

Building Up and Breaking Down: Community Building and Its Difficulties among Mexican and Chicano Homosexuals

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Introduction

With the recent legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States and the recognition and legalization of same-sex marriage in certain states of Mexico, the visibility of queer lives—that is people who experience same-sex attraction and/or identify outside of the gender identity assigned them at birth—and queer communities is more prominent than ever. More specifically, the middle-class picture of a (usually white, at least in the United States) same-sex couple living happily alongside heterosexual couples has become the dominant image in mainstream conceptualizations of homosexuality and queerness. Although the greater mainstream acceptance of queer folk is certainly a positive development, there is commonly also an erasure of nonwhite and working-class queer communities, as well as those that existed in the days before queerness was widely visible, in both the United States and Mexico. I have therefore chosen to study these groups whom American narratives frequently leave out: historical Latinx communities.¹ I

¹ I use Latinx as a gender-neutral and all-inclusive adjective to describe communities of people who are of Latin American descent. By not using Latino/a or Latin@, I am acknowledging that there are people in

have chosen to focus on Chicano and Mexican queer communities in order to examine both queer communities in different national frameworks as well as groups who tend to be erased from the typical North American queer narrative. In taking a comparative approach, it is possible to not only challenge the US-centric narrative of queerness but also observe how issues facing queer communities existed across borders and among groups that shared the same cultural heritage, even if they did not share the same geographic or national space. Moreover, such cross-border interactions as communication, cultural influence, and other linkages can be explored.

This article examines the living situations of gay and lesbian people in the United States and Mexico in the 1970s and 1980s, drawing on existing scholarship as well as publications in gay newspapers and writings by queer individuals, to explore how they used the press to build communities and what the tensions contained in these publications reveal about the priorities, gains, and even fractures within these communities. In particular, I will attempt to illustrate the diverse and multifaceted natures of Mexican and Chicano homosexual communities, especially with regards to gender and class, and the ways this diversity affected these communities. For the purpose of this article, community is defined as a network of individuals who have formed social support systems based on shared experiences. In this case, the overarching shared experience on which these communities were built was that of homosexuality and the discriminatory attitudes towards homosexuals in society. However, despite holding their homosexuality in common, many members of these communities also came from different gender, cultural, and class backgrounds, causing fractures within the homosexual community as a whole.

these communities who do not consider themselves to be a part of traditional masculinity or femininity and, as such, cannot be described by a masculine (Latino) or feminine (Latina) demonym.

Although this article focuses on gay and lesbian people, it is worth noting that people of other gender identities and sexual orientations did exist and faced considerable adversity during this time. The focus on gay and lesbian struggles and community building reflects not only the predominant language of self-identification used during this time period but also the marginalization of people who did not fit into these categories. I will refrain from using the current terminology of contemporary LGBTQIAP+ discourse in order to avoid being ahistorical, as well as impose contemporary labels on the identities of a different time. Thus, the word *homosexual*, although largely out of use with the contemporary community and seen in some circles as derogatory, will at times be utilized to describe gay and lesbian people, as that is what they called themselves during the period studied in this article. An additional study into the experiences of people who identified outside of the labels of heterosexual and homosexual, as well as those whose gender identities differ from those they were assigned at birth, would be a valuable contribution to the existing scholarship of historical queer communities.

First, I will identify the ways homosexuals in Mexico and the United States built communities around their common homosexuality. Second, I will examine the social factors that Mexican and Chicano homosexuals faced, both outside and within their communities, to explore the effectiveness of community building and better understand the Mexican/Chicano homosexual experience. Finally, I will examine the ways that gay and lesbian communities failed to build complete communities—based on the diversity of experience and difficulties identified in the second section of this article. After all, homosexuals were not a monolith, and by building communities that focused only on homosexuality, they often neglected other aspects of the lives of various homosexuals, such as women and poor people. By examining these exclusions and instances of neglect, I bring to light the

lives of homosexual individuals whose concerns are rarely addressed in historical narratives about homosexuality.

Community Building among Homosexuals

Marginalized by a culture they deemed “heterosexist,” or at the very least homophobic, homosexuals in Mexico and the United States formed their own communities to protect themselves from homophobia as well as advance their own agendas.² These communities were formed in a number of ways. As the major source of subject material for this study, gay publications were prominent in both Mexico and the United States. Requiring writers, editors, and other publication and reporting staff, these publications were communities in and of themselves where homosexuals in both Mexico and America could gather to write and report about the goings-on of homosexual life. The staff of these publications, however, were merely a microcosm of a much larger system of communities that they were reporting on. Used as a method of communication among gay communities, publications served as a hub for community building and provide valuable insights about the ways in which homosexuals were creating their own spaces and addressing their concerns on an interpersonal and intracommunity level.

Looking in Mexican publications, it is easy to learn the goals of those working on community building through publishing. The Tijuana-based periodical *¿Y Qué?* declares in its mission statement that it works against political, social, and economic oppression of homosexual people in a society that it deems “heterosexist.”³ I will focus here for a moment on the social oppression faced by homosexuals and the solutions offered within the pages of *¿Y Qué?*. Faced with homophobia in their

² “¿Qué es ¡Y Qué!?” *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 11 (April–May 1986): 2.

³ *Ibid.*

daily lives, Mexican homosexuals frequently experienced social isolation—either marginalized by the society they were in if they were “out” or silenced into an erasure of their identities if they chose to hide their sexual orientation. Evidence for this isolation and oppression are spread across the pages of *¿Y Qué?*, where even an outside observer writing for the paper comments on the way that homosexual individuals felt “isolated, insecure, devalued, without rights, and powerless in the face of injustice.”⁴ Lacking social spaces meant for them in mainstream society, they instead decided to build their own. The most obvious examples of social community offered within homosexual circles were the gay bars that were widely advertised within homosexual publications, such as *¿Y Qué?*. Because they were largely advertised in these publications, gay bars were a place where homosexual men formed social connections based on their shared homosexuality without worrying about having to share space with heterosexuals, who were far less likely to find these bars due to their advertisement outside of heterosexual mainstream publications. Acting almost as a haven where homosexuals could make social connections with other homosexuals without having to deal with the discrimination they experienced when in predominantly heterosexual spaces, gay bars were a major social form of community building for Mexican homosexuals.

Much like in Mexico, American homosexuals built social communities through publications and social spaces. American homosexuals also advertised gay bars in their periodicals and frequented them in their free time.⁵ Chicano homosexuals, however, faced a different situation than Mexicans, as they were

⁴ Felix Escamilla, “Adelante... ICM,” *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 11 (April–May 1986): 3.

⁵ Horacio N. Roque Ramirez, “‘That’s My Place!’: Negotiating Racial, Sexual, and Gender Politics in San Francisco’s Gay Latino Alliance, 1975–1983,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 2 (2013): 224–58, 226.

not only sexual but also racial minorities. According to the historian Horacio N. Roque Ramirez, the racial aspect of the discrimination Chicano homosexuals felt extended even into mainstream homosexual culture—which was predominantly white, or Anglo.⁶ Chicanos responded to the exclusion they faced in the predominantly white homosexual community by forming parallel structures for themselves that focused on both their homosexuality *and* their Chicano identities. This was particularly important because the Chicano community, which was largely heterosexual, discriminated against homosexuals just as the Anglo homosexual community discriminated against Chicanos.⁷ Chicano homosexuals thus needed a community that catered to both their sexualities and their racial identities because they could not rely on either of them on their own to form a true social support system based on shared experiences.

One example of homosexual Chicano community building was the formation of the Gay Latino Alliance (GALA) in San Francisco. Beginning with advertisements calling for a Chicano community in (predominantly Anglo) homosexual publications, Chicanos formed their own social organization beginning in the homes of homosexual Chicano men.⁸ The organization achieved further growth by advertising in other homosexual spaces, including posting flyers in mainstream gay bars. Once fully established, GALA sustained itself through such social events as dances, which provided not only funding but also a place for homosexual Chicanos to find a sense of togetherness.⁹ Excluded from society based on both sexuality and race, homosexual Chicanos formed communities to support one another through the difficulties of these multilayered oppressions. The separation of white and Chicano homosexuals appears to have existed beyond just the people who formed GALA, as there is little

⁶ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 230.

Chicano or Latino representation in American gay newspapers, including *The Bay Area Reporter* and the *Gay Activist*. The racism and exclusion felt by Chicanos in white spaces identified by Ramirez necessitated the creation of specifically Chicano spaces. Because the Chicano community itself perpetuated homophobia, there was moreover the need to create a social support system that served individuals who were both homosexual and Chicano.

Although social support systems were a necessary survival mechanism for homosexuals living in Mexico and the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, there was also a broad recognition that these systems were needed due to the structural homophobia in Mexican and American society. Change and support within communities was thus not enough to solve the problems of homosexual individuals and communities; structural changes needed to be made to society to make it more amenable to homosexual people. The mission statement of *¿Y Qué?* states that it hoped to raise people's consciousness in order to make people aware of the need of an organization that was in favor of "the liberation of homosexual and lesbian people" in its area.¹⁰ The recognition of the "economic, social, and political" oppression of homosexuals informed the activism of Mexicans and Chicanos in homosexual communities, leading them to form organizational structures that reached into heterosexual-dominated spaces and demanded visibility, acceptance, and change.¹¹ Throughout the newspaper, there are mentions of "activists," "organizations," "social work," "community," and even an international "pride group" for homosexuals to organize solidarity socially, politically, and culturally.¹² Although these

¹⁰ "¿Qué es ¡Y Qué!?" 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*; "Progreso del Grupo Orgullo," *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 11 (April–May 1986): 4; "6to Aniversario de FIGHT," *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 11 (April–May 1986): 9; "El Lesbianismo," *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 11 (April–May 1986): 11; "POLEN," *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 11 (April–May 1986): 13; and "Noticias Sociales," *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 11 (April–May 1986): 14.

organizational structures provided social community, they also served the purpose of change making on a broader scale. By organizing together, homosexual activists could not only create greater connections among themselves but also make change outside of their communities. In order to make the changes they desired and address their needs on a societal level, there were a number of different strategies utilized that differed from place to place.

According to the sociologist Rafael de la Dehesa, on the ground political change efforts often involved consciousness raising and political visibility in Mexico.¹³ Often erased by mainstream narratives, it was a struggle to even get homosexuality noticed on the mainstream political agenda, and most political work in the 1970s done by homosexuals in Mexico was geared towards consciousness raising.¹⁴ Moving into the 1980s, however, there was increasing emphasis on electoral politics and representation in the political system. Although there was a divide about how to go about this—with some believing in the formation of activist coalitions with other movements and others advocating autonomy of the homosexual movement—the increased emphasis in affecting change through government was nonetheless present. The focus on public visibility did not fade so much as shift as this change was made, with public rallies emphasizing the homosexual vote.¹⁵ Consciousness raising remained important as well, and the efforts of Mexican activists became increasingly left oriented at this time. Beyond working in establishment politics, Mexican activists formed broad networks of solidarity (which also tended to be leftist) across both the country and the border with the United States, holding conferences and educational events in

¹³ Rafael de la Dehesa, “Global Communities and Hybrid Cultures: Early Gay and Lesbian Electoral Activism in Brazil and Mexico,” *Latin American Research Review* 42, no. 1 (2007): 29–51, 32.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

both Mexico and California. Articles in *¿Y Qué?* indicate that these international conferences addressed issues of AIDS, family, human rights, and race.¹⁶

Divisions within Homosexual Communities in Mexico and the United States

When trying to determine the difficulties faced by gay and lesbian people in the 1970s and 1980s, the most predominant (and most visible) struggle beyond generalized alienation from heterosexual culture was with AIDS, called by its Spanish acronym SIDA in Mexico. Indeed, in just one eighteen-page copy of the Tijuana gay periodical *¿Y Qué?*, AIDS is mentioned in no less than seven separate articles and notices.¹⁷ Having consumed so much attention in gay Mexican media, it is clear that AIDS was a major issue within the gay community in Mexico and that AIDS discrimination was deeply linked with cultural homophobia. This was an issue that moreover extended beyond the scope of this periodical, continuing to dominate Mexican gay publications, including *Frontera Gay*, well into the 1990s.¹⁸ The persistence and prevalence of the AIDS struggle in gay communities is well documented in existing scholarship, so it suffices to say that the AIDS crisis was a serious issue that

¹⁶ “¿Qué es ¿Y Qué?” 2; and “Progreso del Grupo Orgullo,” 4.

¹⁷ “Editorial,” *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 11 (April–May 1986): 3; “Progreso del Grupo Orgullo,” 4; “Proyecto SIDA en Tijuana,” *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 11 (April–May 1986): 5; “Orientación para Afectados por el SIDA (ORASI),” *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 11 (April–May 1986): 5; “Hablando de SIDA,” *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 11 (April–May 1986): 6; “Un Ejemplo a Seguir,” *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 11 (April–May 1986): 7; and “Sigue Creciendo el Grupo GOHL,” *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 11 (April–May 1986): 12.

¹⁸ *Frontera Gay* (Tijuana, Mexico), 2, no. 32 (1991).

affected gay communities on a transnational scale, causing grief, fear, and discrimination from outside communities.¹⁹

I would like to take time here, however, to examine what the discussion of the AIDS crisis tended to leave out: lesbians. In the Mexican periodicals used in this study, there were advertisements for men's health clinics, advertisements promoting the use of condoms, and discussions of how anal penetration increases the risks of the spread of AIDS, amongst other things. Nowhere is there mention of women's health concerns, use of sexual protection for lesbians, such as dental dams, or sexual health resources of any kind. The only published mention of women's health resources was an advertisement looking to start a women's health clinic listed below an article dedicated to lesbians.²⁰ Placed in the part of the newspaper dedicated to lesbian struggle, the advertisement is indicative of not only the lack of resources for lesbians but also the divide lesbian health had from the larger male-dominated homosexual community. Although the risk of being infected with AIDS with another female partner is low compared to the risk faced by gay men having penetrative sex, the male-centric focus of the AIDS crisis took over discussions of homosexual health more generally, leaving lesbian women to find community in whatever space was left, whether or not they were infected.²¹ In *¿Y Qué?*, the space left for lesbian health was small indeed.

The exclusion of women's health from discussions among homosexuals was just one of the many specific issues faced by lesbians in Mexico. Lesbians in Mexico felt that there was a considerable erasure of their identities in their day to day lives

¹⁹ Further reading on gay life in Mexico during the AIDS crisis can be found in Héctor Corillo, *The Night is Young: Sexuality in Mexico in the Time of AIDS* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002).

²⁰ "El lesbianismo," 8–9.

²¹ "HIV/AIDS," US Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health, last modified July 1, 2011, <http://www.womenshealth.gov/hiv-aids/women-are-at-risk-of-hiv/women-who-have-sex-can-get-hiv.html>.

and felt “insult[ed]” and a great “shame” to constantly be presumed to be heterosexual.²² The narrative painted by the author of one lesbian-specific column demonstrates the heteronormativity of the world in which Mexican lesbians lived. She writes, “men will not leave us alone,” “gynecologists want us to use anti-contraceptives,” and their (presumably straight) friends want them “to hook up with boys.”²³ Lesbian women had to either pretend to be straight and endure the erasure of who they were and the “fear of being discovered” or risk social rejection by coming out.²⁴ Lesbians moreover feared isolation from their fellow women when they came out, as fear of being perceived as a lesbian by association and the homophobia that accompanied such assumptions led many women to avoid any level of intimacy with their fellow woman. Both homosexual and heterosexual women were known to isolate themselves from female intimacy for this reason; being assumed a lesbian in public spaces was dangerous, especially for lesbians but also for straight women. Aggression and abuse, both physical and psychological, were a common fear and experience among lesbians who were out, and there was a fear of blackmail.²⁵ Even lesbian women who wanted to embrace their identities struggled with doing so in the face of such adversity.

The concern most specific to lesbians, however, was one of patriarchy as much as it was of homophobia. In a society that expected women to define themselves by their relationships with men, be they familial or romantic, lesbians were seen as undermining the gender status quo and acting as “marimachos,” or women who were attempting to act as men.²⁶ Indeed, the experience of lesbians within the Mexican homosexual

²² “El lesbianismo,” 8–9.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.; and Carla Mari Trujillo, ed., *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About* (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1991), 1.

community appears to have been one of being relegated to second-class status to men, to whom much of the publications were catered and whose voices appeared to be the most dominant. Much like women of all sexualities in society more generally, lesbian women within the homosexual community faced a struggle with structural patriarchy. Unable to find the support and community that they needed within a male-dominated homosexual community, Mexican lesbians formed their own groups.

One example of both the need for lesbian community and the male domination of the homosexual narrative can be seen in an advertisement for the formation of a new lesbian consciousness-raising group found in *¿Y Qué?*. The Grupo Lesbico de Tijuana (Lesbian Group of Tijuana) was supported by the writers of *¿Y Qué?*, who clearly did not see themselves as part of the lesbian community. Instead, they remind their readers that the advancement of lesbian consciousness is an advancement of the homosexual cause more generally and that it is “silly” to oppose it.²⁷ The preemptive strike against anti-lesbian criticism is indicative of the resistance to the advancement of lesbians in the homosexual community; there was an implicit assumption that there would be opposition to lesbian empowerment in the dismissal of those who would stand against it. Although there were male homosexuals who supported lesbians and their empowerment, it is clear that there was also a significant number who did not.

It is worth noting that the women whose voices are recognized in *¿Y Qué?*, as well as the men who took it upon themselves to speak for them, were some of the most visible members of the Mexican homosexual community, with the time and sense of security to speak openly about their experiences with homosexuality. Closeted members of the community, working-class people with little time to write for publications,

²⁷ “Nuevo Grupo de Lesbianas en Tijuana,” *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 16 (November 1987): 4.

and people living in rural areas where publications and communities like the ones found in Tijuana likely did not exist are all absent from this narrative. I therefore caution against seeing this narrative as telling the full story of all lesbians in Mexico. Even lesbians in Tijuana recognized the divide between “bourgeois” lesbians and lesbian members of the working class, although there was ultimately a call for a unified communication network among all lesbians. Further study and attention to these less visible members of the gay and lesbian community would be a valuable expansion of existing scholarship.²⁸

Knowing this erasure, it is interesting to note that in the same article where the Tijuana lesbians called for a network among lesbians, the authors also call for a connection with lesbians in other countries, including Chicanas in the United States. Following this connection, I now turn to the concerns of the Chicano/a communities in the United States. Although AIDS was a prominent concern in the United States, it did not take up the same amount of space in gay publications in the United States as it did in Mexico. The gay periodicals utilized for this study come from the dominant group within the gay community: Anglos.²⁹ Within the Chicano community, there was even less concern with AIDS, as Chicanos were often experiencing racial and class-based discrimination, and many of their concerns centered on these issues. AIDS, which was seen as a homosexual concern, was unlikely to gain much ground within the greater Chicano community because of the homophobia that existed within it, as well as the desire to focus on issues of race and class.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ As Anglos dominated the homosexual scene and had considerably more economic resources to put out publications, I encountered great difficulties finding a Chicano-only gay periodical. This, I feel, is just one reflection of many of the marginalization of Chicano homosexuals.

³⁰ “El caso de discriminación de una sindicalista chicana en contra de la universidad de Washington tocó un nervio del movimiento Chicano, de

Beyond representation in publications and health concerns, homosexual Chicanos felt that they lacked community and a space of their own in which they could identify both with their *raza* (race) and their sexuality.³¹ In middle-class homosexual spaces, Chicano men felt that they could not connect easily with their fellow Chicanos because they were placing Anglo men on a pedestal and competing among themselves about who could be with them.³² Ethnographic studies done by Enrique Horacio Ramirez demonstrate moreover that there was racism in the places that middle-class gay men tended to frequent, including excessive checks of identification cards and behavior in gay bars.³³ Racism from Anglos, however, was only one form of discrimination faced by homosexual Chicanos. Within the Chicano community, too, there was a considerable amount of discrimination, with much of the community believing that homosexual Chicanos had become agents of Anglo culture and abandoned their roots in *la raza*.³⁴ Faced with racism and class discrimination, Chicano activists focused more on issues of race and work than sexuality or gender, leaving homosexual Chicanos feeling like they were not fully embraced by gay subculture or their fellow *raza*. Working-class Chicano homosexuals, who lacked the same level of access and visibility when compared to more assimilated men who spent time in Anglo homosexual circles, likely lacked even the partial communities available to the men whose experiences are documented in the primary and secondary literature.

Ramirez claims that Chicano and Chicana homosexuals were attracted to gay subculture because they were victimized

los grupos feministas y de la izquierda—y los polarize a todos,” *The Freedom Socialist* (Seattle, WA), no. 2 (Summer 1978): 5.

³¹Ramirez, “That’s My Place!” 226.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 230.

³⁴ Trujillo, *Chicana Lesbians*, 1.

by racism, sexism, and cultural alienation and hoped to create a pluralistic approach to these social issues within their community. There was, however, still a considerable amount of gender-based exclusion among Chicano/a homosexuals.³⁵ Much like in Mexico, Chicana lesbians faced a particular struggle beyond their gay male Chicano counterparts: the double burden of sexism and homophobia. Within the homosexual community, Chicana lesbians found that spaces were often male dominated and not meant for them, leaving them to feel as if they were without a true home in the mainstream homosexual community.³⁶ Within the Chicano community, however, Carla Trujillo, herself a Chicana lesbian, claims that other Chicanos saw lesbians as aberrant not only because they were homosexual but also because they subverted traditional gender norms by rejecting the idea that they had to define themselves by their relationships with men.³⁷ By rejecting traditional patriarchal values, Chicana lesbians were seen to be subverting the values of their race and heritage and accused of being *vendidas*, or sell outs, to Anglo culture.³⁸ Chicana lesbians thus represented a particularly burdened group during this time period, left on the sidelines of homosexual communities and rejected by both Anglo and Chicano cultures alike.

Issues of sexism and rejection from culture appear to have been present within both the Mexican and Chicano homosexual communities of the 1970s and 1980s, albeit more pronounced within Chicano circles.³⁹ Knowing these difficulties, I turn now

³⁵ Ramirez, "That's My Place!" 225.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Trujillo, *Chicana Lesbians*, 1.

³⁸ Ibid., 180.

³⁹ Although not extensively explored here, it is still worth remembering the struggle homosexuals, particularly men, faced with AIDS during this time. Although it will not be addressed at length in this article for the same reasons as AIDS, it is also important to remember the violence faced by homosexuals at this time, both in households and the communities and societies in which they lived. This exploration of the

to how they affected Chicano and Mexican communities, with a particular eye towards gender.

Despite providing valuable support systems for homosexual males, many of the communities identified previously in this article were also susceptible to the divisions I have already laid out, especially in terms of gender. One only has to glance at the Mexican homosexual publications to see that the social community building was not targeted at women. The advertisements for gay bars in *¿Y Qué?* that I previously examined are examples of not only social community building but also social exclusion. Accompanied by images of men or images that evoke maleness, such as moustaches, these clubs appear to be catered exclusively to homosexual men.⁴⁰ Although there is one advertisement that features women, it is much smaller in comparison to those displaying male-centric gay bars and does not appear to be specifically for lesbians but rather the entire gay community.⁴¹ In this way, although the need for homosexual community was being met, it was not addressing the full concerns of the entire community. Just as lesbian women faced unique difficulties in Mexico, they also had specific needs for community, as the exclusion they felt in society was not ameliorated by mainstream homosexual community building.

Other intra-community efforts to support homosexual people included discussions of theatre that addressed the issue of AIDS and a number of conferences and gatherings for homosexual individuals. Knowing the previously established patriarchal structure of the homosexual community, it seems

struggles of homosexual Chicanos and Mexicans is by no means exhaustive or fully representative, realizing the diversity of queer communities. It does, however, provide a basis for starting to understand the complex struggles of historical queer communities.

⁴⁰ "Mi Kasa Bar," *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 16 (November 1987): 10-11, in addition to other untitled advertisements.

⁴¹ "Expendido 'Club Marimbas,'" *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 16 (November 1987): 9.

unlikely that these events were catered to the specific needs of lesbians. Although there is evidence of lesbian organizing, including an article calling for the formation of a lesbian consciousness-raising group, the availability of purely social spaces for lesbian women appears to have been quite limited.⁴² In sum, there was quite predominant intra-community organizing to provide social support structures for homosexuals in Mexico; there are indeed even advertisements for a gay youth group.⁴³ Such structures, however, did not address the needs of the entire community, particularly those of lesbian women. By focusing on travel (conferences) and consumerism (bars), homosexual community building was furthermore exclusionary to Mexican homosexual people who lacked financial resources or access to adequate transportation.

As in Mexico, Chicana lesbians found themselves wondering where their space was. Much like their Chicano counterparts, they were concerned about their exclusion from heterosexual and white spaces. Their needs for social systems of support, however, were not nearly as well met. GALA, for example, was a group founded by men that appeared to operate largely for men, with Chicana women eventually finding that they were not entirely welcome at the social events that sustained GALA.⁴⁴ Faced with patriarchy, they were seldom leaders within homosexual communities, making it very difficult for them to address their own needs. One Chicana lesbian, Carla Trujillo, stated that she felt undervalued as a woman and rejected by her culture as a homosexual. Instead of turning to her fellow homosexual men for support, however, she called for unity among women, whom she felt were all oppressed under patriarchy and must rise up.⁴⁵ Because there were few specific

⁴² "Primer Encuentro Nacional de Lesbianas," *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 16 (November 1987): 4.

⁴³ "Grupo Polen," *¿Y Qué?* (Tijuana, Mexico), 16 (November 1987): 9.

⁴⁴ Ramirez, "That's My Place!" 252.

⁴⁵ Trujillo, *Chicana Lesbians*, 192.

accommodations for them in homosexual communities, Chicana lesbians often had to turn to feminist circles to find a space. Feminism during this time, however, was often racist and heteronormative, leaving Chicana lesbians without a space to fully call their own. Although they were involved in community building, I have had difficulty finding instances in which they were the primary beneficiaries of it.

Beyond gender, racism was a major problem faced by Chicanos in the United States that had widespread effects within both homosexual and Chicano communities. Much like in Mexico, Chicano discourse was usually leftist; however, the conversation was centered more on race and then class, with little room given to homosexuals. The discussion of race issues often left homosexual Chicanos outside of the main organizing force, or out of the narrative completely. One such instance of this is found in a Spanish-language article in *The Freedom Socialist*, where a woman facing race- and gender-based discrimination in the workplace found that the coalition supporting her fell apart when she refused to reject the support of homosexuals and feminists, angering the Chicano heterosexual male organizing base, who felt that she had taken a specifically Chicano issue to the feminists and homosexuals where it did not belong.⁴⁶ The internal divide within the Chicano community made it harder for Chicano homosexuals to organize, as their larger community focused on race and class issues.

Turning to homosexual activism also presented the issue of white- and male-dominated organizing. The concerns that the homosexual community faced, it appears, were the same ones preventing them from making the change they wanted to see. Lacking a strong community base that was fully their own, especially among Chicanas whose exclusion was based on not only race and sexuality but also gender, Chicano homosexual activism was limited in comparison to that of Mexican homosexuals. This is not to say, however, that they were not

⁴⁶ "El caso de discriminación," 5.

active. Also concerned with visibility and popular consciousness, American activists participated in international conferences about homosexual issues and agitated for gay consciousness.⁴⁷ Homosexual Chicanos were moreover acutely aware of their roots outside of the United States and were often proponents of Third World liberation theory, linking their oppression as homosexuals and members of an oppressed race to the struggles of peoples abroad.⁴⁸ American Chicano activists also agitated visibly for public acceptance of their sexualities, holding pride parades and other public events.⁴⁹

Despite difficulties with the homosexual movement in the United States, it is undeniable that Chicanos were also participating in more mainstream activism, including white-dominated visibility politics that aimed to destigmatize homosexuality as well as electoral activism that attempted to forward antidiscrimination laws.⁵⁰ Furthermore, it is important to remember the lesbian women who were partaking in these movements, as their efforts and voices remain largely absent from the documents and narratives created by the homosexual movement, despite scholarly evidence that they wished to participate in activism.⁵¹ Organizing was divided by not only race and sexuality but also gender. While Chicano homosexuals did attempt to address the needs of their community on a societal level, they ultimately found it difficult to do so due to discriminatory practices within activist communities. Chicano homosexuals indeed often felt their loyalties were divided between their race and sexuality and had a very difficult time

⁴⁷ “Progreso del Grupo Orgullo,” 4.

⁴⁸ Ramirez, “That’s My Place!” 242.

⁴⁹ “Progreso del Grupo Orgullo,” 4; and *The Gay Activist* (New York), (October 1973): 1.

⁵⁰ Mary Bernstein, “Identities and Politics: Toward a Historical Understanding of the Lesbian and Gay Movement,” *Social Science History* 26, no. 3 (2002): 531–81.

⁵¹ Ramirez, “That’s My Place!” 243.

working for both at once. Thus race, gender, and sexuality served as a basis for exclusion, not inclusion, into larger communities, leaving Chicano homosexuals forced to organize among themselves and Chicana lesbians on the margins altogether.

Conclusion

In both Mexico and the United States, homosexual people of Mexican heritage found themselves facing considerable social and political challenges. From health discrimination and physical violence to social exclusion and rejection, homosexual life in Mexico and the United States was characterized by stigma, discrimination, and social isolation. As this article has demonstrated, in both Mexican and Chicano communities, sexism was often compounded onto homophobia to create a specifically difficult experience for lesbian women, who then found themselves without a real place within homosexual and feminist communities. In the United States, Chicanos and Chicanas also found themselves struggling with a split identity, with their loyalties torn between *la raza*, who usually rejected their homosexuality, and the homosexual community, which often either erased their race or discriminated against them because of it.

In Mexico, there were considerable efforts made to create social support systems and vehicles of political change for the benefit of homosexuals to address the needs of the community; these efforts, however, tended to lack space for women and poor people. Facing multiple oppressions, lesbians in general as well as poor homosexual and lesbian individuals often found that the attempts at community building among homosexuals did not cater to their needs. In the United States, there was a similar issue of exclusion for lesbian women and poor people. Community building was more difficult, however, due to a divided loyalty among Chicanos, who did not feel that they fully fit in either Chicano or homosexual spaces. Activism, too, was

difficult, as Chicano activism did not address their needs as homosexuals and homosexual activism did not address their needs as Chicanos.

Bringing the narrative back to the present, it is important to recognize that the marginalization of people of color and those who do not identify as a cisgender male continues today in queer activist circles, as well as in mainstream discussions of queer people. Through this study, I have illuminated some of the struggles of the past within the community in a way that better allows us to understand and address the issues facing us in the present.