



Latina/Latino Americans

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Latina and Latino Americans must contend with multiple cultural and political histories, including colonization, imperialism, and migration patterns, as well as their status as non-Anglos in the United States, as people of color, and as queer people in their respective racial and ethnic communities.

In general, the lives of glbtq Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. require constant negotiation: as members of minority ethnic communities in conversation--and often in conflict--with the dominant community and with white glbtq culture; and as glbtq people in their own racial and ethnic communities, where they must constantly explain their "non-traditional" genders and sexualities. Thus, while glbtq Latina/o-Americans may encounter racism, exclusion, or relative acceptance in the former, they may simultaneously face homophobia, family opposition, or understanding in the latter.

National, Racial, and Generational Differences

Accounting for "Latina/o Americans" in the U.S. is no easy task. While there are dominant Latino groups in the country--Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, for example--there are also smaller national populations, such as Salvadorans and Colombians, who complicate further the definition of who is a "Latina" or "Latino." In addition, different migration waves over more than a century have added great complexity to the patterns of ethnic identification, English and Spanish language proficiency, and rates of assimilation into the dominant Anglo culture. It is very difficult to generalize about so heterogeneous a group of people, whose experience differs according to a number of variables, including race, economic status, citizenship, language, politics, and length of time in the United States.

The differences in national origin and time of arrival can be critical in shaping the attitudes and comfort levels of glbtq Latina/o Americans. The degree of assimilation in the United States and within glbtq communities may vary a great deal according to these variables. In addition, while earlier immigrants may not have had direct knowledge of glbtq culture in their countries of origin, many of the more recent ones have some knowledge of their home countries' decades-old lesbian and gay liberation movements (especially those in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico); for others, their home nations are still in the initial stages of developing open, non-stigmatized glbtq politics and cultures.

The transnational quality of Latinas and Latinos in the United States can also complicate their lives in terms of glbtq identities. For example, Puerto Ricans are legally U.S. citizens, yet they are not entirely "at home" outside the island. Their bi-national experience means that their immigrant identity itself is often in flux: they are not at home entirely either "here" or "there." Coupled with their multi-racial origins, ranging from lighter- to darker-skinned, they can occupy racially stigmatized positions both in mainstream glbtq culture and in the racially-stratified Latina/o culture as well.

Cubans and Cuban-Americans in the U.S. similarly include racial differentiations, however unacknowledged these may be. Moreover, the political stance of many glbtq Cuban-American may differ significantly from



Members of Bienestar, a Latino community services organization, at Long Beach Pride in 2005. Photograph by Angela Brinskele. Image courtesy Angela Brinskele. Copyright © Angela Brinskele.

that of many other Latina/o Americans. The inhumane treatment of homosexuals, particularly gay men, and female-to-male transgender people in Revolutionary Cuba has caused a large proportion of glbtq Cuban-Americans to support anti-Castro policies, while many other glbtq Latina/o-Americans, desiring the U.S. not to interfere in the internal political life of their home nations, support the normalization of relations between the United States and Cuba.

The transnational identities of glbtq Latina/o Americans thus can have a splintering effect, separating Latina/o Americans according to their cultures and countries of origin. As a consequence, there is no single glbtq Latina/o American racial, political, or economic block. Moreover, once they migrate to the U.S., not all Latina/o Americans regard life in their home nations as of primary concern or directly relevant to their own lives.

Mexican-American Sexualities

Mexican and Mexican-American--or Chicano/Chicana--glbtq sexualities have varied historically in the U.S., reflecting the cultural and political traditions of Mexico. Rigid male/female, dominant/submissive roles have been the norm. According to this tradition, the male has the freedom and privilege to conquer sexually, while the female must remain passive and virginal.

As early as during the period of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, however, when many women took active roles in the armed struggle, culturally typecast female and male roles have not always followed the traditional line. Similarly, the Catholic Church and the state in Mexico have generally repressed and policed glbtq life; yet same-sex and alternative gender and sexual cultures have nevertheless found alternative spaces for expression in literature, music, and film. Mexican glbtq cultural expression has in turn influenced glbtq Latina/os in the United States and Europe.

Similarly, the Mexican gay liberation movements have influenced Latina/o Americans. As the activist and researcher Norma Mogrovejo has documented, there is a long tradition of Mexican lesbian and gay organizing linked to labor rights and anti-imperialist politics. Some of this work has been in dialogue with glbtq Latinos in the U.S. and Europe. Often glbtq cultural workers and activists have crossed social and political borders, exchanging ideas and strategies along the way.

The late gay Chicano sociologist Lionel Cantú, Jr. explored how both sexuality and economic need shape the border-crossing experience of gay Mexican men emigrating to the U.S. Specifically, Cantú analyzed how the phenomenon of Mexican gay men meeting foreign tourists in their country sometimes leads to contradictory experiences. Cantú noted that many gay Mexicans who use networks in the Mexican tourist industry as springboards to cross into the U.S. indulge in "*el sueño fálico*," or "phallic dream": they envision the U.S. as a sexual utopia in which they can be freely and openly gay; however, this dream of an idyllic gay life is usually shattered by the homophobia and racism that they encounter.

Creative and Cultural Work

Cultural and political expression by glbtq Latina and Latino Americans have been most noteworthy in literary and creative works. Novels, poetry, plays, and essays by numerous women and men have reshaped notions of "Latinidad" or "Latinoness" and glbtq identities.

Two prolific and widely read Chicana lesbian authors have been especially influential. In 1981, the late Texan Chicana writer and theorist Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1942-2004) and the Southern California-born activist and playwright Cherríe L. Moraga (b. 1952) published the foundational collection, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Now in its third edition, the anthology is an important political and theoretical text for lesbians of color, including Chicanas and Latinas.

Individually, Anzaldúa and Moraga each earned prominence as Chicana lesbian authors in the 1980s and

1990s. Central in their work has been the argument that sexuality and gender cannot be separated from other means of identification such as culture and religion, or from systems of control such as class exploitation, racial conquest, and patriarchal nationalist politics. Also important in their theorizing has been a challenge to religious institutions such as the Catholic Church and a re-appropriation of traditional indigenous spiritual beliefs.

Other *gltq* Latina/o American writers who have been influential include Carla Trujillo, Tatiana de la Tierra, Jaime Cortez, Jaime Manrique, and Rafael Campo, as have been such performing artists as Marga Gómez, Monica Palacios, Alina Troyano ("Carmelita Tropicana"), and Luis Alfaro. John Rechy and Michael Nava are Latino Americans who have achieved prominence in the wider *gltq* community, as well as within the Latina/o American community. While much homophobia, misunderstanding, and collective silence remains to be challenged, the contributions of *gltq* Latina/o Americans over the past three decades have made a great impact in documenting the lives of this vibrant community.

Gltq Latina and Latino Activists

Many *gltq* Latinas and Latinos have played important roles in social and political organizing at least since the 1950s. They include, among many others, San Francisco's drag performer José Sarria in the 1950s and 1960s; New York's Sylvia (Ray) Rivera from the 1960s through the 1990s; Philadelphia's Ada Bello in the 1960s and 1970s; and California's Jeanne Cordova from the 1970s through the 1990s.

In terms of activism around both sexuality and race/ethnicity, Latina and Latino Americans began their work in the early 1970s. In 1972, a New York-based gay men's group, self-described as homosexual men coming from several countries in Latin America, published a 63-page pamphlet in Spanish, *AFUERA* ("Out"). Highlighting the political dimension of coming out, the booklet addresses Third World liberation, Marxist thought, and patriarchy.

Also in 1972, New York's *COHLA* (*Comité Homosexual Latinoamericano*, or Latin American Homosexual Committee) attempted to march in the city's annual Puerto Rican Day Parade. While they were denied participation, they succeeded in bringing attention to gay lives and politics in the Puerto Rican and broader Latino community, and the struggles of people of color to the mainstream white gay movement. Also active in the early 1970s were the Gay Liberated Chicanos of Los Angeles.

In 1975, gay Chicanos and Latinos, along with a few Chicana and Latina lesbians, founded the Gay Latino Alliance (GALA) in the San Francisco Bay Area and San José regions. GALA combined political activism and socializing as it attempted to challenge the assumptions of gay and lesbian whites about Latinos and of Latina/o heterosexuals about lesbians and gay men in the city.

While GALA tried to carry out co-gender organizing, it was not successful in creating a safe space for most lesbian women. Some lesbian Latinas and gay Latinos worked instead in multiracial coalitions, such as San Francisco's Third World Gay Caucus, or in lesbian and feminist organizations.

Gltq Latinas and Latinos announced their presence nationally at the historic 1979 March on Washington. Coalitions from Texas, California, and the East Coast--together with representatives from Latin America--convened days before the March at Howard University to participate in the Third World Gay Conference.

In the 1980s numerous Latina/Latino organizations formed throughout the U.S., often as a response to the AIDS crisis. While San Francisco's GALA had disappeared by 1983, Los Angeles's GLLU (Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos) formed in 1981, and a subcommittee, LU (Lesbianas Unidas), formed in 1983. LU became an independent group in 1984.

Also by 1984, Denver was home to *Ambiente Latino* (Latinos in the life) and *Las Mujeres Alegres* (Gay Women), while Houston hosted a Gay Hispanic Caucus. In New York, a group of Latina lesbian friends

created "Las Buenas Amigas" (Good Women Friends) in November 1986. The organization emerged from the African-American lesbian organization "Soul Sisters," which had welcomed Latinas. Many of these and other organizations, including San Francisco's *Mujerío* (Gathering of Women), which was active in the late 1980s and early 1990s, organized transnationally with glbtq activists in Puerto Rico, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and elsewhere in Latin America.

Beginning in 1987 in Mexico, Latin American and Caribbean lesbian feminists have come together throughout the hemisphere for their "*Encuentros de Lesbianas Feministas de Latinoamérica y el Caribe*" (Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Lesbian Gatherings). Emerging from earlier feminist gatherings, these *encuentros* have facilitated transnational dialogue and organizing to address the needs and challenges of lesbians throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

The meetings, which have also included Latinas from the U.S., have debated the significance of class and racial differences, including the relative forms of economic privilege for U.S.-based attendees, but also the assumptions that Latin American lesbians make of their counterparts in the U.S.

The Washington, D.C.-based LLEGÓ (National Latina/o Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Organization) also held regular international *encuentros* or gatherings from the 1990s through 2004, when financial and administrative controversies led to its demise.

In recent years local and regional groups have been effective in forging political and cultural visibility for glbtq Latinas and Latinos, usually with transnational links. In Chicago, a small group of 10 Latinas gathered in July 1995 to form a support group for lesbian, bisexual, and questioning women, naming themselves "Amigas Latinas" (Latina Friends). Since then, it has grown to become a large organization. Also in Chicago, for over a decade ALMA (the Association of Latino Men for Action) has provided educational support and social services to queer Latinos.

In Texas, Austin's ALLGO (Austin Latino/Latina Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Organization), founded in 1985, works toward social change through progressive community organizing, promoting queer Latina and Latino culture, and encouraging artistic expression. Today it is the longest running queer organization of color in the U.S.

In California, various organizations, including Los Angeles' queer Latina women's collective that publishes the magazine *Tongues* and San Francisco's sex-positive, multigender HIV agency *Proyecto ContraSIDA Por Vida* (Project against AIDS, for Life), provide cultural and political outreach to the state's multi-lingual, immigrant, and native Latina and Latino populations. In 1993 in New York, a small group of Latinas and Latinos founded LLANY (Latinas and Latinos de Ambiente/New York, or Latina/os in the Life), which focuses on the social and cultural needs of glbtq Latina/o Americans in the city and the tri-state area.

In all these locations, women and men are charting new trajectories and challenging superficial and stereotypical depictions of "exotic" Latino men and "passive" Latina women. Latina and Latino glbtq communities in the U.S. pursue multiple visions, diverse politics, and a variety of struggles for identity and liberation. These efforts, conducted in English, Spanish, "Spanglish," and bilingually, and on both individual and collective levels, have helped shape the meaning of what it means to be queer and Latina and Latino in the U.S. and transnationally.

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