BORDERLANDS: THE SOCIO-POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF GAY LATINO COMMUNITY FORMATION IN GREATER LOS ANGELES

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Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We’re afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us. To avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadow. Which leaves only one fear—that we will be found out and that the Shadow-Beast will break out of its cage. Some of us take another route.


Sometimes being queer feels like being an alien. Too many of the streets have no names, and there are not many friendly places to go. When you are living on the edges of things, the margins, “home” can be hard to find.


Introduction

Among the Mexican men who have sex with men (MSMs) who migrate to the United States are those who, to quote Anzaldúa, have taken “another route” and either identify as “homosexual” or “gay” prior to migration or come to identify as such soon afterwards. ¹ Many of these men come to the United States seeking a “place” where they might have more opportunities to not only explore their sexuality more freely; but also to develop other aspects of themselves which are constrained by factors linked to homophobia and heteronormativity. But where exactly is this “place”? While at some levels the United States may be a more “open” society for gays and lesbians compared to Mexico, as Ingram declares in the above quotation, even here, “sometimes being queer feels like being an alien.” Furthermore, racist and anti-immigrant sentiments create an
environment that is far from hospitable. How then must gay Mexican immigrant “aliens” feel and how much more difficult must it be to find “home.”

Queer Mexican immigrants live in the borderlands, on the margins of not only mainstream “white” society and Latino communities but also that of “mainstream” gay and lesbian communities which Warner (1993) argues are generated by “Anglo-American identity politics.” While Latino barrios and gay enclaves exist in the greater Los Angeles area there are no “gay Latino” enclaves, per se. That is, there is no identifiable geographical space that one might identify as a gay Latino neighborhood. However, space is beginning to open-up and in this essay I examine not only the geographical but also the socio-political dimensions in the formation of gay Latino communities in the greater Los Angeles area. These spatial dimensions are crucial in gay Mexican immigrants’ attempts at adaptation and incorporation in the United States. I argue that the formation of gay Latino communities in Southern California is being driven by four distinct but intersecting factors: 1) demographic changes which include an increase in the area’s Latino population, 2) the commodification of Latino sexuality, 3) the “institutionalization” or mainstreaming of both the gay and Chicano movements, and 4) HIV prevention programs which target the Latino community. While my focus is on the greater Los Angeles area, these factors are obviously more global in scope. In addition, while my main concern in this chapter is with communal space, in a more general sense, I am interested in lived spaces, including the household. For it is at the intersections of the global and the local, the personal and the social, where these queer borderlands are being formed.
A Sense of Space: the borderlands

In order to understand the processes which are leading to the formation of a gay Latina/o comunidad one must first understand the space in which this community is forming. The theoretical and analytical importance of space has recently been given greater attention not only by postmodern geographers but also by immigration scholars who focus on such issues as ethnic enclaves and transnational community formations. Within each of these bodies of literature it has become clear that spatiality is more than physical location but also the space where social relations are formed and power is exercised; in essence, where social constraints and resistance is lived. Foucault referred to this sense of space as “heterotopia,” a space which Soja has re-imagined as “thirdspace” where “the simultaneity and interwoven complexity of the social, historical, and the spatial, their inseparability and interdependence” come together (1996:3). Recently queer and feminist scholars, working within this model of spatiality, have examined the gendered and sexualized dimensions of space (c.f. Rose 1993, Massey 1994, Bell and Valentine 1995). These scholars assert that the binary division of space into public and private realms is not as fixed as previously held. Furthermore, space has erotic dimensions linked to identities and its commodification. This space, which Ingram refers to as “queerscape,” is envisioned as a “landscape of erotic alien(n)ations, ones that shift with demographics, social development, political economies, interventions of ‘the state,’ aesthetics, and – yes – desire” (1997:31). Despite the fact that Ingram envisions the “queerscapes” as the products of multiple marginalities, most of this queer spatial literature focuses on desire, often at the expense of other dimensions especially race.

While not necessarily theorizing space in the same ways as postmodern geographers do, space is an important aspect of migration scholarship. Whether it is in
the form of the household, the enclave, or the global city; space is a dimension of analysis that is central to the study of immigration. For instance, migration scholars argue that social networks and modes of incorporation such as ethnic communities and economies are an important aspect of personal transition as they link migrants to social, cultural, familial, and economic resources (Chavez, 1992; Portes and Borocz 1989; Portes and Rumbaut 1990; Portes 1995). While most studies have conceptualized social networks either in terms of familial relationships or men’s labor networks some scholars have demonstrated that alternative network arrangements exist such as those of single women (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Regardless of how these networks are arranged, they can only be produced by contacts and communication which eventually arise from shared space. Often these networks lead an immigrant to a “landing pad” household where resources for survival and adaptation might be shared (Chavez 1992). Similarly, ethnic economies and enclaves serve as a means by which immigrants adapt to their new environments. But in the case of gay Latino/a immigrants one must ask where these “landing pads” for survival and adaptation might be. As previously mentioned, migration scholars have ignored the sexual dimensions of migration including the ways in which sexuality influences migrant strategies. Thus, in this chapter I examine how race/ethnicity and sexuality shape spatiality among queer Latinos. I begin with the area’s demographic context.

Various scholars have discussed what some have called the “browning” or “Latinization” of America which refers to the increasing number of Latinos in the United States (cf. Stavans 1995, Fox 1996). Indeed, the proportion of the nation’s “Hispanic” population has increased significantly since the creation of the category after the 1980
census\(^2\). In 1980 6.5 percent of the U.S. population was of “Spanish Origin;” by 1996 the “Hispanic” population was 10.7 percent and is estimated to grow to 14.7 percent by the year 2020. Although the Hispanic population is increasing in many states, it is geographically concentrated in five states: Florida, Illinois, New York, Texas and California (which has the largest Hispanic population of any state). From 1990-91 to 1993-94, California’s growth rate declined from 2.07 percent to 0.87 percent with a net loss due to the net migration of 212,000 “White” residents from California between 1992 and 1994 alone. At the same time the state’s Hispanic population grew by a yearly average of 235,800 by “natural increase only” (i.e. not including migration). By 2025, the Bureau of the Census projects that Hispanics will comprise approximately one quarter of the state’s population while the non-Hispanic white population will decline to less than half at approximately 43 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1994; State of California, Department of Finance 1996).

According to 1990 census estimates, nearly half of California’s population (49 percent or 14.5 million people) lives in the Los Angeles Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area (CMSA) which includes Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura counties. Los Angeles county alone has a population of more than 9.6 million, 43.9 percent of which is Hispanic; while 22.9 percent of Orange County’s estimated 2.4 million population is Hispanic. The significant presence of Latinos in the Los Angeles area in not new, of course. The region was part of Mexico’s territory prior to the U.S. Mexican war and in 1920 Los Angeles was already referred to as “the American Capital of Mexico” (Oxnam 1970 [1920]). Figure 1 (see appendix) provides a contemporary visual representation of where Latinos are residentially
concentrated in the greater Los Angeles area. There are six general areas on the map with Latino residential concentrations greater than 60 percent: the San Fernando Valley, Central Los Angeles (centered around East Los Angeles/Boyle Heights), The San Gabriel Valley, Pomona, Wilmington/Long Beach, and Santa Ana.

Estimating the “gay and lesbian” population is a difficult if not an impossible task. If we assume that ten percent of the general population is gay or lesbian an estimate would stand at 1.4 million. However, there are ongoing debates as to what percentage of the population is gay or lesbian and it is not clear if these estimates may differ by gender, race/ethnicity and region. More important than these problematic statistics, and easier to identify, are the spaces which have become identified with gay and lesbian communities. There are five major gay communities (or enclaves) in the greater Los Angeles area: West Hollywood, Hollywood, Long Beach, Silverlake, and Laguna Beach. But gay organizations, bars, discos, and other businesses can be found throughout the Southern California. In addition both Venice Beach and Santa Monica also have sizeable gay and lesbian residents but I do not consider them to be enclaves. Figure 2 (see appendix) demonstrates where these areas are located in the Los Angeles area. As I will discuss below, the physical proximity of gay communities to Latino communities plays an important role in Latino marginalization and the larger politics of space. But before discussing this point, I present an overview of the places where gay Latino immigrants live.

During my research and fieldwork, it soon became clear that gay Latino immigrants’ daily lives are in most ways tied more closely to the larger Latino community than to the larger gay one. Cultural similarities, including language,
undoubtedly play a large role in this respect but so too do the socio-economic differences which segregate many gay Latino immigrants from other communities. Like most of their compatriots, gay Latino immigrants often work at jobs that are not only distant geographically from where they live but also distant socio-culturally. Thus, Latino immigrant labor often spend their (paid) working hours in spaces quite different from those to which they return home. “Home” in these instances often means the Latino ethnic communities shown on Figure 1 with their own markets, theaters, and other gathering places which are in most instances heteronormative spaces. The Mexican immigrant men who I came to know through my years of doing research and working with the gay Latino community did not live in any one particular area of the Los Angeles metropolis but did, without exception, live in areas that were either predominantly Latino or had a large percentage of Latinos in the vicinity.

Nearly all of the Mexican immigrant men I interviewed moved at least once from the time I met them and had reported moving several times since moving to the United States. But in each case, residential relocation remained within the general Los Angeles area. Most of the men who I interviewed who identified as gay lived with other gay men as roommates, even if they had a partner. Only four of the twenty men I formally interviewed lived with their families. Three identified as gay and one as bisexual; of these, only two of the gay men were “out” to their family. The differences in the socio-economic dimensions of these household arrangements seem to have a direct relationship to the men’s sexual identities and lives. For instance, most of the gay men who I interviewed lived with other gay Latino immigrant men. While different arrangements
were made for sharing household resources, in each of these households information on jobs, social events, and general “gay” information was shared with one another.

In one Santa Ana household, where five gay immigrant men lived, three were from Mexico and the other two were from Central America. Rent for the two-bedroom apartment was shared between the five men as were costs for food. Household chores were also shared although cooking was usually done by only two of the men. This particular household was often the center of social events held either at the apartment or organized there and held elsewhere. Thus the household also became a social network “node” where gay Latino men were able to meet other gay Latino men. When the members of this household moved to separate locations these established networks were used to set up new shared gay Latino households. While these households are far from what one might consider “stable” they are not unlike other Mexican immigrant households described in the migration literature (cf. Chavez, 1992). Perhaps more important than the longevity of these household arrangements are their very existence and the spaces they provide Mexican immigrant men to develop as gay men.

Clearly, sexuality plays an important role in shaping these “gay” household arrangements but it should be understood that these “gay” households provide a lens by which we can begin to question how sexuality shapes other household arrangements as well. Household arrangements where heterosexuality is the norm are no less influenced by sexuality; however, the power of these relations becomes invisible because of their normativity. The ways in which sexuality shapes immigrant household relations is all the more important because of their “landing pad” and adaptive functions.
For instance in discussing his migration experience with me, Pepe, a thirty year old immigrant from Michoacan, explained how he crossed the Mexican border with other “illegals” with the services of a coyote who took them to a “safe house.”

When we got to the place where they brought us, let me tell you, it was a room with mattresses thrown on the floor, a couch, and a very small restroom where the water didn’t even work. So when everybody did their necessities, it all remained there, and there was a horrible smell. The windows were covered with paint or cardboard, I don’t remember, but the thing was they didn’t let us look outside. Everyone would place themselves wherever there was room, because the long mattresses were placed all over. So we were there and it was very uncomfortable.

But I’m going to tell you something that I have never told anyone but something I want to say. What happened was that there was a young man, well there were many, we were all men, he was about 25 and dark. I got to see him a little because there was a little bit of light. The room was almost dark, when you got up to go to the bathroom it was all the light you got. He had a medium stature and dark curly hair, that has always attracted me, well in short, I liked the young man. He was the one next to me, it was the only space left when we arrived and my brother was on the other side of the room. The room was almost dark but the young man saw me. I don’t know what exactly happened but we ran into each other in the bathroom and I stared at him. I don’t know if with the stare I told him that I liked him but he felt it. Then he would hold my hand and he would caress my body and we would embrace each other. My brother was there but I don’t think he saw anything as you couldn’t see from here to there. It was one experience I had that has always stayed with me.

Pepe and his brother would later join relatives in the Los Angeles area, but his story helps to reveal just one way in which the “landing pad” space might be not only sexually charged (despite the literature, immigrants are not asexual) but more importantly how heteronormativity operates within such a space. Argüelles and Rivero (1993) have already pointed to some of the ways in which women are subjected to sexual violence under similar conditions. Eventually, Pepe moved out on his own and when we met he was sharing an apartment with a lesbian niece who was also an immigrant. This home, in turn, became a landing pad for at least
one gay Mexican immigrant who stayed with Pepe and his niece for about a month until he found work and his own accommodations.

The sexual dimensions of the immigrant household and adaptation were reflected in a variety of ways in the lives of my informants. When I first met Manuel at a gay Latino men’s social gathering he identified as bisexual. HIV-positive and in good health, he lived with his family in Orange County. He was not working and his social life was constrained not only by his lack of income but also by the fact that he was not “out” to his family who are Jehovah’s Witnesses. Over the years of working with gay Latino men, I ran into Manuel from time to time and began to notice changes in his social “performance.” Although when we met, Manuel had acknowledged that most of his sexual experiences had been with men, he asserted his bisexual identity and denied any possibility that he had contracted HIV from sex but instead assured me that he must have been exposed to the virus through his job as a nurse. Overtime, however, Manuel’s opinion on these matters changed. He soon began to identify as gay and to accept the possibility that he may have contracted HIV through sex (or possibly occupational exposure too). When we last spoke Manuel still had not come out to his family but the changes in his public expression may be attributed to his increased social interaction with gay identified Latino men and the social pressure to “admit” one’s “true” sexual orientation. Bisexuality in Mexico seems to have greater acceptance as a behavior and as an identity than in the United States. In this new social context, I myself witnessed on several occasions episodes of peer pressure in which Manuel was chided for not admitting his homosexuality. While he seems to have “submitted” to this pressure to a certain extent, Manuel’s financial dependence on his family limits his ability to be an
openly gay man, in a way that is more consistent with Almaguer’s framework for understanding gay Latino identity.

Almaguer argues that because Chicano gay men are located in a subordinate racial position they are more dependent upon familial relationships for their survival than Anglo gay men -- a “gay” identity is therefore constrained from development. The argument is conceptually linked to John D’Emilio’s (1993 [1983]) assertions which link sexual identity to capitalist development, the lessened dependence of family, and the migration of homosexuals to urban gay communities in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago and New York after World War II. Thus, economic dependence upon family members may constrain the development of a gay identity but the reverse may happen as well. While it may be true that homosexual men and women who are dependent economically upon their families may not be constrained from developing a gay identity, the family itself may come to depend upon the income of homosexual family members which creates a different sort of power relationship.

Rafael is a 29-year-old Mexican immigrant born in Mexico City but raised in the state of Michoacan. He moved to the United States in 1991 to join family members and help his infirm mother financially. Eventually he brought his mother, who is separated but not divorced from his father, to the U.S. to live with him. At the time of my interview with him, Rafael was working three “jobs,” two of which were paid positions while the other was volunteer work with an AIDS services organization. Despite the fact that Rafael has two jobs his annual income is only about $26,000.00. Rafael describes his family situation in the following way:

My siblings think of me as their father because for a very long time I’ve given them the confidence to speak to me about anything. They all care for
me a great deal; my mother cares for me a lot too. She knows that I’m gay, she doesn’t completely like it, but she accepts it. She’s very catholic and at times we have out little problems because she thinks that God doesn’t permit my lifestyle. She won’t talk to me openly about the issues but she loves me for my support of the family. My sisters all know about me and I can speak openly with them but not my mother. I think that with time, you know, I’m her son and she loves me. Then with time, if God permits, she will accept me. I don’t blame her.

Rafael’s story exemplifies the complexity of sexual identity among “gay Latinos.” While he uses the term, “Latino gay” for self-identification, the “coming out” process has been constrained at a certain level by his family obligations. Yet, Rafael is “out” to his family and tries to maintain a balance between his individual needs and a sense of respect for the family. Although these identity issues may seem at a superficial level to be cultural constructs, they are also influenced by social and economic dimensions. Rafael’s economic situation seems to parallel those of travesti in Mexico City reported by Prieur (1998) where family members became dependent upon the income of a “queer” family member and thus to some extent were forced to accept the family members queerness. These conditions provide the space whereby a “gay” identity may form and contrasts directly with Manuel’s situation where he is financially dependent upon his family. Rafael explains,

This is where I really opened up to the experience of being gay, to my dreams of finding someone who cares for me and understands me and I him. I think I’ve changed a lot, over there I didn’t express who I was in Mexico it wasn’t so easy, people wouldn’t accept me. Even more so because I lived with my sisters and I was worried about scandals that arise when people talk…. I’ve learned to live differently, that life isn’t necessarily tragic.

Rafael’s words suggest that, although he didn’t explicitly move to the United States because of his sexual orientation, his sexual identity and perspective as a gay man have
been transformed by the move. This is due in part to greater economic opportunities which have transformed his relationship with his family and his ability to assert his right to live his life a gay man and to meet others like him.

The Political Economy of Queer Latino Communal Space
While the mainstream lesbian and gay community has developed in its own infrastructure of businesses, service organizations, and social clubs, these were not regularly utilized by the gay Latino immigrants I met. Communal spaces where gay and lesbian Latinos/as can mix and meet are few and far between (especially for women). The irony is that, as mentioned, mainstream gay and lesbian establishments (and even “cruising” sites⁷) are often either adjacent to or in Latino communities. Though it may be stating the obvious, the political economy of queer Latino space is shaped both by the larger political economics of sexualized and racialized space as well as that which is more specific to queer Latinos. Thus, the dynamics which led to segregating marginal groups such as Latinos and queers from the mainstream and in effect created this neighbor:border situation are reproduced to marginalize queer Latinos from both communities. The queer Latino space which is opening up is, I argue, in great part shaped by two political economic dimensions: the commodification of Latino sexuality and HIV funding.

While there are a number of possible places where gay Latino men might meet other gay Latino men⁸, the most common place mentioned by informants was gay bars and clubs. There are several bars and clubs which cater to gay Latinos in the greater Los Angeles area. Some, such as Arena in Hollywood, target a younger clientele with a “rave” type of atmosphere and a mix of Latin House, Rock en Español, and some more
mainstream queer dance music. These type of clubs are perhaps best described as “American gay bars with a Latin flavor,” that is, they are very similar in most respects to mainstream gay clubs except that the majority of the patrons are Latino. The crowd, which is both native and immigrant Latino, tends to be in their twenties although it is not unusual to find men in their thirties and forties. In addition, there are bars which target more “traditional” Latino musical tastes and have a greater percentage of immigrant patrons. These clubs tend to play Latin music, such as Banda, Cumbias, and Latin Pop and Spanish is spoken almost exclusively. In addition, many “mainstream” gay bars now sponsor “Latin” nights on designated evenings. The bars use themes like “Machismo” in order to supposedly attract gay Latino customers but perhaps more importantly to attract white patrons seeking Latino gay men. While one could argue that these establishments merely serve the demands of the market, the commodification of Latino sexuality (both straight and gay, male and female) is also shaping the creation of these spaces.

Beyond just serving a Latino market, these commodified spaces create the fantasy of the insatiable “hot” Latin sex machine. Images 1, 2, and 3 (see appendix) illustrate how the male Latino body is exoticized and objectified to sell to both mainstream and Latino gay markets. While these images are obviously racialized (e.g. models with the sarapes and big hot chiles) their portrayal of Latino men as belonging to the “lower” classes as manual laborers and gang members reproduces dominant views of Latino masculinity (the macho) which are often, if not always, attributed to “Latin culture.” The lack of alternative types of spaces, ensures that these commodified visions of Latino sexuality constrain the ways in which a gay Latino can envision himself at both a personal and community level. Thus, despite being constructed as objects of desire, gay
Latinos remain, in many respects, segregated from mainstream gay culture with few alternative spaces of their own.

While both gay and Latino communities have historically been segregated spaces marginalized from the dominant white heterosexual community, they have also served as sites of resistance. Both the gay and Chicano/Latino movements have sprung from spatially segregated communities, both movements have deep roots in their respective communities in the Los Angeles area and now play important roles in their contemporary formations (c.f. D’Emilio 1983, Muñoz 1989). However, despite their important contributions, queer Latino concerns have for the most part been ignored by both of these movements. At both a national and local level, mainstream gay and Chicano/Latino organizations have attempted to address these concerns with varying degrees of success (e.g. National Association Chicana and Chicano Studies meetings in 1991 and 1999). In 1987, following the National March in Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights, a group of Latina/o LGBT activists met and formed an organization which would eventually become the National Latina/o Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Organization or LLEGO as it is more commonly known. LLEGO plays an important leadership role in the queer Latina/o community through its annual conferences, periodic programming, and small grant funding. In the past, the organization has sponsored programs specifically for Latino youth, lesbians, and transgendered people.

Locally there are several organizations which serve queer Latino communities. Table 1 describes these organizations. Although this list is not inclusive of all Latino groups in the area, it is a fair representation of LGBT organizations which are Latina/o focused. Other organizations such as LGBT Community Centers in Los Angeles, Long
Beach, and Orange County do have groups or services which are aimed at Latinas/os but for the most part these are like the majority of groups listed below HIV/AIDS focused. For instance, the Center of Orange County (which has the most Latino inclusive programming of all the centers) lists five Latino programs under its auspices: Encuentros, Entre Amigos, Hermosa y Protegida, Latina Lesbians, and Unicos. Of the five programs listed, only the Entre Amigos and Latina Lesbians groups are not HIV focused nor HIV funded and are more social in nature.

Table 1: LA Area Queer Latino Organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Location(s)</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bienestar</td>
<td>East LA, Long Beach, Hollywood/Silverlake, Pomona, San Fernando Valley</td>
<td>HIV/AIDS Prevention and Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entre Hombres Program</td>
<td>Santa Ana</td>
<td>(MSM) HIV/AIDS Prevention and Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Delhi Community Center)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Latino Services)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wall-Las Memorias Project</td>
<td>East Los Angeles</td>
<td>HIV/AIDS Prevention and Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hombre A Hombre &amp; Jovenes in Action (AltaMed Health Services)</td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>(MSM) HIV/AIDS Prevention and Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos (GLLU)</td>
<td>Hollywood</td>
<td>General (Social and Political)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbianas Unidas</td>
<td>Alhambra</td>
<td>General (Social and Political)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unfortunately, the Entre Amigos group no longer exists. Encuentros targets Latino MSMs who are not necessarily gay identified and is part of the CDC’s Latino AIDS Project, Unicos is also an HIV prevention program that targets Latino day workers at the sites where they gather and is also part of the Latino AIDS Project. During the past six years The Center of Orange County has utilized state HIV prevention funds to sponsor an annual event called, Hermosa y Protegida (Beautiful and Protected) Beauty Pageant,
where transgendered Latinas compete for the crown of Señorita Hermosa y Protegida. According to events organizers, “The winner gains recognition as a community leader who is charged with the responsibility to promote HIV prevention messages to the transgender community throughout the year” (centeroc 98). I actually served as a judge for the 1999 pageant and can testify to the important role that the event serves as a space for community building. However, the event does have a moralistic tone, and like the other programs, it emphasizes monogamy and self-control. My point here is not to diminish the importance of HIV/AIDS prevention and services in the Latino community but rather to point to the fact that the politics of HIV/AIDS funding shapes not only the space which is available to Queer Latinos, but also the ways in which they imagine themselves as individuals and as community. Within my research of gay Mexican immigrants, I have worked primarily with two of these organizations, Bienestar and Delhi Center’s Entre Hombres Program. For the rest of this chapter I will focus on my research with the latter of the two to examine how the socio-politics HIV shape this space.

**Entre Hombres: Creating Space**

Located in the city of Santa Ana, California (euphemistically referred to as Little Mexico) the Delhi Center is a Latino community service organization with a number of programs. Among these programs are three which are organized under the Delhi Center’s Wellness Program: Caminos Positivos (Positive Pathways: for HIV positive individuals), Entre Nosotras (Between Us: a general wellness program for Latinas), and Entre Hombres (Between Men: an HIV prevention program which targets Latino MSMs). The Entre Hombres Program has three main projects which they organize: 1) Outreach, 2)
Volunteer/Leadership Training, and 3) weekend retreats which are called Encuentro Entre Hombres. The stated mission of the Encuentro Entre Hombres (EEH) project is to “improve the quality of life of the gay, bisexual, and transgendered Latino community. Creating spaces for self understanding, integration, and social well being; starting from our human values.” (Delhi Center, EEH IV, 1998). The mission statement is reflective of the way in which the Delhi Center, a Latino staffed organization, envisions its role in the larger Latino community. As Program Coordinator Luis Lopez states,

The agency [Delhi Center] really looks at developing the leadership capabilities of the individuals it serves so they can provide their own opportunities and advocate for their own issues and really be involved in their communities. So, we’re not concerned so much with the provision of service as we are with persons -- person skills, volunteerism, and leadership development.

This ideology seems particularly useful in dealing with a “community” that is in many ways difficult to define. In the words of Luis Lopez, the gay Latino community is,

…not a geographically defined area… there are social networks in place, people know people, there hasn't been a whole lot in terms of formal organized efforts. It's starting. In the last couple of years since the onset of prevention work, in the county, it's started but it's never been there before. What's been in place has been informal social networks of people that just know who's gay and where you meet and those type of informal networks. Which are in my mind not any less valid, but for whatever reasons they haven't addressed issues like HIV in an organized way, or issues of social isolation, that a community needs to address for it's collective well-being.

Whether the roots of queer Latino communities in the U.S. trace back to a time prior to the HIV/AIDS epidemic is debatable; but it is clear, that HIV/AIDS has had a tremendous influence over queer Latino social space. As an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983, Chavez 1994) that lacks geographic specificity and is marginal to the mainstream gay community, queer Latino communities have in many ways been constructed out of the necessity to confront the threat of HIV/AIDS. As discussed above,
since most of the gay Latino organizations in the greater Los Angeles area have an
HIV/AIDS focus, their very existence is due in large measure to the availability of
funding which targets the Latino population. In the case of the Delhi Center, at least two
programs have been terminated because of a lack of funding: Casa Delhi which was a
converted house which dealt only with HIV/AIDS issues, and Chispa Latina, a Spanish
language newspaper for the queer Latino community in Orange County. The Delhi
programs which remain are also threatened by the constraints of their funding source.

Events sponsored by the Entre Hombres program, such as weekend retreats, are
funded by state and county HIV/AIDS funds and are aimed at HIV education and
prevention among this high-risk group. However, such programming must juggle the
understood needs of the population which Delhi serves with the expectations and
constraints placed upon them by funding agencies. As Lopez stresses,

I firmly believe you can't address some of these issues, prevention of HIV,
without addressing all the co-factors, all the other issues involved with gay
Latino men. I think with Latino gay men you really have to address some
of the self-esteem issues, some of the mental health issues, some of the
disconnectedness, the marginalization, the alienation that some of these
individuals feel... Funders have a hard time with that they want to see that
we're preventing HIV period and for them, it's difficult to conceive of it as
something that's going to include coming out to my family, cause that's not
HIV prevention, of belonging to a strong and healthy gay community,
cause that's not HIV prevention, that's a political agenda, all these other
issues which are very real and very impacting.

As Lopez eloquently illustrates, “disconnectedness” is more than an individual client
issue; it is a “community” problem based in the political economy of space. The end
result is that programs such as Entre Hombres must either coach their programs in the
language of regulatory and funding agencies (learn the language) or take the risk of
alternative programming on their own. The Entre Hombres program walks a fine line
trying to negotiate the requirements of regulatory agencies with their own understandings of their clients’ needs. Events therefore combine the two demands in an attempt to find a balance, however precarious. Programs, such as weekend-long retreats, commonly mix HIV prevention techniques with leadership training and the hope that in the process communal space is created, if even for a moment.

Furthermore, both HIV negative and HIV positive individuals attend the organization’s events in order to deconstruct sexual myths at an inter-personal level. Participants are recruited by utilizing social networks and outreach programs at local bars which cater to gay Latino men and other sites where Latino men who have sex with men congregate. These sites and networks are not confined to geo-political boundaries. Thus while the program targets “gay Latino men” in the Orange County area, in the program’s fourth retreat in 1998 approximately 28% of participants came from other areas of the Southern California area including Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties. The events also include cultural components that seem to help the clients feel that they are in a supportive environment. Programs are conducted in Spanish and events often include a spiritual dimension where events open and/or close with a candle lighting ceremony where the men form a circle and re-affirm, through prayer, the gift of life as well as a gay existence. Thus, culture, in this instance, is utilized in a somewhat subversive way to open up supportive spaces for queer Latino men.

Although cultural affinities are partly responsible for bringing these men together under the umbrella of the Delhi Center, the social isolation which Lopez describes cannot be attributed to cultural differences between mainstream and Latino communities alone, i.e. cultural isolation in a mainstream “Anglo” culture. To a certain extent, the diversity
of the Latino “community” in the Southern California area itself lends to a sense of isolation. Differences in class, nativity, nationality, and language are not small matters to overcome and can be barriers to a sense of “belonging” especially when legal status is added to the equation. Differences in the needs, concerns and interests between U.S. born and English speaking Chicanos and “illegal” Spanish speaking immigrants can at times seem immense even though both are considered part of the same “gay Latino community.” Even though most of the Entre Hombres program participants are immigrants, they too are by no means a homogenous group. While participants are predominantly from Mexico, which has numerous regional differences alone, they also come from Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, and Venezuela. Thus, despite the fact that these men come together as “gay Latino men” the Entre Hombres retreat organizers have learned that differences between the men is one of the first obstacles to overcome.

For instance, during a retreat held in May of 1997 in a Big Bear, California campground several exercises were conducted which attempted to build a communal base. One exercise had the participants answer descriptive questions about themselves on butcher paper which was taped on the walls of the main meeting room. Written entries included names, place of origin, sexual identity, whether they were “out” or not, people they admired, and a motto. The majority mentioned either parents (particularly mothers) or religious figures (such as the Pope) as people they admired and the virtual dearth of gay Latino role models couldn’t be ignored. This became a point of discussion which gave rise to the realization that “gay” Latinos, though not absent from history, were invisible. Another exercise called on participants to list what they actually had in
common. The exercise proved to be somewhat difficult even though the men had broken into six smaller groups. Participants in each of the groups would call out a topic until they found a characteristic which they all shared. Common responses were centered around hobbies or entertainment such as music, dancing and sports, but they also included what can best be described as a shared need for intimacy, e.g. looking for a relationship, love, romance. What these responses have in common, of course, is that they all require, albeit at different levels, shared space. The men responded in a variety of ways such as grunts, laughter, and sighs of frustration when an assumed similarity failed to be shared. One such characteristic, which proved to be a “problem”, was sexual identity.

Of forty-three participants, eighty-five percent identified, on paper, as “guy u homosexual fuera del closet” (gay out of the closet), twelve percent as gay or homosexual in the closet or in the process of coming out, two percent as bisexual, and 1 percent as transsexual. However, during the group exercise it became clear that not everyone agreed on what these terms meant. For some, being gay was an essence, something they “had always been,” they had never doubted their sexual orientation and their “gayness” shaped every aspect of their identity. For others, being “gay” was a more of a struggle with “acceptance,” (i.e. accepting their sexual inclinations) but it did not define who they were, in fact as several participants asserted, they were “gay varonil” or masculine and gay. For these men, sexuality and gender performance needed to be kept as separate categories which were not mutually exclusive. All though most of these men defined themselves as “out of the closet,” most were not “out” at work and were more selective with whom they were out to (e.g. siblings but not parents or sisters but not brothers).
Therefore, the relationship between sexuality and gender became a “hot” topic of
discussion with some men deriding effeminacy and others “showing their feathers.”

In an attempt to get participants to understand that they had common concerns,
retreat organizers created an exercise in which each of the men were given either a pink,
blue or purple inflated balloon which represented different types of gay men (feminine,
masculine, and HIV infected). The participants were then instructed to toss the inflated
balloons in the air and keep them from hitting the ground, if they did hit the ground they
were to be left there. After a few minutes the men were instructed to stop. With various
balloons lying on the ground they were told that without unity, without teamwork, “gay
Latino men” would -- like the balloons – fall; but together even in a diverse community,
all could be supported.

The exercise seemed to have a profound effect on the men as they began to
intermingle more and talk more openly about their experiences. Participants began to
share stories of an extremely personal nature such as past sexual abuse, substance abuse,
and HIV infection. As one participant put it,

It’s difficult to talk about many of these things. We’ve all been affected by
them and yet even in this retreat many of us are afraid to speak openly. We
carry these problems with us and they affect those around us. To
overcome them we need to speak openly about them.

Another participant added,

We all have our problems from childhood but we reach an age where we
need to be who we are. Society influences us, and yes, I think many of us
leave our countries to be who we are but we don’t owe society anything.
We all have to support ourselves; society doesn't do it. We don't need to please society, we are all the same, maricas, jotos, putas, and we need to support each other.

These points seemed to really hit home at the end of the second evening of the retreat when the “Miss Big Bear” drag contest was held and some of the most outwardly masculine men were selected as contestants. Although the contest was meant to be all in fun, some of these same contestants seemed to take their gender transformations quite seriously and attempted to be as feminine as they possibly could. The next day, two of them confessed that they had discovered both a new found respect for the skills of the vestidas and a sense of their own feminine sides. This is not to suggest (in a Butlerian sense) that these men were suddenly liberated from their gender regimes by the drag performance (which in some ways is problematic itself) but the exercise does indeed seem to aid in a sense of empathy and community building.

When directly asked what they felt were the personal challenges in their lives, the men listed the following: 1) Coming out of the closet, 2) Preparing oneself to be in a relationship, 3) Maintaining a relationship, 4) Being more assertive, and 5) Dealing with loneliness and depression. These challenges point less to the homophobia of Latino culture specifically than they do to a sense of isolation and a need for intimacy. Culture is obviously a component of these challenges, but the homophobia, sexism, racism, and poverty that many of these men face are shaped by structural dimensions beyond “Latino culture.” As immigrants from Latin America they must deal not only with communication issues (i.e. English fluency) but also with the problems of living in a new
cultural environment that is racist and anti-immigrant. Thus the limited number of spaces which are available to these men to develop as gay men owes not to a lack of will or the constraints of a “machista” Latino cultural but rather a lack of material resources and social marginalization.

Conclusion

In his essay on heterotopias, Foucault argued that “space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power.” In the preceding pages, I have demonstrated that for gay Latinos the “fundamentals” of community are largely missing and this lack has profound ramifications in terms of power. Gay Mexican men who migrate to the Los Angeles area seeking a “place” where they can develop as “gay men” soon discover that such places are difficult to find. This is due in part to the ways in which sexuality shapes space itself. The perceived lack of space where Mexican men can be “gay” is one of the reasons that these men to migrate in the first place. Sexuality influences the very spaces where these immigrant men come to call home, the household. And sexuality also shapes the spaces where Mexican gay men try to form communities. But sexuality is one of multiple axes which intersect and shape the spaces where these men live; race, gender, and class also shape these spaces (or the lack of them).

From the standpoints of the men of Entre Hombres, experiences of sexism, racism, and homophobia as “gay Latino men” resist flat cultural explanations. These men face many challenges in which they try to find a balance between the demands placed upon them as men and the factors which constrain their development. As “gay Latino
men” the challenges which many of these men must face are exacerbated by a sense of isolation. The social isolation, or disconnectedness, which they experience is influenced by multiple and intersecting dimensions such as racism from mainstream and gay communities, homophobia outside and within the larger Latino community, limited accessibility (due to physical and social distance, as well as financial constraints) to gay community resources, and different legal migration statuses.

The communal spaces which are beginning to form are shaped by a combination of influences including demographic changes, social movement mainstreaming, market forces, and the institutionalization of HIV/AIDS prevention. These dimensions provide both opportunities for growth as well as constraints upon the social relations and identities which are created in these new spaces. More spaces are definitely needed in order to provide environments where gay Latinos can come together and form communities of support.

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1 This essay is part of a larger dissertation research project entitled Border Crossings: Mexican Men and the Sexuality of Migration. It is an ethnographic study of Mexican men who have sex with men in Guadalajara Mexico and the greater LA area and examines how sexuality influences migratory processes.

2 Prior to 1980 “Spanish Origin” was the label used to capture the characteristics of those now referred to as “Hispanic Origin." The term “Hispanic” is meant to refer to people whose ancestry is from Spanish speaking countries.

3 “Natural increase” is a demographic term which refers to the excess of births over deaths and does not include migration in its calculation.

4 There have been a number of attempts to estimate the homosexual population. Perhaps the most famous is that of Kinsey and his associates who estimated that ten percent of the male population was “exclusively” homosexual (compared to 2-6% of females). “Ten percent” has become a sort of rallying cry for the gay and lesbian community despite the fact that other estimates have varied widely and that Kinsey's original estimate may well have been historically specific. For a summary of other estimates see Singer and Deschamps (1994: 9-12).

5 See Cantú, Border Crossings, Ch. 3.

6 In a similar vein, Gayle Rubin argues that gay identity is a result of the rural to urban migration of “homosexually inclined” men and women where communities and economic niches (which Rubin calls a “gay economy”) were formed based on a shared identity as an “erotic minority” (1993 [1984]).

7 Cruising sites are places where people seek others for sex, in this case men who are looking, or cruising, for other men to have sex with. Such sites might be found anywhere but are commonly found in parks, adult bookstores, and public bathrooms.
Cyberspace is beginning to function as an alternative "space" for such needs but access is limited by material resources and the fact that a majority of this media, such a Quo Vadis (QV) magazine is written mostly in English.

A representative of the Center in Orange County explained that the group disbanded in part due to problems with meeting consistently and the existence of HIV programs which were funded.

Unless otherwise noted all English to Spanish translations are by the author.

Ethnographic research is needed on gay Latino community formation and change.

While Anderson uses the concept of "imagined community" in terms of the nation, the concept may also apply to those who form communities within and marginal to the nation such as Chavez's application of the concept among undocumented Latino immigrants.

To what extent educational information from the retreat reaches beyond even these boundaries is unclear, but given the transnational social networks that many of the men maintain it seems almost certain that some information is transmitted via these networks.

Another example of the subversive use of culture was provided during my interview with a leader of the Las Memorias: The Wall, a Chicano HIV organization. He reported that during a AIDS memorial held on Mother's Day, the organization held a barbecue for mothers who had lost their sons to AIDS, during the event a statue of the Virgen of Guadalupe served as a cultural icon to link the suffering of these mothers, who "also had sons who did not marry and were ostracized by others."

See Cantú, Border Crossings, Chapter 4.
References


Figure 1
Celebrate Gay Pride with Escandalo. Come early to enjoy our special FAGOT Parade and show it Midnight. For information call 213 856 8914.