



Department of Sociology
264 Haines Hall
Box 951551
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1551

December 2, 2024

Dear Admissions Committee,

I write this letter in enthusiastic, unqualified support for Coral Utnehmer, who has applied to your sociology graduate program. Coral is one of those undergraduate students who come along once a decade and for whom writing a recommendation letter goes from being a pleasure to an honor. I think that Coral is pretty much a no-brainer for admission to your program, and it should be in your interest to get to meet her and find out more.

Coral's readiness for graduate school is unquestionable. She already produces graduate-level written work, as demonstrated by her exemplary honors thesis. This paper, which was motivated by Coral's interest in the changing landscape of contemporary gender categories and self-identity, was initially conceived—somewhat naturally—as a qualitative interview-based project. Yet, as Coral sought advice from various faculty and expanded her reading to include recent work on measuring culture, she began to think seriously about both the promise and limitations of interview data. Accordingly, she decided to move to mixed-methods design by including a survey-analysis component, which she did by teaching herself how to use the R statistical environment over our very short—we are in the quarter system—three-week winter break. If you have ever heard about the (in)famous “R learning curve,” I assure you that for most of us, it is longer than three weeks! The result was a better and more compelling piece of sociological work, which was able to put the interview data in a more encompassing macro-level context, showing cohort-based transformations in the trans and nonbinary-identity population. So that's Coral for you. The type of student who is willing to teach herself a new method to provide a more compelling answer to a question she's after.

In addition to her strong writing skills and budding research prowess, Coral, of course, has many other qualities that make her graduate school-ready. For one, I, and most of her other UCLA faculty advisors, already treat her like a graduate student (and you know about the power of reflected appraisals); if she seeks advice on a given piece of literature, I don't hesitate to recommend a pile of books or top journal articles to read, because I know she would go through them at lightning speed. Another example: As a matter of policy, I don't allow upper-level undergraduates to enroll in my graduate classes. When I taught Sociology of Culture last Spring, I made an exception, but only after a persuasive email from one of my colleagues (Gabriel Rossman) assuring me that Coral wasn't just any old undergraduate; I agreed but did so with tempered expectations. To my surprise, not only did Coral excel in the graduate seminar environment (holding her own against UCLA graduate students), but she, in fact, was one of the *top* students in the seminar regarding participation, capacity to synthesize ideas across readings, and in terms of the final written product she produced, a brilliant synthetic essay combining the work of Rogers Brubaker on comparative categorical systems, Swidler's inside-out model of culture under unsettled times, interactionist sociology, and ideas from

culture and cognition studies, to make sense of the changing landscape of sexual identification in contemporary times with a focus on processes of “exit” from the category of woman as a way to escape and avoid perceived discriminatory or marginalizing treatment and interactions from others. This essay (which went on to win one of our department prizes) displayed the sort of mature command of a wide swath of interdisciplinary literature that you seldom see in an undergraduate student.

The other thing that makes Coral graduate school-ready is her aforementioned insatiable appetite for learning. Coral is very much in the “sponge” stage of her intellectual career, seemingly capable of absorbing unlimited amounts of ideas; she does so, however, always with a strong critical capacity, an enviable synthetic mind, and a sense of what sort of sociological phenomenon she wants to understand and shed light on. These abilities, along with her tenacity and indomitable autonomy, have allowed her to take full advantage of some of the faculty at UCLA in a way that few undergraduates are capable of in the context of a large research university department featuring more than fifteen hundred people enrolled in the major. Accordingly, as intimated earlier, Coral has learned to command various theoretical streams predominant in the department from her exchanges with many of our top faculty, including Brubaker’s work on comparative category systems, ethnomethodological, conversation-analytic, and social psychological streams, comparative historical sociology, quantitative methods, and most recently, work on cultural analysis and culture and cognition studies.

But Coral is very far from done, and very much not yet a finished product. There is no doubt that her intellectual development and flourishing will certainly continue and is bound to include—if you are lucky enough to nab her—the core intellectual streams dominant in your department. The ultimate result—that is, what sort of intellectual and sociological theorist Coral will turn out to be—will, therefore, very much depend on where she ends up. You have a chance not only to find out the answer to this exciting question but also to maybe have a hand at guiding and molding what is no doubt a rare intellect and talented addition to the stock of near-future young scholars in our profession.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Omar Lizardo', with a stylized, flowing script.

Omar Lizardo

LeRoy Neiman Term Chair Professor

Co-Editor, *Sociological Theory* (2024-2026)

Board of Reviewing Editors, *Science*