

# Differential Consciousness and Oppressive Realities



## Sexuality in the Urban Geography of Chicago Latinos

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I remember the first year we did it I was nervous because I saw many adults. This is for the kids, so naturally I was like, “where are they?” And then they all walked in holding hands at around or past 9:30 . . . it was really beautiful to see . . . I remember Carlos Tortolero [President of the National Museum of Mexican Art] making a very simple speech . . . saying that this was “your home” (Valdivia, 2007).

The statement above is from the memories of a social activist describing the first annual queer<sup>1</sup> prom in Pilsen<sup>2</sup>, a Lower West Side neighborhood of Chicago. Dedicated to Latino<sup>3</sup> youth across Chicago, the prom sought to include queer subjectivities in a pivotal period of young adults lives

1. An umbrella word for all facets of human sexuality, especially for those proclaimed as deviant practices. Queer activists have reclaimed it from a derogatory meaning of oddity and have assigned it a new meaning that celebrates oddity as unique or nonconformist (see Goldman, 1996).

2. Pilsen is the local name given to a neighborhood inside Chicago's Lower West Side

at the time of high school graduation and most importantly when young adults attempt to merge two incompatible identities: the queer in them (Herdt, 1993) and the *Latinidad*<sup>4</sup> around them.

In this ethnography of a queer prom, I have attempted to understand the process by which Latinos negotiated their “ethnoracial” identities vis-à-vis cultural indoctrinations in practices of gender and sexuality. Moreover, I was interested in finding out how Queer Prom was understood by the organizers and hence formulated with regard to the geography and cultural terrain of Chicago. For instance, did the city grid complicate or simplify the production of Queer Prom? And lastly, how did the activists navigate the existing queer and Latino communities?

In Chicago, I had the wonderful opportunity to attend and interview the coordinators of a queer prom, called *Noche de Arco Iris* (Rainbow Night) Queer Prom. The coordinators responsible for the event consisted of the radio production team, *Homofrecuencia* (Homofrequency), staff from the National Museum of Mexican Art, employees from the Broadway Youth Center, and volunteers from across the city. Throughout the paper I refer to the radio production team as simply *Homofrecuencia* since it was they who provided the prom’s fiscal support, and, as I later found out, the ideological constructions behind “queer *Latinidad*,” which emerged from this particular queer prom. For the most part,

3. The term Latino is more a geographical reference to those who have Latin American origins than a term denoting cultural identity. Latinos are comprised of many races (if not all) and come from 21 countries speaking more than 12 European and indigenous languages. It is also the term preferred by my informants, and therefore the reason why I use this term rather than Hispanic.

4. Like the word *machismo*, *Latinidad* has no direct translation. *Latinidad*, nonetheless, would best be described as Latino-ness.

quotes come directly from the interviews, which I transcribed, or from my memories of the proms I attended in 2007 and 2008.

In larger liberal cities like San Francisco, Chicago, and New York queer proms might seem old news. However, *Noche de Arco Iris* is not an ordinary Chicago prom located at a rented dancehall, hotel ballroom, or gay resource center. This prom is hosted at the critically acclaimed National Museum of Mexican Art and inside one of the largest Latino communities in the country. Prom-goers arrive and witness customs, colors, linguistic idioms, and histories from all over Latin America and the Caribbean. *Noche de Arco Iris*, particularly for U.S. Latinos, marks a cultural change of immeasurable potential.

Simply put, Queer Prom serves as a space for youth to combine queer and Latino parts of the self. "It is not like when you 'come out,' you stop being Latino. It is very much a part of who you are," says a director at the National Museum of Mexican Art (Valdivia, 2007). Exclusivity, he believes, should not characterize the relationship between ethnic *and* sexual identities. Rather identity could be understood in plural terms, or as plural identities that together define community. He adds, "[the] museum realizes the importance of cultivating partnerships with other organizations and being able to provide programming that is representative of everyone in the community." Local queer organizations, therefore, have received programming allocations from the museum exclusively for their use.

As a result, in 2005 the National Museum of Mexican Art funded *Noche de Arco Iris*, which unknowingly became the nation's first queer prom in a Latino neighborhood.

## UNO: Navigating the Sociohistorical Context

### Latinos in Chicago

In spite of historical differences, Latinos have similar structural experiences that unite them in the U.S.-American context. They share a mode of reception for having come to the United States as an immigrant or migrant group, and moreover, a mode of racialization that folds all Latin American racial subjectivities into a single group (Sanchez, 2002). The complicated role of race and racial formation in this context, as a result, offers an interesting discourse of *mestizaje* or “mixed race(s)” among Latinos. Social factors and environments ultimately determine how they balance their racial or ethnic subjectivities, which varies from one U.S. region to another. In this research, I focus primarily on the Midwest, and its largest Latino population in Chicago.

The Lower West Side<sup>5</sup>, home to the National Museum of Mexican Art, is also home to the largest Latino community in Chicago. In conjunction with other Latinos in the metropolitan area, they compose approximately 26% of 8 million residents (Guzman, 2000). By comparison, Chicago has the third largest Latino population after New York City and Los Angeles, the second largest concentration of Mexicans after Los Angeles, and likewise the second largest concentration of Puerto Ricans after New York City. As suggested by these numbers, however, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans dominate the Latino cultural sphere in Chicago with the former predominating across most Latino spheres (Genova, 2003).

5. For some, the Lower West Side is considered part of Chicago's general South Side geography.

Nevertheless, public amenities for Latin American immigrants have been neglected, especially in urban areas (Vigil, 2002). Community leaders have faced increasing deficits of clinics, educational centers, legal services, and other basic necessities for Spanish-speakers. In 1996, the National Museum of Mexican Art seized a lucky opportunity when it acquired the license of WCYC radio station (formerly held by the Boys and Girls Club of Chicago). Still youth-based but renamed WRTE *Radio Arte* (Art Radio), the station continues the long-standing tradition of promoting public responsibility. It offers affordable courses in broadcasting and journalism for inner-city adolescents, and caters to a bilingual audience. It is located a half mile east of the museum on 18th Street, in the heart of Pilsen.

For many in that neighborhood, *Radio Arte* has become a prominent voice for the preservation of Spanish, and by extension, a facet of the Latino culture. However, *Radio Arte* has received criticism from the greater Latino community as well. Some activists have questioned *Radio Arte's* commitment to *Latinidad* due to its physical—or some would argue—total immersion in a heavily Mexican neighborhood (Perez, 2007). Meanwhile, queer activists have accused *Radio Arte* of promoting homophobia by failing to discuss paradigms of gender and sexuality.

### Development of Queer Prom

To remedy this neglect and in the true spirit of the museum's mandate, *Homofrecuencia* arrived in 2002 for queer listeners. Its founders agreed it was an attempt to address the lack of resources for queer Spanish-speakers in Chicago. More broadly, *Homofrecuencia* provided information on specialized public aid, for example coming-out hotlines, free HIV testing, affordable English courses, and immigration services (Unzueta, 2007). Most important of all, in May 2005, *Homofrecuencia* staged their

largest public outreach in the form of a high school prom, *Noche de Arco Iris*.

“Adolescents should be able to confront aspects of their sexuality without the public shame encountered at schools or in the presence of their community physicians,” says Tania, executive producer of *Homofrecuencia*. Discrimination has kept queer youth silent about feelings that can be frightening without proper mentorship or guidance from someone already “out.” She continues, “the visibility issue is very important, sometimes youth need role models to see happiness in expressing oneself without fear of hate” (Unzueta, 2007). Proms, more specifically, are sites of public and personal struggles for adolescents, who negotiate its “hetero” traditions in relation to their own personal experiences.

At this particular queer prom, moreover, feelings of discrimination against sexual orientation constitute only one piece of the Latino experience in Chicago. For the most part, attendees’ parents are members of Chicago’s working class and therefore remain in positions of financial disadvantage (Genova, 2005). The culture of prom that has evolved into lavish displays of wealth and social prominence thus poses additional problems for Latino families (Best, 2000). According to Tania, Latino parents do not understand proms and as a result feel less persuaded to send their children to a tradition fueled by consumerism, which in order to be “cool” encourages expensive dinners, tailored dresses, car or limousine rentals, and at times weekend trips as a celebratory treat for graduating seniors. The total cost of attending prom can be in the hundreds of dollars.

At Queer Prom, *Homofrecuencia* resists the consumer lifestyle of attire and admittance. It is informal; tuxedos, prom dresses, and corsages are not required for attendance. There is a suggested donation of not more than \$25 for those who can afford it, or no charge for those who cannot. A buffet-style dinner is included regardless of entrance pay, and finally, in its second year, the Prom Committee added a new function to

Queer Prom: the distribution of free information about how to lead a healthier mental and physical lifestyle. Students who attend Queer Prom end up receiving more than what they paid for admittance.

For *Homofrecuencia*, the health element to prom is crucial, especially for those affected by the language barrier. Queer youth sometimes suppress their health concerns because of the technical English used by medical professionals, which can be difficult to understand even for native speakers. As a result, they jeopardize their physical health during a crucial time when it requires the most careful maintenance. *Homofrecuencia* agrees with medical experts who consider unsafe sexual activity, homelessness, and depression as common dangers that can compromise the well-being of queer youth (Baker, 2002).

Queer Prom in Pilsen is derived from and serves a purpose much different than that of today's consumerist prom. *Noche de Arco Iris* prom, Tania explains, "celebrates who you are, not what you have" and innovatively addresses what Amy Best describes as the "socializing [of students] towards heterosexuality," which "secures the exclusion of queer students from prom" (2000, p.155). By coordinating a queer prom along these lines, *Homofrecuencia* has gone against the normative order of prom tradition.

Yet beyond *Noche de Arco Iris*, much more is at stake for *Homofrecuencia*, which frequently leads the discussion outside of Pilsen and into the cultural terrain of Chicago. A look into the city's grid reveals an interesting negotiation between location and representation.

### Geopolitics of Chicago

We wanted to make sure that in Pilsen, since [it] does not have much access to health or sex education materials, [youth] will have an opportunity to inform themselves at the prom (Rivera, 2007).



The above quote is taken from an interview with Tony who has coordinated the health education table at Queer Prom since its inception in 2007. He points to the importance of health-related resources and the inaccessibility of those materials for youth in Pilsen. It is fortunate for *Homofrecuencia* that Tony is an employee of the Broadway Youth Center located on Chicago's North Side, which is dedicated to helping homeless queer youth with basic needs like food, health, and shelter. Tony's access to Broadway's resources considerably increased the resources available to prom attendees.

*Homofrecuencia*, on the air and at the prom, recognized and addressed the needs of the South Side Latino queer community by bringing existing queer services from the North Side to the South Side. Queer organizers from elsewhere in the city have few options for acquiring resources. Thus, an important goal for Queer Prom is to provide an alternative to Boystown, which serves a largely Anglo-white, upper-middle-class population.

Because of the concentration of queer residents on Chicago's North Side, South Side, and West Side queer residents have difficulty locating public resources and political advocacy in their own areas.

Everything queer has a tendency to gravitate north to Boystown, given its long history of visibility and legal activism. Although many queer activists wish for an open liberal environment like Boystown across all Chicago, the concentration of resources poses problems for those trekking from one side of the city to the other. The producers at *Homofrecuencia* realized that a single location favors youth who can afford the luxury of multiple trips, i.e., transportation costs, time allotted for frequent visits when necessary, and trusted friends who can help with traveling across the city in secrecy, without parents finding out. Nicole, another organizer of Queer Prom and board member for *Amigas*

*Latinas*, which is a queer group for women of color, summed up the disparity by asking, “why bother living anywhere in the South Side if all the queer resources are in Boystown” (Perez, 2007)?

*Homofrecuencia* and many other Latino organizations like *Amigas Latinas* wish to highlight the lack of diversity in Boystown. North Halsted Street, the heart of Boystown, is dotted with mostly Anglo-owned and Anglo-attended nightclubs, bars, coffee shops, diners, and various other shopping marts. Nicole explains,

My experience as a queer woman; there is one bar on the North Side for queer women of color, and that is Stargaze. These other queer spaces are all white, male-dominated, and not always female-friendly (Perez, 2007).

Except for a handful of ethnic restaurants, Boystown mirrors the demographics that dominate the area. Mostly white and upper-middle class, Boystown inherently embodies an ethnocentric character that does not reflect the Latino, African American, Asian, and other diverse enclaves across the city.

Split in two, queer Latinos are prevented from feeling “whole,” explains Nicole. Gay identity takes precedence in Boystown. Meanwhile, their *Latinidad* is left elsewhere or barred from entering. In order to be sexually expressive, Nicole suggests, queer Latinos are pressured to assimilate into an overtly Anglicized gay culture. Likewise, women seeking same-sex partners are equally marginalized for reasons that could seem puzzling to an outsider. Here, Nicole affirms the dangers in assuming queer communities to be free of intra-group differences. Lesbians, like people of color, are subject to exclusionary practices and positions relative to mainstream gay culture.

Despite the regional differences among Latinos, *Homofrecuencia* creatively and consciously fosters a *Latinidad* when organizing *Noche de Arco Iris*. The Spanish language, staple foods, music, and decorations in a space filled with Mexican artwork and Latin American items viscerally connects attendees to their shared heritage. For Tony, the connection strengthens because “there [are] more brown folks,” and because attendees “start smelling like the food, the *frijoles*.” He adds, “[the food] reminds me of home,” a critical factor in his own sense of *Latinidad* (Rivera, 2007). The food, in particular, distinguishes *Noche de Arco Iris* from other queer proms in the city. Although different for everyone, nonetheless, the kitchen seems to hold a special place for Latinos.

The marking of Chicago into distinct places presents a telling backdrop to how Latino youth negotiate their queer identities with respect to the city’s geography. Latino activists challenge the center of queer activity by locating a queer prom in a Latino neighborhood, miles south of Boystown. By doing so, Latino activists also call into question the underlying assumptions of an exclusive Boystown: that places like the Lower West Side are devoid of queer youth. The continuation of Queer Prom — celebrating its fourth anniversary in 2009 — affirms the opposite. Many queer youth in fact desire an alternate space that acknowledges racial and ethnic backgrounds. They are in search of feeling whole and within their *Latinidad*. For them, Queer Prom uniquely decenters the city’s cultural landscape and reconstitutes the self into one piece.

## DOS: Exploring the Field from within Theory

Before I continue with details of the prom ceremony, I want to share my own impressions of the field site as a participant observer at *Noche de Arco Iris* Queer Prom. From this perspective, I wish to concretely situate my research experience so that one can get a descriptive feel for the prom and its unique sociohistorical setting. I start off with my personal experiences and then provide thicker ethnographic material as the story progresses.

### Specters that Haunt Me—Personal Observations

At Queer Prom the unfamiliarity with the South Side disappears. I share my home address rather than saying keywords like Midway Airport, South Side, or Marquette Park. In response, some provide modest directions or nearby restaurant names, evidently displaying their knowledge of the local area. Others who listen to the conversation from afar confirm (and even contest) at random moments. The most fun, though, comes after people bring up the names of middle schools or high schools (for the older crowd), “No way! I thought I was the only one there!” At such a moment, youths suddenly realize that queers are everywhere in the South Side, West Side, and other parts of the North Side, not just Boystown.

Before I enter the dancehall and before we speak of our South Side queer-hood, however, I must admit that walking in Pilsen brings up issues of my own sexuality. On the way to the National Museum of Mexican Art—from the Blue Line stop at 18th Street—I look for a rainbow flag, a sign, anything gay to hone me back into my comfort zone. To my date, I say, “this is Pilsen, not Boystown!” as if he needed reminding. I confess I have rarely held hands with men outside of that square mile of Boystown. Fears of verbal harassments—worse, gay

bashings — taunt me when I encounter anyone in route, including the peaceful fruit vendors on 18th Street.

In my fearful state, I imagine distant relatives appearing from behind the museum, from within the crowded baseball fields of Harrison Park. They would say to each other, *¡mira, Ángel es un maricón!*<sup>6</sup> Only my parents and siblings have knowledge of my “deviant” path — the usual clan of distant relatives, churchgoers, coworkers, and *compadres* of my parents do not. If they see me holding hands with another man, two separate worlds would collide: my culture and my sexual orientation.

No one familiar is behind the museum. No wayward cousin of mine, only high-school kids lounging, playing catch, or clinging to each other as lovers. None of them notice the two men holding hands (us) as we walk past them, except for a handful, who stare momentarily and then look the other way. A couple of steps and hours later (despite my fears) there was not a single protest, hate crime, nor complaint issued from residents in Pilsen.

By eight in the evening more than 150 prom-goers are in the museum according to the sign-in sheet near the entrance. The gift shop, *Tzintzuntzan*, named after a pre-Columbian city in Western Mexico, welcomes lingering viewers, as people huddle and buzz over the night to come. Meanwhile, an excited museum employee, working that night, confesses she has not seen so many “gays” in Pilsen. I ask her why, and she responds, “because they’re good at hiding,” and she nudges me on the elbow with a gentle laugh.

There is not enough evidence — nor is it the focus of my research — to confirm what residents think about Queer Prom, and how they interact with queer individuals at the public level. Nevertheless, I believe the staff members comment affirms the many ways people become

6. Look! Ángel is a faggot!

oblivious to oppression. In particular, the comment demonstrates the pervasiveness and overwhelming male dominance to the point that it becomes hegemonic and largely invisible. Her rationalization (though of course not just *hers*) of “good-at-hiding” queer youth entirely ignores the *cause* of their absence. The logic assumes the individuals to have total agency over their actions (*still* hiding in the closet) and pays no attention to social context. This shortsightedness is precisely that invisibility stems from the subtle workings of male dominance.

### Patriarchy Will Not Have It: The Role of Women

A wooden dance floor, several round tables with glitter and candles, trays of food, and a stage immediately greet the guests in the principal hall for *Noche de Arco Iris*. The setting is very colorful and extremely energized by music emanating from large speakers.

Yet all eyes (and ears) find the disc jockey despite the distractions. One notices that this DJ is unusual for this neighborhood perhaps, but not at a queer prom. She wears a long graphic T-shirt, baggy jeans, a baseball cap, and a pair of large sneakers. Her hand gestures are rough and vigorous, usually pumping fists in the air to the music beat. From time to time, she steals everyone’s attention and howls with excitement.

For attendees, the lesbian DJ Papi Chulo acts as the first “object” to spread awareness about the queer experience produced by *Homofre cuencia*. Her masculine dress code contradicts the outward appearance expected from Latinas: fitted clothing, make-up, long hair, skirts, and high heels; the normative order of heterosexuality to which queer women feel pressure to conform. The kind of femininity displayed by the DJ, or lack thereof, offers an opportunity for reflection. Her “masculine” appearance prompts the attendees to ask themselves, *what is femininity, what does it look like*, and likewise, *where is it not found?*

In Latin America, male oppression or *machismo* is a cultural trope that has defined practices of gender and sexuality since the colonial era (Murray, 1995). The Spanish kingdom introduced a hypermasculinity that favored more lenient codes of sexual conduct for men (Twinam, 1999). Within the social hierarchy, promiscuous men were not penalized, their reputations remained intact, and they were not excluded from public offices or positions that required reputable standing. Male virility was seen as an extension of one's honor, and therefore, a reflection of social ranking in Spanish America.

For a woman, on the other hand, public knowledge of any sexual activity threatened her reputation. Sexual contact was restricted until marriage, which was severely policed by the Roman Catholic Church (Gutierrez, 1991). A woman's virginity was sacred and upheld with the highest honor. Furthermore, her sexual role in matrimony was similarly constrained. Sexual activity with someone other than one's husband challenged the tenets of holy matrimony and threatened social standing (Twinam, 1999).

Despite the difference in sexual behaviors, gender inequality was not often questioned in Spanish America. It was understood to be perfectly acceptable, normalized into everyday practices. To this day, 21st-century Latin America still adheres to conventional rules of courtship. Men continue to advance the Spanish code of "honorable" promiscuity, and women remain under the influence of the Church, which dictates that they are subject to their husbands' rule (Gutierrez, 1991).

Evidently, and to the chagrin of feminists, little has changed in Latin America (Yeager, 1994). Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana feminist, argues that Latin American patriarchy extends into the United States among its emigrated Latino families. She explains, even for Latinos "the [patriarchal] culture and the Church insist that women are subservient

to males. If a woman rebels, she is a *mujer mala*<sup>7</sup> (1999, p. 39). She identifies two roles for women that persist within the family structure: the virtuous bride and the rebellious whore, whom Anzaldúa equates to *mujer mala* throughout her essay (1999). Women in the latter category, furthermore, require no participation in sexual activity to receive the derogatory branding; just a direct stance against patriarchal values circumscribing gender roles.

*Machismo*, Anzaldúa says, “professes to protect women, [but] actually keeps women in rigidly defined roles” (p. 39). As primary breadwinners, men commonly see themselves as protectors of their wives and children. Men take on the responsibility to ensure financial security for the family. In exchange, it is common practice for women to stay home, usually permanently, to raise the family. However, this complimentary exchange is nonnegotiable. She must struggle against the patriarchal family system to escape her domestic duties, and when she is successful, there are social consequences. She is branded a “prostitute,” which signifies her transgression of virtue and the men who insist on protecting it.

Coming back to the *Noche de Arco Iris*, one can see how Papi Chulo celebrates “bad woman.” Not only does she challenge her submissive role in Latino culture, but also the perceived masculine ownership of nightlife. Only a man can venture out in the late hours of the evening without calling into question his moral standing (Smith, 2002). For Papi Chulo, her position as DJ promotes a social function that challenges masculine ownership, because she is both out at night and a DJ.

7. Bad woman



## Male Practices in Sexuality

After the formal introductions of prom night—welcome speeches from *Homofrecuencia* producer Tania in Spanish and museum director Jorge in English—the emcee entertains the attendees in camp fashion. Keith McNeal describes camp ethos as a “particular type of humor . . . that is intimately related to the subjectivities of gay men” (1999, p. 355). Someone presents the material, usually cultural stigmas, with exaggeration, flamboyancy, and effeminacy. It is meant to embody a self-parody while simultaneously wrestling the psychological demons on stage (McNeal, 1999). At Queer Prom, the emcee offers comedic relief, in Spanglish, about gender and sexuality in the Latino culture.

In one notable example, the emcee, Tony Alvaro Rivera the First, pokes fun at any attendees professing to be straight, or heterosexual. Tony warns, “ya’ll straight men better watch out. I may look cute and girly with this lovely shawl of mine. Yes, thank you, I know I look good. But after tonight, honey, I won’t be the one called girly.” He then continues into his own experiences with gender fluidity, stigmatization, and activism in the queer community. Not as humorous as his opening statements, he mixes comedic social commentary with the psychological struggles of sexism.

Tony’s defensive stance points to a particular aspect of femininity as the source of anxiety. In sexual references, it refers to the one who is penetrated, or *el pasivo* (Beattie, 1997; Carrier, 1995; Carrillo, 2002; Murray, 1995). Peter Beattie notes,

There is a common belief that women . . . are sexually passive and men are sexual actors. This creates a sexual hierarchy in which penetrators dominate the penetrated. Shame rests mostly

with passive partners because active partners often boast of illicit sexual conquests as proof of virility (p. 67).

In Brazil, Beattie observes that penetration places shame on the *pasivo* role. Shame remains with the woman when a man leaves her, takes her virginity if not already taken, and releases the details of his deeds to the public. Consequently, his proclamations of virility subordinate *pasivos* through the physical act and ensuing social stigma.

According to Beattie, it is important to understand the ways in which men establish biological superiority over women in Latin America. The prevalence of *activo/pasivo* understandings presents an interesting negotiation of power vis-à-vis biological functions. As long as he has a penis, he maintains dominance. While this is assumed to be evident in most contexts, it does not apply for all biological males. In ethnographies on male sexuality in Mexico, findings reveal that widespread attitudes regarding homosexual men show otherwise. A *maricon's* perceived male dominance is lost the moment he receives anal penetration, which is believed to be an unnatural activity for real men. In the sexist ideologies of sexual activity, *pasivo* men receive an inferior status similar to women. Power in the gay sexual act also favors the *activo* partner, who acts within his sexual role.

I should note that the stigmas attached to homosexual activity are heavily grounded in the public sphere. The same ethnographers observed many highly variable negotiations in power between people in private circles. In private, which partner receives anal penetration or not is a matter of individual preference and does not affect the public standing of either man. They switch sexual roles with ease and at times develop a long-term relationship to sustain such desires. Secrecy is essential for these men since it is not uncommon for them to be married with families of their own (Carrier, 1995; Carrillo, 2002).

Without question, the *activo* men perpetuate the negative stereotypes of *pasivos* to protect their own social standing. At *Noche de Arco Iris*, Tony Alvaro Rivera the First turns this perception on its head by making claims in the public eye. He claims a feminine demeanor, as evident through his shawl, eye make-up, and language, and then explicitly announces the secret of “closeted” straight men. *They*, not Tony, will receive anal penetration, receive the title of *pasivo*, and furthermore receive the social stigma long evaded in public knowledge. The irony in this situation is that Tony’s *activo* behavior marks the “straight” man as “girly,” *pasivo*, even though Tony looks and acts more feminine.

Displaying both feminine physical appearances and masculine activities in bed, Tony’s performance of gender reorganizes power to place a hybrid-like gender at the top of the social hierarchy, or at least, above *machismo*. Tony uses camp humor to challenge male dominance without causing too much of an emotional stir. Esther Newton explains, “camp is a system of laughing at one’s incongruous position instead of crying. That is, the humor does not cover up, it transforms” (1979, p. 109). Perhaps then, Tony’s strategic use of humor about homosexual activity does not cover up issues about *pasivo*, but rather transforms its cultural significance into something beyond sexist dualities.

### Drag Superstar and Gender Ambiguities

Tony Alvaro Rivera the First also demonstrates a dedication to daily activism by way of his dress. During our interview, he wore the same ensemble as at the Queer Prom, though in a different color combination. Again, he has a shawl wrapped around him, and his eye shadow gives off an aura that is neither too glamorous nor too plain. Yet it is there. In his opinion, he showcases gender aesthetics through his apparel, gestures, and speech. His ambiguous appearance promotes his

political agenda to subvert gender norms, a prominent theme throughout Queer Prom.

Another volunteer at Queer Prom offers an alternative example of gender ambiguity during one of the most exciting components of Queer Prom: the drag show. As gender illusionists, drag queens impersonate women and drag kings impersonate men, while lip-synching to their favorite songs. Jovanka, a drag queen, graces the spotlight with the whole shebang: four-inch platform pumps, maroon dress that sparkles with sequins, a white glove that silhouettes her fingers, and a boa to add a trail of color to her movements across the dance floor. Emotional fervor runs high as Jovanka contorts and contracts the body to “Bidi bidi bom bom,” a classic hit by now deceased Tex-Mex pop-star Selena. That night “Jovanka commanded like a true diva,” says Victor (Jovanka’s everyday name) in an interview months later (Gomez, 2007).

The drag persona forces the viewer to think critically about gender, particularly about how to recognize it. Unlike Tony, drag stars attempt to embody *either* masculinity or femininity through dress, language, and gestures. They try to conceal ambiguity so that they can surprise the audience with the quality of their impersonation (though at times they break out of the impersonation to enhance the comedic “camp” experience for the audience).

Nonetheless, Victor (Jovanka) explains how his own sense of gender has become plural rather than one or the other over time. Performing gender, he suggests, destabilizes the assumptions of how gender *makes* identity. Instead, he believes a person’s actions make gender, and furthermore show how it can be easily constructed from head to toe. He implies that others like him often slide between the two throughout their lifetimes. At least for Victor, performing drag facilitates the pluralization of gender in a single night.

A *queer* selfhood, Victor continues, protects the gender and sex ambiguities of a person. It saves them from having to explain their complex understandings of identity—especially throughout a person’s entire life—in dualistic terms. Especially for transgender youth, a queer approach, Victor believes, allows an individual to inhabit a space in between and outside of the binary terms of sexuality. According to Victor, this is Jovanka’s contribution to Queer Prom (Gomez, 2007). The queer performance helps to encourage a gender/sex pluralism not commonly found in neighborhood proms. At least, not yet.

## TRES: Towards Third-Wave Ideologies, a Discussion

### Queer Latinidad

Queers are part of the *familia*, part of the community, and part of our *Latinidad*, there is a common perception that, well if you are gay, [it] is fine but as long as you do not do it in public, or [in] any kind of visible way . . . Prom makes a statement against this (Perez, 2007).

In the above statement, Nicole, one of the principal organizers for *Homofrecuencia* talks about the common negotiations around homosexuality in the Latino family. The “common perception” of homophobia, Nicole feels, will not allow deviant behavior into the public sphere. It will bring shame to the family, which Twinam sees as the classic symptom of the colonial past. Twinam goes on to say, people “consciously manipulate the private-public duality to construct public reputations superior to private realities” (1999, p. 34). In order to maintain proper public perception, homosexuality must be kept secret or otherwise

repressed, not ever visible for others to see.

Building *familia*, Nicole insists, is her shared responsibility. At Queer Prom, Nicole projects an image of an idealized family that would be able to support a person's sexuality in the public sphere, for everyone to see and for the collective *Latinidad* to acknowledge. She and *Homofrecuencia*, in this way, point to the emergence of a queer *Latinidad*. It suggests the participation of *Homofrecuencia* within a larger social movement that in practice, I argue, directly speaks to third-wave feminism of the 1990s.

Like the feminist approach to gender, *Homofrecuencia* animates Queer Prom by showing how to separate the social and the biological when differentiating the multiple meanings that bodies can have. The drag show, for example, breaks down essentialized notions, that is, masculinity, woman, etc., and in doing so, Queer Prom shows the social constructedness of gender in society. Jovanka, Papi Chulo, Tony, and the countless attendees at Queer Prom demonstrate how easily gender is manipulated in practice, and, thus, they destabilize notions of normal and categories and hierarchies of power.

In the 1990s, queer feminists extended the constructedness of gender critique by asking, *what is* (socially) *normal* rather than *what is* (biologically) *innate*? The former question, of determining "normativity," involves decoding the moral classifications of sexuality. In the heteronormative opinion, heterosexuality is the socially acceptable—God-mandated—example for sexuality. In contrast, queer theorists investigate sexual behaviors deemed perverse and show that such classifications are social constructions. Queer theory expands the scope of sexuality—while also illuminating the role of gender-bending—to explain how particular sets of behavior are socially positioned within heteronormative hegemony (Rubin, 1992).

Finally, third-wave feminists also commented on their own normative realities among feminist “mothers” of the 1970s, second-wave feminism. Similar to queer theory, third-wave feminists critique the heteronormative tendency of second-wave feminists by pointing out the displacement of queer voices in their academic writings (Goldman, 1992). Moreover, although second-wave feminists have advocated for all women, third-wave feminists feel that the second wave universalized their experiences for all women without analyzing their own hegemonic forms of privileged race, citizenship, language, and socioeconomic status (Anzaldúa, 1999). Queer Prom adopts a third-wave oppositional stance that responds to both second-wave feminists (as an alternative method) and hegemony.

Much the same as heterosexuality, normative racial and ethnic understandings conceal their own set of “perverse” subjectivities. Gloria Anzaldúa, one of the pioneers of third-wave feminism, draws a wonderful parallel between queer and racial/ethnic identities in her work on the *mestizo*<sup>8</sup> construct. She writes,

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode — nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned . . . The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended (1999, p. 101).

8. *El mestizo* is a Spanish term describing someone of mixed European and Amerindian ancestries (Carillo, 2002).

Having a *mestiza* consciousness means deconstructing race/ethnicity in order to arrive at and embrace the (perceived) deviant members of this group. The “deviant” individual is ambiguous, as a result of acquiring plural personalities, breaks from dualities supported by normative teachings, and instead finds a home in this ambiguity, or what she terms the borderlands of identity. The *mestiza* not only accepts the Anglo, Amerindian, African, and Asian parts of her physical appearances (or *sangre*<sup>9</sup>), but also genders and sexualities occupying any part of the self. More importantly for my purpose in this essay, the concept outlines a framework that organizers of Queer Prom can adhere to and implement in Pilsen.

Later in her essay, Anzaldúa links *mestiza* consciousness to an awareness of *sin fronteras*<sup>10</sup> for Chicanos or Mexican Americans who live in U.S. Southwest. She pushes for these people to accept their transnational citizenship despite their treatment as second-class citizens (1999, p. 100). For Anzaldúa and other Latina feminists, the third wave is an attempt to reclaim the Spanish tongues (in addition to others), transnational histories (though for some the border crossed them), and physical colorings of their flesh. Living *sin fronteras* resurrects the abandoned (repressed) subjectivities due to U.S. hegemony (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 2; Sandoval, 2000, p. 60). *Sin fronteras*, moreover, is one of the visions for the National Museum of Mexican Art and makes Queer Prom a possible refuge for the Latino experience.

Ultimately, Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness mirrors the theoretical framework of queer theory; both rely on the social constructedness

9. Blood. In Spanish, it also connotes a person’s heredity or family lineage.

10. Without borders or borderlands, which is the name commonly given to her theory on ambiguity and plural identity.



of the flesh to elucidate how institutions of power normalize the white and heterosexual in U.S./Latin American cultures. From here, third-wave activists must find ways to heal and collect the fractured pieces of identity into a collective human spirit. In other words, third-wave proponents address heteronormativity in order to fold ethnicity and sexuality into a broader understanding of plural subjectivity.

Although not perfect, the fostering of a queer *Latinidad* by Chicago youth offers a political platform for the third wave and its proponents in the 21st century. It rescues youth from a hostile environment that essentializes gender and sexuality and ignores ethnic diversity. The third-wave ideology-in-practice is not an isolated strategy of Pilsen, but bridges the community's border, animating the queer within an ethos of *sin fronteras*, such as *Homofrecuencia's* collaborations with the Broadway Youth Center. As one prom organizer aptly says, the collaborations "will bring gayness to Pilsen" (Aguayo, 2007) — a thought I found simultaneously compelling and contradictory.

### Equal and Separate: Differential Consciousness and Third-Wave Cognition

*Homofrecuencia*, *Radio Arte*, and the National Museum of Mexican Art can be considered rogue proponents of gay liberation in Chicago. I found this idea interesting because these organizers (via Queer Prom) express unique oppositionalities in the city: South Side, and Latino. On the whole, however, the organizers of Queer Prom were never consistent about its impetus nor did they offer a clear sketch of what drove the production of the event.

I noticed, furthermore, caution among the organizers, who did not want to appear separatist in their activist efforts. In an interview, one said,

I don't think spaces that cater to people of color are separatist. This is a common white gay view. I think it is offensive. People need to understand why these spaces are needed. They need to have an awareness of the queer spaces that they're attending and how they're 95% white and all in the North Side (Perez, 2007).

Evidently, Queer Prom was not solely about sexuality, nor was it about racial/ethnic separation from the queer epicenter of Boystown. What was clear, at the very least, was that Queer Prom directly challenged and altered the queer landscape of Chicago. It showed how organizers of Queer Prom wished to promote queer spaces *outside* of Boystown.

Nonetheless, the issue of separatism threatened the ideological foundations of Queer Prom. Although Queer Prom provided support for queer youth, it would still appear to embody a separatist movement removed from the prominent queer epicenter on the North Side, because it was staged for a particular racial/ethnic group.

As I delved deeper into *mestiza* consciousness, queer theory, and post-structuralism, however, this apparent theoretical contradiction regarding Queer Prom emerged as the precise outcome of third-wave feminism, a fact unfortunately overshadowed by the racial tensions of an already segregated city (Caffrey, 1998).

Chela Sandoval's essay *Methodology of the Oppressed* describes from a cognitive standpoint the on-the-ground mobility of oppositional stances, for example the way in which *Homofrecuencia* both critiques and praises the work of Boystown (2000). I originally thought that this mobility, known also as "differential consciousness," indicated contradictory behavior, was actually the "borderlands" (in Anzaldúa's terms) among power structures. Practitioners with a differential consciousness examine their own perimeters, i.e. a queer community, and consciously

challenge the normative hegemony along an alternate axis of power (race/ethnicity, city geography, socioeconomic class, language, etc.).

Queer Prom displays resistance to heterosexuality but also to the white-Anglo dominance of queer mainstream culture. From the queer community's power axis of sexuality, the differential consciousness established among Queer Prom organizers and attendees allows them to wander onto the axis of race/ethnicity (though even these two could be considered separate in their own right) as *another* alternate power structure for further cultural critique. Queer Prom's Latino focus and South Side location open additional paths to build a broader queer community that challenges heteronormativity on many fronts.

Sandoval's complex third-wave methodology also outlines the way in which differential consciousness acts as the theoretical tool for social change (2000, p.58). She explains, that in addition to wandering onto different axes of hegemonic power, i.e., race, sexuality, etc., at any given time, differential consciousness grants each axis the possibility to change its social *role*, giving it new meanings in negotiations of power (p. 59). The roles are multiple, not singular, and most importantly not essentialized.

In other words, Boystown can be both the hegemonic oppressor *and* political ally for *Homofrecuencia*. As explained earlier, there is opposition to Boystown because of its racialized experience or how it has become a mostly white-Anglo upper-middle-class enclave. Hence, this legitimates *Homofrecuencia's* resistance along racial, geographic, and socioeconomic lines. However, and just the same, when *Homofrecuencia* organizers shift (by way of differential consciousness) back to the axis of sexuality, the practitioners must also (necessarily) resume their oppositionality against heterosexual *machismo* in concert with Boystown's white-Anglo queer culture.

The illusion of a possible "separatism" appears when outsiders assume *Homofrecuencia's* oppositionality against Boystown to be essen-

tial, stagnant, and arbitrarily enforced at all times. Sandoval warns that a differential movement does not universalize groups as necessarily oppressive (2000, p. 58). The implicit danger in doing so keeps the perceived oppressive group from voicing oppressive relations of its own, as is the case with Boystown, the queer epicenter of Chicago. The mentorship between Boystown and Pilsen—where the former provides important resources to help resist heteronormativity for the latter—would be an example of the differential movement that places them alongside each other and among the collective oppressed. The lesson here is that the oppressor-oppressed duality should not be exempt from demonstrating ambiguity in third wave movements.

U.S. third-wave feminism plays an instrumental role in the ways *Homofrecuencia* positions itself with respect to present activists in Boystown. The (differential) movement enables *Homofrecuencia* to embody a plural stance without compromising its allies. (Of course, this requires an appropriate level of diplomacy.) Yet, the fear of separation still exists among the organizers. Perez laments the typical reactions from white-Anglo activists, who have told her in the past, “‘oh, a Latino Bar. Why did you have to go ahead and do that? We don’t have a white gay bar,’ and I respond, ‘you do. You just don’t call it a white gay bar’” (Perez, 2007). Because of its differential mobility, and as the seedling of third wave feminism, the political platform of Queer Prom will inevitably signal to others a separatist movement that appears contradictory to queer liberation efforts. This is the case particularly for those who feel the race question ended with the 20th-century United States. This research hopes to prove otherwise.

## CUATRO: Identifying Gaps and Methodologies

In Chicago, it is difficult to discern the Latino response to Queer Prom. It would require an extensive survey to do so, and even then, a quantified analysis to make sense of popular beliefs. My research funds and limited time precluded such a wide-scale research endeavor. The lack of public-opinion research is certainly one possible critique of this cultural inquiry, and specifically of the picture that I have painted of normative Latino practices. In fact, I have had adverse reactions from peers also studying queer theory, “*machismo, still?*” when I surmised that the patriarchal influence is strongly present among Latinos.

The bulk of my data comes from eleven in-depth personal interviews as well as participant observation at two Queer Proms. The interviews were semistructured, combining prewritten questions with other spontaneous questions that naturally emerged during the 20–45 minute sit-downs. As mentioned before, I gathered data strictly from prom organizers so that I could understand principally *why* the need for Queer Prom on the one hand, and *how* they executed their political activism on the other.

### On Behalf of Whom?

In spite of my limited resources, I was not too concerned about the “missing” data from the audience’s perspective. I looked to Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on “voicing” and concluded it would be equally problematic to assume that Queer Prom organizers did not share a common discourse with prom-goers. Bakhtin, a rhetoric scholar, carefully shows how each individual’s “voice” is subject to an internal heterogeneity, such that one’s thoughts are not from one author (the Self) (1981). Instead, thoughts are coauthored by others and hardly autonomous, often embedded in concepts and discourses learned (and developed) within social contexts.

Organizers at *Homofrecuencia* were as vital to understanding and interpreting public discourse about heteronormativity as any others in a community that shares common identities or histories. Together, *Homofrecuencia*, residents of Pilsen and Boystown, Latinos, and queer activists were theoretically coauthors of Queer Prom. Therefore, I believe my engagements with only *Homofrecuencia* did not diminish the qualitative substance of my inquiry on sexuality and its discourse among queer Latinos. At the very least, my engagement offers a starting point for those who wish to push the claims of this ethnography in new directions.

### Machismo, Still?

Another area of concern was the way in which I characterized Latino practices that denoted specific constructions of gender and sexuality. Some felt that I dismissed recent pro-gay legislation and (mainstream) events in countries like Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay, Nicaragua, Cuba, and Argentina by describing an ethos of severe patriarchy among U.S. Latinos.<sup>11</sup> On the

11. Mexico: in 2003 legislators approved a federal antidiscrimination law that included sexual orientation. Moreover, in 2007 Mexico City passed the Societal Cohabitation Law for same-sex couples, which allowed them to have the same marital rights as common-law relationships between a man and a woman. Brazil: in 2004 President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva adopted the motto, “Brasil sem homofobia” (Brazil without homophobia), as a way to change national attitudes about sexuality. Additionally, the LGBT pride parades (Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro) attract the largest number of attendees in the world — along with Mexico City — that break at least 1 million in numbers. In 2008, the pride parade at Sao Paulo had a world-record turnout, with an estimated 1.8 million attendees. Uruguay: in 2007 a law was passed to grant marital benefits to all couples. Nicaragua: the penal code no longer criminalizes same-sex relations. Cuba: in 2008 the government (and Brazilian government) announced gender-reassignment surgery for transsexuals free of charge (Corrales, 2009). Argentina: in 2007 the International Gay and Lesbian Football Association (IGLFA) held its first games in Latin America at Buenos Aires (Valliani, 2007).

contrary, I second the "Latin American" concern presented by my peers. By no means did I wish to ignore the different cultural formations that ultimately distinguished Latinos and Latin Americans from each other.

The purpose of this paper was to show more broadly how Latinos both negotiated patriarchy and assigned meaning to their sexual behaviors in the United States. I could not deny, however, the insistence on a patriarchal Latin America from the organizers involved with Queer Prom. Nevertheless, I could understand how more research about present Latin American sexuality would be equally important, especially given the dangers of assuming a homogenous Latin America. The Latino perspective (from the activists in Chicago) might have inadvertently caused me to focus on certain aspects of sexuality. In my conclusion I have offered a possible explanation for the conservative take on Latin American sexuality.

### Latinidad or Mexicanidad?

My questions to the organizers addressed my own critique of the event and its efforts to reach out to all Latinos. I found the ethnic representations of Queer Prom most puzzling because it was overwhelmingly Mexican. When I asked the organizers about their opinions on *Latinidad* as really just being a celebration of *Mexicanidad*, I received honest responses that both confirmed my suspicion and challenged it.

The activists were well aware of this, considering the obvious Mexican appearance of Pilsen and the National Museum of Mexican Art. Nevertheless, they explained how they attempted to include various Latin American foods and music, and also people from different Latin American countries. They actively sought the partnership of Latino activists across the city and implemented a creative method to intentionally assemble a pan-Latin American cast of drag performers. They encouraged the

performers to invite their own set of groupies, which would extend the invitation to many pockets of queer Chicago. (Of course, *Homofrecuencia* did not require all attendees to be Latino or queer.)

What surprised me most about their answers, nonetheless, was the degree to which they were conscious of the Mexican dominance. Some even mentioned that had the museum not offered a free-of-charge venue for the prom, they would have been forced to look elsewhere. Yet regardless of the financial assistance offered by the museum, the prom's producers at *Homofrecuencia* were still adamant about changing the location of Queer Prom in the years to come. While on the one hand they seemed to promote a Mexican dominance at Queer Prom, on the other hand their conscious evaluation of the power imbalance proved that they were not blinded by Mexican hegemony. This was yet another example of their application of differential consciousness and third-wave critique.

## Conclusion

The cultural cartography of Chicago has long segregated (and institutionalized) peoples of different ethnicities into specific communities. The need for events like Queer Prom sadly confirms that even queer identities have not escaped the segregated tendencies of Chicago's past. Organizers from *Homofrecuencia*, therefore, find themselves wrestling with the "gay" question and the "race" question as they try to negotiate their stigmatized identities. This ethnographic inquiry shares the story of how they have managed thus far.

In two essays, Thomas Almaguer's "Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior" and Hector Carillo's "The Night is Young" both argued for a *new* understanding of a gay Latino/Chicano experience in the United States that was "modern" and missing in



current literature. They described the sexual practices of gay men as oscillating between two social structures: Mexican/Latin American and European-American. Moreover, Carillo pondered the question of cultural hybridity as a coping strategy to reconcile seemingly incompatible parts of the self.

At Queer Prom, however, I had hoped to show something different from existing scholarship. Rather than locating the negotiations of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity as between two cultures “Mexican/Latin American” and “European American,” I instead favored an approach that looked from within and at the cultural terrain of an urban setting. I saw Chicago’s geography as the context from which social constructions of race, sexuality, and gender could be mapped, traced, and transformed by key events like *Noche de Arco Iris* Queer Prom.

Working more closely with queer Latino youth in the city, it was apparent that they implemented third-wave critiques and practices in addressing those identity crossroads, which seemed choked by institutionalized racism, sexism, homophobia, and even xenophobia. They embraced, I argue, a queer *Latinidad* that sought to heal fragmented pieces of an internalized (and repressed) “perverse” sexuality and “inferior” ethnoraciality. Their insistence on calling forth a *Latinidad*, moreover, suggested interesting ways in which city youth have meshed their geographical origins (Latin America) and ethnoracial identities (*mestizaje*). Most importantly, I should add, it was interesting to observe how Queer Prom’s organizers aligned *mestiza* consciousness with the adoption of a “queer” subjectivity, as opposed to employing the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual) term. These connections might present interesting avenues for future research about the Latino experience.

My time spent in Pilsen, or Chicago’s Lower West Side, revealed insights that can illuminate some gaps in current Latino discourse on

sexuality, which does not explicitly address the structural configurations of socioeconomic class and transnational migration patterns. I found that Queer Prom organizers represented and reacted against a particular rural segment of Latin America, who (trans)migrated to the Midwest, occupied working-class positions, and sustained sexual behaviors in accord with their Latin American childhoods.<sup>12</sup>

In my own observations, Queer Prom activists often referred to their parents when commenting on patriarchy. To them, it seemed ubiquitous among Latino families and that establishing a Queer Prom, especially at a prestigious museum, was a powerful way to combat an otherwise pervasive social stigma. But they were careful not to attribute patriarchy to (a homogenous) Latin America. The activists were keenly aware of diversity among Latinos through *Homofrecuencia's* extensive online clientele and popularity outside of the United States. Listeners in San Juan, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires often call or e-mail the production team about current events or personal stories about the gay-liberation struggle in their local areas.

Researching the dimensions of third-wave feminism in the United States, furthermore, can shed light on new practices of building "family." *Homofrecuencia*, through its use of media and events such as Queer Prom, has reached a new frontier in constructing and ritualizing community. It is interesting, therefore, to see how *Homofrecuencia* has the capacity to

12. See Nicholas de Genova's *Working the Boundaries* for more information about rural or working-class families in the United States. He argues for the dominance of working-class Latin Americans among the migrants to the U.S. Midwest throughout the 20th century, most notably during the 1930s, 1960s, and 1980s. And unlike the long history of U.S./Mexican relations in the U.S. Southwest, he implies that industrial hubs like Chicago, Detroit, and St. Louis contain a younger population of Latin Americans, who are mostly first-, second-, and third-generation Latinos (2005; Portes, 2001).

politically dismantle multiple hierarchies at once, including U.S. domination, through the differential consciousness of third-wave feminism. Still, it is not clear *to what extent* third wave was present among queer Latino youth. Was it the same third-wave feminism that Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa called upon in their own writings of the early 1990s? Or does Queer Prom manifest something entirely different, more attuned with the digital and transnational ethos of a modern-day United States? Maybe it is too soon to tell. ■

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