

**DYKE PSYCHE**  
by esther rothblum



## Immigrant and Refugee Lesbians — An Interview with Dr. Oliva Espin

Coming out as a lesbian is difficult enough, but is even more stressful when the woman is an immigrant and is struggling to come out in a new country and using a new language. For several years now, Dr. Oliva Espin, a professor of women's studies at San Diego State University, has been studying the lives of immigrant and refugee lesbians. The topic had to do with her own life experience as an immigrant and with the immigrant clients she was seeing in her psychotherapy practice for over twenty years.

"I saw that there were some experiences that were common to immigrant women," Dr. Espin told me. "A major theme I found most interesting was how often the woman would be talking to me in Spanish, for example, and then switch to English when she began talking about being a lesbian. There seemed to be something about using a second language that helped distance lesbians from whatever they had been told was bad in their original language."

"I also think that women who have come out as lesbians when they were still children, may have more disruptions about their own identity," Dr. Espin said. "They ask 'Who am I?' or 'What is wrong with me?' For them, coming out so young gets mixed up with other

issues of identity. For girls who also feel that they are not 'real Americans,' or who as immigrants are different in color or in language or in cultural traditions—being lesbian is one more thing that strains their relationship with their parents." Furthermore, the parents may feel that their daughter's lesbianism is something she has "caught from those

not get mixed up with the turmoil of adolescence although it may get mixed up with the turmoil of migration if they are recent immigrants.

Dr. Espin has found two types of immigration experiences. Some women were lesbian before the migration, or else were somewhat dissatisfied with what they were even if they had no language for

If they were used to being 'the man,' they couldn't understand why their partner did not want to cook their meals.

Americans." When immigrant lesbians come out as adults, they have a stronger sense of identity and coming out does

this. "Coming to a new country made it possible for them to come out." This is true for women from all countries, not

just those from traditional cultures. Being away from the familiar environment gave them permission to come out; being lesbian was very freeing in this way. "I've even spoken with lesbians born in the US who have told me that they had to move all the way across the country in order to come out."

The other group of women Dr. Espin interviewed was actively lesbian in their home country, immigrated to the US, and found that the US lesbian culture was different and had to adjust. "Some women who were used to playing roles very actively," Dr. Espin continued, "If they were used to being 'the man,' they couldn't understand why their partner did not want to cook their meals, for example. Or, vice versa, women who lived lives that were very closeted in their home countries, found it terribly offensive when I would use the word 'lesbian' and were threatened by not having a cover-up."

In general, Dr. Espin found that immigrant communities focus very much on the 'decency' and 'purity' of the women in their community. "Because the communities are experiencing difficulty adjusting to the US, they want to prove that they are

good people. It is the behavior of women that describes the family. So when you have a lesbian daughter, how are you going to explain that to yourself and to your community? They may think that this is what happens to all women when they come to America."

Dr. Espin has also found that lesbian daughters tend to be more educated than their parents or their heterosexual sisters. As a result, the lesbian daughters tend to be making more money and in many cases running the community centers and activities. "So coming out is also difficult for the lesbian immigrant in terms of the community losing their trust in her. The community doesn't have the language skills, the education, and the access to the dominant culture that she does."

Dr. Espin has written about her experiences in two recent books: *Women Crossing Boundaries: The Psychology Of Immigration And The Transformation Of Sexuality* (Routledge, 1999) and *Latina Realities: Essays On Healing Migration And Sexualities* (Westview, 1997). ▼

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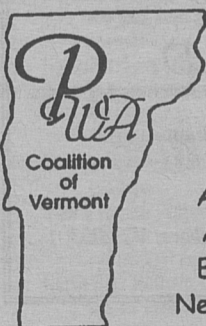
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