In an article titled “Narrating Cultural Citizenship: Oral Histories of First Generation College Students of Mexican Origin” (Benmayor 2002), I argued that higher education is a negotiated cultural space where first generation students of Mexican heritage (FGMH) construct an integrated subjectivity. A space from which, as historical outsiders to higher education, FGMH students strive to integrate their ethnic/racial, familial, generational, and educational worlds, rather than abandon any one of them. I frame this negotiated space as a claim for cultural citizenship (Flores and Benmayor 1997), where FGMH students affirm their collective right to be in the university in significant numbers, with first-class citizen status in the nation-state and in higher education. I base this analysis on three years of oral history and ethnographic research with first generation college students on my own campus. Students in my Oral History and Community Memory course focused on this topic, recording interviews with approximately sixty FGMH students on our campus.1 Mexican-heritage students, mostly from the Salinas Valley, comprise over 25 percent of our student body. They variously identify as Mexicana/o, Chicana/o, or Mexican American. The majority are daughters and sons of immigrant Mexican farmworkers; others are second or third generation in the United States, and a few have deep ancestral roots in this region.

In “Narrating Cultural Citizenship” I foregrounded race and class as analytical categories. In this essay, however, I turn to gender as an intersecting construct. I explore how gender informs claims for cultural citizenship within the university and within the family and culture, where power relations and traditional expectations impact
students’ struggle to forge an integrated and centered subjectivity. FGMH students not only have to claim equality within the university, but they also have to confront prescribed and constraining gender expectations at home. Cultural citizenship, I contend, helps us understand FGMH students’ claims for first-class citizenship in institutions of higher education and in the nation-state; the concept also informs an internal gendered negotiation and cultural struggle.

In this essay, I also underscore the ethnographic and storytelling dimension of cultural citizenship studies. Vernacular accounts are key to understanding claims for cultural rights and practices of resistance. They express subjectivity and standpoint, how people envision and position themselves as members of a cultural group in a larger multicultural society. Cultural citizenship narratives are counter-stories to hegemonic master narratives of nation, immigration, assimilation, and belonging. They are oppositional, but they are also propositional. In this essay, I weave together voices and stories of seven interviewees. These students’ narratives are oppositional in that they resist and critique existing power arrangements; they are propositional in envisioning more egalitarian, transformed social spaces and ways of thinking and acting.

In this sequel article, I rely on primary source material to illustrate: (1) how claims for cultural citizenship and gender are embedded in these stories; (2) how individual stories construct a larger narrative about gender, education and cultural citizenship; (3) and how these counter-stories disrupt hegemonic master narratives about FGMH students and about gender inside culture. Thus, these stories can be read in two ways, simultaneously: as situated narratives that contest second-class citizenship for Mexican-heritage people and communities in U.S. society; and as narratives that challenge prescribed gender norms and roles within Mexican/Chicano/Mexican American cultures. I begin with a background section on the concept of cultural citizenship and set the context for this current focus on gender, drawing from and synthesizing my previously published article. This is followed by a closer examination, through gender, of the stories of seven male and female FGMH students, stories that are highly representative of the larger data sample.

Concept and Context

Cultural Citizenship refers to “the ways people organize their values, their beliefs about their rights, and their practices based on their sense