korea and just marry a man and just be able to assimilate into Korean culture.”

Like Sana and Meiling, Katie aligned her sexuality with American identity, even if it came at the cost of losing cultural and national associations with Korea. As much as she desired to be fully immersed in Korea, she could not “completely throw away” the “American” aspect of her identity, referring to her bisexuality. In order to fit into Korea, she perceived her sexuality would have to be sacrificed in order to *not* “reject” her Korean culture and Korean identity. Here, Korean culture and identity are presented as completely at odds with her sexuality. Like Interview 23, sexuality caused a fracture to her comfort in claiming her country of origin. Therefore, “coming out” in these cases determines whether individuals feel comfortable claiming national belonging, as sexuality becomes nationalized.

Migration allows for LGBTQ+ individuals to conceptualize their own genders and sexualities within a global context, attempting to understand the privileges (or lack thereof) of these identities on some kind of transnational scale. In my participants' lives, however, queerness is framed as an American cultural outcome, one that then caused irrevocable tensions between national belonging and status. Given that sexuality is often positioned as a Western trait of exceptionalism and acceptance (Lee 2018; Puar 2017), it should perhaps be unsurprising that many LGBTQ+ individuals with migration histories utilize their sexualities to claim belonging to the United States. Although the countries represented in my sample all have varying policies and cultural acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals, the United States was consistently positioned as the *most* accepting.

While on the surface my participants seemed to repeat narratives of American sexual exceptionalism, the ways that these nationalized sexual narratives emerge in their lives helps us better understand how these belief systems structure their understandings. Rather than understanding that their own lived experiences as proof that it was possible to be LGBTQ+ and of another country, my participants learned the two identities were impossible to hold at once. This highlights a form of identity fracture – wherein my participants believe their identities cannot coexist – and their families played a critical role in their understandings of American sexual exceptionalism and how it figured into their own lives.

### *Family Lessons*

Families served as a key site wherein LGBTQ+ individuals with migration histories learned what it meant to be within and across national contexts. Throughout the interviews, participants spoke about the influential role families played in not only their sexual identity development journeys but their simultaneous influence on their relationships with their home

countries. Access to belonging and emotional attachment was described as critically shaped by their families and passed down as stories and policed expectations. When the family is the primary site of connecting to the nation, the lessons about national belonging emerge from the family directly. While in Maghbouleh's work (2010, 2017) youth utilize inherited nostalgia to align with Iran, a country many of them are not directly fully involved with, this operated differently and had different consequences within my sample. As displayed in the following stories, sexuality directly impacted how individuals accessed and connected to inherited nostalgia, showing how nostalgia can be fractured.

During our interview, Miguel shared their frustrations with me about reconnecting to their home country of Peru, and the direct influence the role of family and sexuality had on their ability to connect. They stated, "When I see other people be like, "I yearn for my home country so much, *ni de aqui ni de alla*" like, must be nice. I want to yell in their faces - you will not be beaten up, or like, denounced by your family. Please shut up." As demonstrated by Miguel, sexuality and family directly shaped how Miguel was able to connect to their country of origin, which was contrasted to other immigrants who did not face the same challenges. The potential for family denunciation in relation to their sexuality creates a direct separation in their ability to be nostalgic. Likewise, Raja, a nonbinary bisexual individual from Haiti struggled to connect to Haiti for similar reasons. They explained that when they first came to understand their sexuality, they held a lot of fear about people from Haiti finding out. They shared,

"The stories of queer people that I was told, were through the lens of like, my mother who grew up in Haiti. And she was like, to be gay, in Creole is called *masisi* and like, they were like considered demons... And so that, like... that traveled here, right? Like with my mother. And it was also like, reinforced by the super religious and

homophobic Haitian community around me, who also have those stories... stories of the cousins getting killed, or someone they knew, you know what I'm saying?"

For Raja, their immediate and extended family became instrumental when learning their place within Haiti, especially in relation to their sexuality. The stories passed through the family become guidelines to how one can belong, which are further reinforced by other community members. The nostalgia that might have existed for Haiti is then disrupted as Raja learns one cannot be queer *and* Haitian. Similarly, Interview 9, who considers herself a fluid lesbian and has a mixed Haitian and French background shared,

"I think it was my stepfather who said something like, 'You cannot be Haitian and queer or gay.' He must have said gay because that's the only word he knows about queerness. And I guess that's how I ended up being on forums when I was a kid, because I looked up Black and gay, something like that, and the conversation that immediately appeared... was a queer person who was basically explaining why they would never date a Black person. And then it was like hundreds and hundreds of comments of people explaining why they wouldn't date a Black person. So I guess I was aware of this very, very young. That it was not compatible."

Like Raja, Interview 9 was taught through family that she could not be both Haitian and queer, which is then further confirmed by the community around her. These rules implemented by family not only police sexuality, but additionally, embed these rules within a form of national belonging. The stories being passed down about home countries then become dichotomized, as queerness and national identity are made separate in the nostalgic visions parents attempt to impart. Similarly, Interviewee 12 shared the negotiations she had to do between her family, sexuality, and national alignment:

"My experience as a queer person would be *dramatically* different, if like, I didn't have to deal with this, like, the pressure of like, "What if people from Iran find out and you die?" And someone murders you? Or like, if the state murders you, is what I mean. But like- like that pressure was, like, the entirety of the pressure when I was in high school. Like... sure, I had to deal with other weird stuff, but none of it compared to the burden of like, that my dad kind of put on to me when I was growing up."

Although Interviewee 12 was out as a lesbian at college and is out in close social networks, she keeps her sexuality discrete due to the warnings issued by her parents that no one from their country of origin would understand her sexuality. Indeed, she shared being told that she should worry for her physical safety should “people from Iran” find out about her sexuality. Since, she shared that she has been careful not to post anything on social media about her sexuality, or be too open at public events, especially in Iranian cultural spaces. Like the other interviewees, the pressure put on by families was not light, and rather, created a deep sense of separation that threatened not only national and cultural isolation but by violence and death.

Not only were individuals warned of sexual nonbelonging, but the options of how public one could be about sexuality were additionally policed. When I asked Sana if their family knew of their sexuality, they laughed and said, “They don't know [laughs]. I'm not out to them. I blocked them on like, all social media except for like, Facebook. I'm very out here at college, but my parents are... kind of... they don't really talk about it, but my mom is adamant that I only need to come out to them.” Like, Sana, several others spoke to coming out as a process policed by families, wherein they described being told by family that transnational family networks should not find out about their sexuality, expressing fears of serious consequences otherwise. Although they were open about their sexuality in the United States, participants described being told that it had to be hidden in all other contexts.

The pressure was further complicated by individual levels of guilt over potential family consequences. Meiling shared, “it's not just me dealing with my sexuality. It's also like, if this becomes public, my parents will also have to deal with like, you know, being a parent of a queer person. Like, that's something that they'll have to work through as well.”

Similar to the Latino and Filipino men in Ocampo's (2014) study, my participants felt it would be unfair to "burden" their families with their sexual identities. These narratives then further caused anxieties over belonging, as coming out becomes not only something that would affect the individual but family and nationhood as well. This fraught process results in the kind of fractured, segregated, and fiercely contextualized identities my participants shared feeling obliged to mobilize.

Some participants, however, were able to create alternative cross-national claims to belonging as their families shared different narratives about their home countries with them. For instance, Rosa is an undocumented queer woman from El Salvador who struggled coming out to her family for several decades, partially due to the homophobic messaging said to her by family members in childhood. However, upon her engagement to her fiancée, she decided to finally tell them about her sexuality and engagement. She went on to say,

"After I told [my dad] that I'm queer, I start learning about all these queer people on his side of the family. That I've never heard about before. His cousin, his tía, his tío, and I'm like, what the fuck? I would have loved to hear this before I like suffered over it. Thinking I'm the first person and we've never- like, obviously not. It just wasn't talked about."

Others had similar moments of shock, reevaluation, and family interventions in their understandings of how their sexuality and national identity converged. As shared earlier, Katie struggled with connecting to Korea due to her bisexual identity and felt that her queerness made her "American." However, later in the interview, Katie went on to share a moment with her mother that made her reevaluate her ability to connect to Korea. She shared,

"My mom showed me a vlogger on YouTube- a vlog about cats, but the people are also gay- they're a gay couple. And I was simping over one of the girlfriends, and I

was over here like ‘Mom, they got gay people in Korea? In Korea?!’ and she's like ‘of fucking course. What do you think, that being gay is an American thing?’”

This moment with Katie and her mother allowed her to imagine the possibility of queerness and her Korean identity coexisting. As her mother directly challenged the belief that “being gay is an American thing,” Katie felt like she could now reimagine her home country and her own belonging.

Angel — a transmasculine queer person whose parents were both from Mexico — shared a similar realization as Rosa and Katie. Although they too had struggled with understanding their queerness in relation to their migrant history, previously thinking of them as completely separate, things changed once they moved to Mexico and met new family members after their college graduation. They told me a story of a time they met up with an estranged aunt, sharing,

“I remember, I- we were in a swimming pool. And I was like, "By the way, like, you know that I'm gay, right?" She was like, "Obviously." I was like, "Okay, good." That's done. "Also, I'm transgender." She was like, "What does that mean?" I was like, explaining that. But I was like, "Okay, now you understand." And then she was like, it was so funny, her response- she was like, "Don't tell your mom. And don't tell your grandma. They're crazy." And that was when I learned that my nuclear family are known as the fundamentalist lunatics of the rest of my extended family. Which is insane, right? Because I thought- I thought everybody was like that. No, bro. That really changed my whole life.”

Through coming to terms with their sexuality, they first developed an awareness of Mexico as inherently homophobic. This was further strengthened when their family sent them to a conversion therapy camp, which they were able to leave eventually by pretending to be straight, a lie that their nuclear family still believes. However, hearing alternative stories from family members challenged their previous inherited nostalgia and, as they described it, fostered new possibilities for self-understanding and acceptance that did not require the same kinds of fractured identities. Further, in Mexico City, Angel met queer and trans radical

activists who pushed their thinking and showed them solidarity networks across national boundaries. This led to new understandings of identity for them, where they challenged not only their own previous assumptions but broader migrant assumptions.

“There's a tendency, especially among the diaspora to frame- to like... ah, how do I put this... to like, consolidate homophobia with your culture? And what living in Mexico City has taught me, is that Mexicans are gay as fuck. And in fact, my family is the weird ones. They're the ones that are fucked up. Like, of course, Mexico is a very homophobic culture, in the same way the US is a very homophobic culture. It's just not different. Like, it's not- them being Mexican is not what makes them homophobic. You know what I mean?”

Although these examples contrasted the ideas shared by most participants in my study, they further emphasize the role of the family in structuring cross-national sexual belonging, mirroring previous scholarship that has highlighted the role of family in shaping ideas of proper gender and sexual norms (Cantú 2009; Collins 1998). Similar to Maghbouleh's (2010, 2017) participants, my participants inherited nostalgia from their families. They described learning what it meant to be *of* a country and what possibilities existed for them to connect with their cultures, nations, and histories. Fractured nostalgia is what emerges when the inherited nostalgia passed down from families teaches underlying lessons about power, hierarchy, and belonging that directly *conflict* with individuals' identities. In particular, the lessons of belonging families implemented about their home countries through inherited nostalgia were often splintered by sexual identity.

Placed alongside ideas of American sexual exceptionalism, this then helps explain why LGBTQ+ identity is continuously framed as an “American” concept in the lives of my participants. Family units in my participants' lives directly implement lessons about proper sexuality through inherited nostalgia. This inherited belonging is highly impactful, for many participants have limited exposure to their home countries beyond their families. Therefore,



within migrant families, the main source of learning about their country of origin and its national hierarchies exists through their families. And if families stated certain forms of sexuality were not allowed or were nationally incompatible, participants often internalized those narratives. However, this fracture is not *inherent* to LGBTQ+ individuals with migration histories. Some are able to consider their identities alongside each other, largely due to inclusive belonging taught by some families that did not limit their ability to connect to their countries of origin.

## **DISCUSSION**

Those with immediate migration histories not only negotiate their sexuality and/or gender alongside family and culture, but also alongside understandings of national identity. Sexual identification is bounded within and implicated by cross-national and transnational experiences of belonging, highlighting that sexual identification literature must take national context into more consideration. My findings illustrate how LGBTQ+ identity is made sense of as a national identity (bounded by U.S. borders) discursively made sense of as a marker of belonging to and incorporation into the United States—and as a barrier to belonging anywhere else in the world. While scholarly critique has rightfully challenged the homonationalist classification of the U.S. as a country of sexual exceptionalism, (e.g. Lee 2018; Puar 2017), my participants were still raised within these discourses and taught through their families that their sexuality served as a disruptor to their cross-national possibilities.

Other scholarship has looked at how LGBTQ+ sexuality is racialized and classed (Han 2015; Heaphy 2011; Hunter 2010; Moore 2006, 2012; Ocampo 2012). This work builds on this scholarship by highlighting that non-heterosexual sexuality is additionally

nationalized and recreated discursively as American. Further, U.S.-based sexualities can be understood as constructed in contrast to the rest of the world, particularly the Global South. While scholarship has shown the ways that the United States, and “the West” broadly conceptualized, has shaped global sexual discourse (Altman 2002), my findings show that within the United States, sexuality is additionally being constructed in contrast to the rest of the world by LGBTQ+ people with migration histories in their families.

Additionally, my findings shed light on why so many individuals with migration histories learn that their sexuality is understood as inherently opposed to their migrant histories. If families serve as the predominant site of learning about hierarchy and power (Collins 1998), then inherited nostalgia can come embedded with lessons about belonging within larger structures of nationhood. As families serve as the center of national attachment, narratives can be created within families that determine how connected LGBTQ+ individuals are able to feel to their countries of origin. LGBTQ+ individuals with familial migration histories learn their place within nations through their families, and inherit nostalgia that is often deeply laced with lessons around sexual belonging.

Fractured nostalgia emerges as the result of conflicting messages between families, nationhood, and American sexual exceptionalism in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals with migration histories. Inherited nostalgia not only encompasses emotions, but additional boundaries around belonging, power, and hierarchy in relation to the state. Therefore, I propose that inherited nostalgia functions in ways that are not neutral and constructs ideas of proper belonging, particularly around sexuality. Parents’ memories and narratives of the homeland lend to a particular passed-down vision, one often laced with homo/transphobia. This caused individuals to reconsider their national belonging, disrupting their access to

unquestioned nostalgia. Therefore, familial inherited nostalgia and cross-national belonging is was “fractured” by sexuality in the lives of my respondents. LGBTQ+ individuals with migration histories serve as exemplars of this phenomenon, as individuals not only negotiate sexual identity but national attachments taught by their families. Through documenting the continual identity negotiation of LGBTQ+ individuals with migration histories, it becomes apparent that sexual identity categories, and particularly the process of coming out, are constructed alongside nation, family, and global discourses of sexuality.

Fractured nostalgia caused individuals to construct their LGBTQ+ identity as American, and incapable of coexisting with a migrant identity. Within my participants’ lives, this discourse of American sexual exceptionalism contrasted the inherited nostalgia they described collecting from their families, as they are told that the United States is the only place wherein their queerness can exist. Within the discourse of American sexual exceptionalism, wherein the U.S. is seen as the locale of LGBTQ+ rights and identities, queerness then is framed as an “American” aspect of my participants’ lives. As sexuality is constructed alongside narratives of national identity, queer sexuality is framed as *improper* transnational belonging, yet as a proper American identity.

This process results in stratified identity experiences, limited transnational solidarity, and flattening of the true sexual diversity of countries outside of the United States, as LGBTQ+ identity is made sense of as uniquely and culturally “American.” This is important to understand because LGBTQ+ immigrants directly benefit from the discourse of American sexual exceptionalism being troubled, as was evident in stories shared by respondents who had just such an experience (like Rosa, Katie, and Angel). Rather than imagining their identities as constantly in tension, their sexual and migrant identities could be reimaged

together. Further, unpacking discourses of American sexual exceptionalism is necessary to disrupt colonial reproductions that continue to place the Global North as the centerpiece of modernity. As Puar (2017:9) reminds us, “unraveling discourses of U.S. sexual exceptionalism is vital to critiques of U.S. practices and empire.”

Additionally, my data show this process affects those across migrant generations, as the same patterned negotiation was described across interviews, even with interviewees who would be categorized as third-generation migrants. The contextual belonging and negotiation of my interviewees were similar across migrant generations, making those distinctions less significant than anticipated in my sample. These findings further display that while generation-based frameworks within migration studies do offer significant perspectives into the lives of immigrant communities, my data suggest that cross-national attachment to home countries are not inherently determined by the migrant generation. Migration generational frameworks perhaps do not fully represent the conceptualization of belonging and cross-national attachment discussed by my participants.

My research draws upon the experiences of individuals with diverse sexual and gender identities, as the experiences of individuals beyond cisgender men have been less studied within sociological queer migration studies. However, I center on sexuality as the primary analysis of my participants’ identities. Further research should analyze the *gendered* aspects of LGBTQ+ immigrant experiences, particularly in comparison to previous queer migration studies centralized around men and masculinities. Furthermore, future work could investigate the ways in which other identity categories (such as race, class, etc.) could additionally result in a fractured nostalgia for immigrant communities and their children.

Additionally, scholarship should investigate what happens when LGBTQ+ individuals are able to visit, connect with, or live within their country of origin and interact with LGBTQ+ communities outside of the United States. Further research should investigate what interventions allow participants to feel increased belonging, rather than identity separation. Rather than taking for granted the belief that sexual minority status inherently is in opposition to migrant pasts, scholars should further investigate *how* and *why* those narratives are constructed. In taking the separation for granted, we run the risk of perpetuating colonial narratives that continually place the United States as inclusively superior to the rest of the world and erasing the true gender and sexual variance of the Global South.

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