CHAPTER 8

When Does Resistance Begin?
Queer Immigrant and U.S.-Born Latina/o Youth, Identity, and the Infrapolitics of the Street

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What one did was turn away smiling all the time, and tell white people what they wanted to hear. But people always accuse you of reckless talk when you say this.

—James Baldwin, A Talk to Teachers, 1963

Resistance in the form of traditional politics, such as mobilizing against school policy, immigration, and using social media for civic engagement, do not often work for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) Latina/o youth. In this ethnographic study of 57 LGBTQ homeless youth in a large U.S. city, the author reframes Latina/o immigrant and U.S.-born youth narratives through a lens of infrapolitics—reimagining what might count as resistance. Examining the small and deliberate practices of youth toward their coworkers, security guards, and with one another and researchers in identifying and recognizing resistance when youth refuse the logic of domination and practice sharing knowledge in ways that suggest new kinds of socialities. Reframing the relationships between the surveillance and power of police, teachers, and other authorities and queer Latina/o youth as infrapolitical allows social science and educational researchers to move away from the deficit thinking and radical “othering” that is often found in educational policy and research. The case study suggests that these new socialities have the possibility to become spaces where youth can practice new sensibilities and ways of being as they negotiate through the often hostile worlds they traverse.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) Latina/o youth occupy tight spaces of resistance, where multiple subjections, including being positioned
as an unaccompanied and/or undocumented minor, make moves against any kind of domination difficult. Resistance happens when youth say no to the alternatives they are offered in worlds where they are brutalized and oppressed. Queer Latina/o youth might resist using the smallest of gestures. Part of the work as teachers and researchers is to recognize and acknowledge the small acts of resistance that youth are making in the face of tremendous odds.

Feminist philosopher and popular education scholar Maria Lugones (2003) writes about resistance in “tight spaces,” where a delicate spatiality is produced in off-stage practices. But these spaces are porous and Lugones argues that despite the constriction of this spatiality, it is neither permanent nor concrete for youth. “You are concrete. Your spatiality, constructed as an intersection following the designs of power, isn’t” (p. 10). In this chapter, I activate a rethinking of resistance to portray the agency of LGBTQ Latina/o youth. It is in the careful observation of the often violent junctures of race, gender, citizenship status, and sexuality where the “tight spaces” of Latina/o youth resistance is encountered. Interfacing Lugones’s theorizing of resistance with those by James C. Scott (1990) and Robin D. G. Kelley (1993), I begin by examining the everyday acts of resistance in tight spaces, where LGBTQ Latina/o youth often violate and inhabit this spatiality with great resistance.

This chapter reframes youth experiences that extend traditional notions of resistance, where the daily acts of resistance performed by Latina/o LGBTQ youth become important. Part of this reframing of youth resistance centers on Lugones’s (2010) concept of resistant socialities, where an examination of the offstage practices of queer Latina/o youth offer researchers an opportunity to reexamine youth experiences in ways that perceive these alternative socialities as the breathing spaces, however tight, for youth to reclaim energy, regroup, and create safe space. As Lugones (2003) states:

And if “you” (always abstracted “you”) are one of the dominated, your movements are highly restricted and contained. And there may not be any you there under certain descriptions, such as “lesbian” or any other description that captures transgression.

(p. 9)

Resistance in these instances is not about mediating the life circumstances of queer Latina/o youth, nor is it about the destruction of a system of oppression. It is the small deviation from the logic of oppression, however small and imperceptible these acts may be.

The queer body has always been perceived as infected, contaminated, and expendable (Cruz, 2011; Goldberg, 1991) and youth’s talking back to power must be recognized. In this chapter, I will (1) define queer Latina/o youth resistance as infrapolitical, (2) describe how an infrapolitical frame offers queer Latina/o youth the possibilities of creative and strategic ways of developing alternatives for being and relating in their worlds, and (3) begin the discussion about how these offstage socialities are necessary for queer Latina/o youth to survive in worlds hostile to their existence.
Thinking about LGBTQ Latina/o youth practices and small acts of resistance through an infrapolitical framework offers invaluable insight into the economic, political, and cultural patterns of power and resistance. Beginning with a *public transcript*, the public performance of deference and humility by the powerless, Scott (1990) argued that those with power uphold this public transcript through the maintenance of the symbols and practices of a multilayered social order. The *on-stage* practices of a public transcript maintain the illusion of particular social orders. The performances in the public sphere between those with power and those without reveal little information of how power is exercised between communities.

A skeptic might well ask at this point how we can presume to know, on the basis of the public transcript alone, whether this performance is genuine or not. The answer is, surely, that we cannot know how contrived or imposed the performance is unless we can speak, as it were, to the performer off-stage, out of this particular power-laden context, or unless the performer suddenly declares openly, on-stage, that the performances we have previously observed were just a pose. (Scott, 1990, p. 4)

For queer Latina/o youth, the hidden transcript is the space of rest and leisure, a place to gossip about your caseworkers, teachers, and the ever-present security guards in Spanish. It is also a place for youth to exchange valuable information about how institutions, organizations, worksites, and, in this case, schools and youth centers, work (see Conchas, 2001). If an on-stage performance is the public transcript, then the *hidden transcript* is the account that takes place offstage and beyond the surveillance of those in power (Scott, 1990).

I did my primary observations at a youth drop-in center, where I often hung out with the LGBTQ Latina/o youth who congregated on the sidewalk or on the roof where there were places to sit and relax. These were places where youth were allowed to smoke cigarettes, and it was a space out of sight of the center security and staff. These spaces were safe spaces where youth often shared stories, gossiped, and complained about their treatment from caseworkers and center staff.

For example, at one point I overheard a young trans-Latina tell a group of youth about her derisive treatment by center security: “They dragged me out with my skirt hiked up to my armpits, I am sure on purpose,” and did not allow her to enter the building to see a mental health worker without an appointment. Having been homeless for over a week and unable to take care of her basic needs, the security guards escorted the youth roughly out of the center, exposing her body in ways that was meant to embarrass and reveal that she was transgender. The harassment of Latina/o trans-youths who came in for services became a point of contention for many of the youth clients seeking assistance. Because they often depended on these services from the drop-in center, it forced a public transcript of civility between trans-Latina youth and staff. The sidewalk and rooftop smoking area became some of the few secure places where youth could talk back about their ill treatment that was outside of the hearing distance of center staff and security.

In these ways, the hidden transcript helps researchers understand the eventual low turnout of youth as resistance. The emphasis on security in social services settings at this field site, even now, is immense. In a 2014 visit to this same youth center, staff reiterated the work of security as one “that keeps [city] out of the center.” Youth, particularly trans-youth, stayed away in such numbers due to the presence of guards at each facility that some centers were forced to cut hours and staff, if not close operations altogether. Examining these security practices, is this show of force by center guards for the protection of youth from predatory adults or is it to protect the property of the community agency? This theme requires further research.

**METHODOLOGY OF THE STREETS IN MULTIPLE LGBTQ SITES**

The data for this case study come from a multiyear ethnography of LGBTQ homeless youth in a large city with one of the largest populations of homeless adolescents in the United States. I was a teacher and a street outreach worker for 5 years prior with this community of young people. I did HIV counseling at a youth community center and taught writing and community studies at a continuation school that served LGBTQ students who were at risk for dropping out of school. Although the official ethnographic work was conducted over a period of 2 school years, I had been engaged in learning and teaching in this community of youth for much longer and continue my relationships with youth, staff, and administration to the present.

The communities where I conducted my research with 57 youth between 14 and 21 years of age are places undergoing massive gentrification, where formerly working-class neighborhoods of apartments and small single-family dwellings co-existed with exclusive neighborhoods that extended east into the hills above the main streets. The major boulevard of the community was filled with small ethnic shops and eateries, tourist attractions, and new entertainment scenes for wealthy patrons, including shopping malls. The new development of this community also meant that more attention was given to loitering and vagrancy laws by police and security who made youth an easy target to harass and push away from new community development. New shopping and entertainment areas in gentrified neighborhoods did not want homeless youth hanging around the community’s recent investments.

Some homeless Latina/o youth took advantage of empty and abandoned homes to sleep in, and others found cheap hotels and rooms to stay in for a week or less. Survival sex and prostitution have been one of the primary means homeless Latina/o youth have of exchanging sex for shelter, food, or money. The school and the youth drop-in center dealt with these issues through safe sex curriculums and HIV testing. Both sites were able to share resources with other youth agencies that provided caseworkers, HIV educational resources, and other mental health services. The school site, modeled after continuation schools typically found in
the large urban district, offered credit accumulation courses to integrate students back into their comprehensive high schools. Rarely did students integrate back into their comprehensive high schools. Almost all students at the LGBTQ educational center stayed through graduation.

I observed and did semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 57 youth aged 14–21 who fit the following criteria:

- Youth must have experienced homelessness (as defined in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act [42 USC 11434a]) for at least 1 night in the past 6 months.
- Youth must be between the ages of 14 and 21.
- Youth must self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer.

Thirty-seven of the 57 youth identified as Latina/o immigrant and the children of immigrants. Thirty-four of the 37 were young gay men and transgender youth. Three of my subjects were young lesbians. My role as researcher was multiple, where I was a teacher, an HIV counselor, and a referral service. I was attentive to the everyday conditions of youth lives. I learned much about the community agencies that offered services to youth and often hung out with youth to understand better the daily regimen of queer homeless youth. My focus on the bodily experiences of queer youth, including youth who had crossed international borders unaccompanied, helped me understand on a material level the lived experiences of being young, Latina/o, and homeless in a large city and the options youth are offered to resist, survive, and thrive.

THINKING ABOUT AGENCY AND ACTIVE SUBJECTIVITIES

When queer Latina/o youth share information with one another in offstage discussions to weigh their options against other youth’s experiences with caseworkers, police, teachers, and social services, the concept of youth agency needs to be rethought. The agency enacted by youth is not one of an individual act but one with a set of histories and communities, such as the trans-Latina/o community, that contributes to how youth share and assess their own options. Lugones (2010) named this movement an “active subjectivity” rather than individual agency, stressing a “peopled sense” of youth worlds. In essence, agency for queer Latina/o youth needs to be reimagined as one that is collective, peopled, and intersubjective.

When I talk with youth, I cannot be exhausted or distracted. Access to these offstage spaces that youth create is not so easily established for researchers, whose questions and observations may be seen by youth as informing the powerful. Coded languages, like caló or the queer languages of youth, may be indecipherable and inaccessible to some researchers. Additionally, the boundary between the public and the hidden transcript is a “zone of constant struggle” (Scott, 1990), where our recognition of subordinate/dominant narratives and resistant/conformist behaviors are not so concise. A researcher may not even comprehend, or worse, may deny or misinterpret certain kinds of behavior as resistance. As social scientists and educational researchers, not only are we responsible for the critique and deconstruction of deficit and race and culture of poverty models of achievement, but we are also unfortunately positioned to only recognize certain kinds of agency and active subjectivity in the public transcript.

RESEARCHING INFRAPOITICS

There is a certain position a researcher must take when working with queer Latina/o youth. It is a belief that youth have something to say about their own experiences with oppression, that the insight that youth bring to a research event is illuminating and survivor-rich, and that the researcher has as much to learn from youth as they do from the researcher. Yet this stance should not be one of pity. Many stories that youth narrate elicit emotions that are not ones of empathy or even solidarity. Pity keeps researchers, teachers, and other youth advocates from a deeper engagement with the issues that are significant in a young person’s story. There is no bridging the gap between a researcher and a youth participant when pity defines the relationship—pity objectifies. A youth will never be subject when pity defines the relationship between researcher and young person.

To research youth resistance is to take the stance that youth are not victims but are often witnesses and survivors of great trauma and oppression. In order to recognize their resistance later, I have to first recognize the stories that students narrate on their own terms. For example, a 17-year-old queer Latina/o youth, “Carlos,” told his story of moving from his parents’ home to a large city in the United States to pursue a relationship with an older adult:

You don’t want to know my story of how I got to [the city]. I just know I had a boyfriend who was crazy who tried force me to have sex with him.

Ugh, I got away from him. Now that I am here in [a new city], I have a new man but he’s crazy too. Just last week he even tried to grab me off the street right outside the center! I saw him on [street name], tried to talk with him and told him no, I am not going anywhere with you, maricón, and stepped right back in here. I usually hate the guards around here but I was glad they were on it that day. (Carlos, age 17, September 18, 2014)

When I hear stories from youth where a relationship with an adult figure is central, I have to acknowledge that this could be a story of sexual exploitation. In this fieldnote, Carlos tells a story of resourcefulness and shrewdness, where he talks back to his abusive partner and is able to avoid further strife by stepping back into the youth center. It is significant when youth say “no” to a potentially volatile situation. Yet there is a very real problem with domestic violence and sexual exploitation in the street youth community that must contextualize this narrative.
In Carlos's recasting of events, he refuses to be seen as powerless and without options. In this zone of constant struggle, my reading of the sexual exploitation of a young gay Latina/o becomes intimately tied to my recognition of his refusal to be defined as a victim.

In thinking through multiple interpretations of youth narratives, Lugones's (2003) conception of "world-traveling" becomes so helpful. World-traveling is the negotiation of mainstream life in the United States for queer youth, immigrants, women of color, and others from nondominant communities, who occupy and move through multiple worlds in their everyday existence. An important part of world-traveling is the concept of the multiple, shifting self as it moves across worlds. World-traveling is frequently done unwillingly to often hostile worlds for women and men of color. In a "world" of sexual exploitation, a young person is deemed powerless and utterly victimized. In the previous example, Carlos refuses that "world" and instead reframes his story in a "world" where he tries desperately to maintain his dignity and resourcefulness. Yet researchers must also recognize this other "world" of exploitation. In these multiple and contradictory "worlds" that exist in this example, there is a healthy tension between how Carlos sees himself, how a researcher might see him, and how Carlos sees the researcher. Part of world-traveling is the ability to understand "what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes." (p. 17).

The researcher's role becomes crucial in this mediation of multiple narratives, selves, and worlds. The aim is to create different interpretations of youth experience and to forge new knowledge that is outside of the usual frames of public performances of power. It often means challenging both subject and researcher to see what other kinds of meaning can be made. Recognizing and validating the multiple narratives of this example is a critically important methodological move, where this queer Latina/o youth's story can be remediated as resistant, agentic, and sometimes even emancipatory, even when homeless young people take many risks for connection and for procuring basic needs. When you are 17, without a diploma or GED, unemployed (as are most youth in the United States), homeless, and LGBTQ, your options are few, with little social economic and cultural capital. What is left is the body and experience, with survival sex figuring prominently in almost every queer street youth narrative I have collected.

LGBTQ Latina/o youth take many calculated risks, such as the youth mentioned earlier, who weighed the chances of leaving home for a commitment of intimacy with the costs of potential exploitation. Despite guarantees of anonymity in the research interview process, it may be that the youth testimony is deliberately designed to have multiple meanings, protecting the identities of the actors in this story. In order to make sense of vague and unclear narratives, researchers must also consider the resistant sociality in those tight spaces where meanings are developed.

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YOUTH LEARNING THE SOCIALITIES OF RESISTANCE

Emphasizing the development of a collective identity among Black laborers in the Jim Crow South, Kelley (1993) discussed how workers in Birmingham, Alabama, organized their time and space with others. In these spaces of Black working-class culture, workers were able to "take back their bodies, to recuperate, to be together" (p. 84). Kelley theorized that places of rest and recreation, such as family organizations, churches, dance halls, parties, and bars, became spaces where Black laborers learned alternative socialities outside of the institutions of White supremacy. Organizing together for a dance, a party, or church reinforced the sense of shared community, knowledge, and cultural values for the Birmingham Black working class. In terms of LGBTQ youth socialities, where spaces like a continuation school for LGBTQ students or a youth drop-in center can—despite their problems—offer the possibility of alternative forms of mutuality and sociality. What happens in these youth spaces helps to explain the solidarity that queer Latina/o youth have shown in times of duress. In this case, resistance is not only about countering oppressive systems, but of building infrapolitical worlds that are essential for survival for LGBTQ Latina/o youth.

The Black workers in Kelley's study not only made these spaces to unmask themselves of the disguises of deference and humility, but they also practiced new ways of relating outside of oppressive restrictions. Both Lugones (2010) and Kelley (1993) suggested that these socialities can only be practiced in spaces where communities are able to define themselves outside the frameworks of their oppressors. In the offstage spaces where youth create, define, and rehearse more egalitarian ways of relating with one another, there is an implied pedagogy of teaching one another, sharing information, or finding ways to celebrate their mutual socialities.

For example, in a 2014 focus group interview I asked queer Latina/o street youth about their social media use. The youth shared that social media was an inexpensive way to communicate internationally, among other things. All youth interviewed carried smartphones, although none had contract cellular plans. One young gay male from a Central American country showed his focus group the application on his smartphone that allows free international calls. The other youth were not aware of this application, where they quickly "friended" one another through the application portal. In a matter of minutes, the youth shared his knowledge about the application, how it operated, and what kind of wireless connection you needed to use it. "You have to be in a Subway [restaurant], the big Target, or in a Verizon store to grab Wi-Fi without filters," the youth told the group. Not only did he offer the other participants a quick map of local places where unrestricted Wi-Fi was available, but he also demonstrated a quick lesson on how to hack into a WEP (Wired Equivalent Privacy) network when needed. It was vital information shared among youth, an example of the practice of sharing knowledge that may prove to be invaluable when access to communication may...
be denied or unavailable. This practice of connecting to one another in joint activity with knowledge to share illuminates how queer homeless Latina/o youth participate in resistant socialities that often center on creative and strategic uses of technology in unintended ways.

DIFFICULTIES OF RESEARCH AS FAITHFUL WITNESSING

When I am part of an activity where queer Latina/o youth share important information necessary for their daily survival, as researcher I make the commitment to write and interpret these youth experiences as infrapolitical. It is a commitment recognizing resistance in all of its complex and intermeshing/intersecting ways. However, these experiences of youth and researcher always come from power-laden contexts. Despite Scott’s (1990) assertion that the infrapolitics of subordinate groups cannot be known unless we can speak to an informant offset, the presence of researchers, even those committed to pedagogies of faithful witnessing, may disrupt resistant youth socialities. Not all of my research events were as open or as trusting as the young queer Latina/os in my focus groups. In another of my engagements in this case study, I met “Gloria,” a 14-year-old Latina lesbian. In this excerpt from my interview fieldnotes, she turns from telling a story about her body to a critique of power, representation, and research:

I have been living on the streets for 6 days now. I’ve talked with caseworkers and social workers, those people at [the youth shelter] and I am ready to go home now. I just want to go home, take a shower, sleep in my own bed. I am tired of walking and walking and walking all over this place, my feet hurt, even my skin hurts. You want to test me, sure, go right ahead. What do I get for that? Do I get paid for this? What do I get for my little drop of blood?

Equating a body to its revenue-generating value to produce wealth is a discourse directed at immigrants, homeless women and men, teen mothers, and youth of color. Gloria implicates the research process as part of the mechanism for these neoliberal discourses. As a researcher, I was attempting to compile experiences of violence, homelessness, and the body. Gloria’s response reflects how the process of knowledge production about the queer Latina body is reductive and predatory. She challenges the implicit discourse of a body’s net worth in terms of dollars accumulated in a lifetime of earnings. The drop of blood is a vital part of that laboring body and the labor of that body is the only thing this young person has left to sell. She is also critical of the pedagogy in my research (“What do I get for that?”) and its unequal exchange between subject and researcher.

Being a faithful witness is inadequate if it is reduced to only acknowledging the narratives that describe the trauma and perils of LGBTQ street youth defiance. It is not only about being a good listener with street youth, but also about acknowledging that researchers know very little about homeless queer youth if we only notice that they are homeless and hungry. We might know that she is particularly desperate to go home that night, or that we know the limitations of youth shelters and their availability of beds, and we might even recognize that she may have suffered at the hands of her family or schoolmates or partner. We might have learned something about the shape of her oppression. These are certainly important understandings of the conditions facing LGBTQ street youth.

However, it is critical that we challenge a social science epistemology that surmises “once we know” about queer Latina/o street youth, then this knowing offers something “better.” Things are supposed to “get better” with better, more reflexive research. Perhaps witnessing faithfully has revealed how a resistant sociality is necessary in the lives of queer Latina/o street youth. In the tight spaces of their resistance, researchers might witness the opening of new creative strategies for organizing life and practicing new kinds of relating in their worlds that are outside the dynamics of oppression. Research, therefore, can be used to share knowledge with other youth and develop creative strategies to survive these often-hostile worlds.

In a fieldnote about a 16-year-old gay Latina/o, I began to understand how few options were left for youth leaving abusive environments:

I interviewed a young Latina/o, 16 years old, who said he was looking for his brother in the streets of [the city]. “I know he’s here and I need to find him,” he told me, “because I can’t live here at home without him.” I also noticed that many of his fingers had been broken but healed, and that he had chewed all his fingernails down to the quick. “I’ve been looking for him for 2 weeks now. Do you know where I can find him?” he asked. The condition of his fingers made me think about his anxiety and his worry about his brother and the knowledge that he cannot live in his family’s house without his brother there to intervene. I told him that eventually his brother would visit this youth center, and if he wanted to, he could leave a message for him at the front desk.

When young queer Latina/os decide that the uncertainty of the streets is a better option than staying home, I believe they are enacting one of the few possibilities left available for them. Most research on homeless adolescents shows that physical and sexual abuse is one of the main reasons that youth leave home for the streets (Bagley & Young, 1987; Buckner & Bassuk, 1997; Tyler & Melander, 2013). For this young man and his brother to leave home where domestic violence and abuse is part of their everyday experience, I want to name this as resistance, where resistance is a refusal of abuse and domination. In these tight spaces of agency, youth have little space to resist, yet these brothers have said no to abuse and further violence. I think it is important to note these rejections made by youth, where in the tight spaces of their positions, not only must we be attuned to these signs of abuse and violence, but we must also recognize these refusals and gestures as resistance.
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power. It is the small acts of resistance that are necessary to recognize and to acknowledge how these refusals by youth make up the daily interactions between youth and security guards, social service agencies, and other authority. These refusals define the everyday experiences of queer Latina/o street youth, marking sites of power and resistance that are the core of homeless experiences. Instead of staying silent, invisible, and passive, youth talk back, share knowledge, and practice ways of knowing and being that have the potential for other kinds of emancipatory praxis.

NOTE

1. IRB did not allow any names, places, or information collected that could be linked back to the identities of the youth I interviewed. This may have freed youth to talk openly, yet the politics of the public/hidden transcript seemed a part of every interview.

REFERENCES


