



A History on College Street: Learning from Oral History in Enunciating Latina and Trans Identities

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No te encierres, sal, habla, haz experiencias con la gente, ayuda a la gente que va llegando. El punto principal es ayudar a otros que vienen, para aquellos que no tienen a nadie . . .

[Don't be closed in, go out, talk, make experiences with people, help people that are arriving. The main point is helping others that come, for those who have no one . . .]

– Ena Sanchinel (qtd in Sanchinel, 2021)

On February 12 it was my mom's 70th birthday. She was in her forties when she came to Canada from Guatemala. I detail some of her journey through Mexico and first settling in Los Angeles in my paper "[Tengo Sueño: a Cross-Generational Latinx Dream of Borders, Religion, and Trans Identity](#)" (Sanchinel, 2021). I interviewed my mom in an attempt to understand her journey to Canada and gather a more fulsome picture of her experiences. While the paper focuses on the "journey" aspect of her experience, to further connect to how my own Latinx identity could form from it as a result, here I want to think about what came after. What happened after being in Toronto for a while? How do her oral histories affect and effect my own trans/Latinx positionality?

Upon settling here in the mid-90s, my mom lived by College and Spadina. She frequented [La Augusta](#) [ah-goo-stah] (a.k.a Kensington market, Augusta Avenue), [El Rancho](#) at 430 College (still standing since 1979!), and [Las Bolas](#) ["the balls," in reference to the lightbulbs at Honest Eds] (Honest Eds, formerly at 581 Bloor Street). I remember doing the trek to Chinatown from Jane and Finch to see doctors, not understanding why. These being streets that I now live by, which held little importance to me since I'm here due to its proximity to the University of Toronto, now attain a new affective meaning every time I leave the house.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, [Michel de Certeau](#) writes that "walking in the city" can be understood through its "speech," namely that walking "affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects . . . the trajectories." These spoken trajectories, as affirmations, suspicions, and transgressions are rooted in the material subjective being in a space. Yet, this walker of this city is usually presented as [the flaneur](#). Somewhat anti-capitalist in the act of non-productive activity, though entrenched in a high society setting of being able to lounge around in the first place, and undoubtably masculine.

In understanding "walking in the city" as a part of what [Maria Isasi-Diaz](#) calls [lo cotidiano](#) [the everyday], we can reconceptualize walking in the city beyond the flaneur. The experience *cotidiano* of my mom getting lost on College due to not having the right pronunciation of the street (in Spanish the "ll" sounds like a "y" and "g" sounds like a "h" in some cases, College would be "co-ye-heh" instead of "call-edge"), is precisely what enunciates a city.

In opposition to the flaneur, the paranoid would take this experience as a warning to stay home, to remain in only well-known places. Yet, for my mom, she adventured through the city with limited English, in her *cotidiano* aim of finding a good deal on clothes for her children at *Las Bolas*, at finally getting some good Hispanic food in *La Augusta*, and, of course, partying in El Rancho (she hasn't told me this directly because she's a good Christian lady, but that's what people go to El Rancho for).

But, I admit, I'm a paranoid. When my mom tells me of all the times she's gotten lost, or when I see her

unapologetically walking through downtown streets with people shouting and freaking out, it gives me pause. I have an internal map of the city where I know where I can and can't go dressed in a certain way. As a transfemme person, I know that Church Street, Bloor and Yonge Area, the Annex, Kensington, are all ok places to present femme. Really, most of Downtown. But, in my paranoia, I just end up "boymoding" a lot of the time. As [Eve Sedgewick](#) puts it, there can be no bad surprises. The Jane and Finch neighbourhood where my mother now lives is not a place where I can enunciate the city (and let alone enunciate myself).

How can I learn from a Latina, *cotidiano*, flaneuse walking of my mom's, to enunciate my own Latinx, transfemme self? In learning from my mom's oral history of survival, community, and fun, I can understand how I begin to delimit myself in paranoia.

This is not to say that "putting yourself out there" is the key to everything. There are very valid reasons, especially for POC trans folks, to "boymode" or "girlmode" or whatever. These ways of being are our tactics of safety and survival. There are also structural inequalities that delimit the possibilities trans folk have for "enunciation." Though, connected, enunciating a city (or yourself), can come in many forms.

One of those forms of enunciation can come through the development of community. Upon settling in Toronto, my mom also became an avid member of the Pentecostal church. This was something I entirely resented. Imagine being a child, wearing dress clothes, and handing out [tratados](#) [little brochures] at the bus stop that said (in Spanish) that you'll burn in hell. Though, I admit, there was some insight into this. Since my mom mostly spoke Spanish, we had to suss out who was Hispanic. Further, handing these *tratados* out at the bus stop added a class dynamic to the picture as well. The act of handing out these messages of "you're going to hell" provides subtext for the creation of community. Reflecting on the conversations I had with my mom, I began to understand how this terrible and annoying thing for me was another attempt at community building (and a co-enunciation of the city for herself and the person receiving the *tratado*).

In the invitation to a church (which was Spanish-language, majority women, mainly people of central and south American descent), it created the possibility for a node in the city of cultural being for immigrants. While praising God was certainly a goal, this was done through Hispanic music (bachata as hymnals), food (pupusas, tortillas, empanadas for Sunday after service), and for myself, the ability to learn Spanish and about Hispanic cultures under a minoritarian Canadian context.

Now am I going to start handing out little brochures that say "accept trans people *or else*"? Probably not, I don't have the same guts as my mom. But I can begin to reconceive and traverse my inherited temporalities into the development of my own non-paranoid enunciation of the city (and myself), beginning with simply walking as a transfemme in the city.

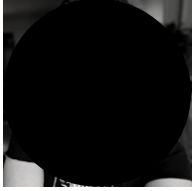
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