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Gay Latino Alliance (GALA)

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The first prominent gay Latino organization in the United States, active between 1975 and 1983.

The Gay Latino Alliance (GALA), a San Francisco-based gay Latino organization, was the first gay Latino association to attain nationwide visibility in the United States. GALA offered a safe forum for its Latino gay members, who experienced racism in San Francisco's white gay communities and homophobia in Latino communities. Its leaders organized social events and participated in national and international political movements during its period of activity between 1975 and 1983.

Founding the Gay Latino Alliance

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many gay Latinos and lesbian Latinas migrated to the San Francisco Bay Area to live their sexuality freely, as many of their white counterparts did. Gay Latino newcomers could meet other Latinos in the Mission District, San Francisco's Latino neighborhood, but had to travel outside of the Mission in order to meet their white gay counterparts, who mainly resided in the Castro, San Francisco's

predominantly white gay neighborhood. In a heated social and political context, these new migrants had to navigate urban discourses on race, place, immigration, gender, and sexuality. Gay Latinos encountered homophobia in their Latino home neighborhoods and racism in the mainly white gay neighborhood of the Castro. Gay Latinos and lesbian Latinas felt therefore marginalized, isolated, and discriminated against.

Rodrigo Reyes, a Latino gay male, had moved from Texas to San Francisco in 1971. Reyes knew only a few Latino gay males in the Bay Area. When, in 1975, a lover invited him to spend a few days in Los Angeles, Reyes discovered an all-Latino gay nightlife for the first time. He remembered the experience vividly in an interview with GALA historian Horacio N. Roque Ramírez:

This bar [was] *full* of *nothing* but Chicanos and Mexicans. White people [were] a very, very small minority. So for the first time in my life I [found] myself as a gay man and as a Chicano at the same place, at the same time, and all of a sudden all those people that I grew up with, all my *ideal* types, all the people that I used to have crushes with, were there, present, in this place. And for once I did not feel like a minority of any kind, not a minority as a gay man, not a minority as a Chicano. This was a place where I could be the majority. It felt wonderful. It felt *incredibly* wonderful.

(ROQUE RAMÍREZ 2003, 234)

Upon returning to San Francisco, Reyes decided to organize the Latino gay male population of the area. He published a classified ad in a gay newspaper, the *Bay Area Reporter*, that read: "Chicano and Gay? An organization is now forming in San Francisco to explore and attempt to fill the social, cultural and political needs of the Gay Chicano. Being a Gay Chicano is a unique experience only other Chicano Gays can truly understand" (quoted in Roque Ramírez 2003, 231). Reyes received twenty responses.

Manuel Hernández Valadéz, who had by then started to organize a group of gay Latino men in San Jose, was one of the individuals who responded to Reyes's ad. Hernández Valadéz had lived in the Bay Area since the late 1960s and regularly attended San Jose's and San Francisco's gay bars. His best friend, Jesús Barragán, had moved to California from Arizona in 1955 and was also a regular in the Castro's gay bars, where they had met. Their experiences were similar: they both encountered racism and discrimination in these predominantly white spaces, wanted to meet more gay Latino males, and aspired to organize politically.

In 1975 Barragán and Hernández Valadéz hosted a dinner party in Barragán's San Jose home. Reyes, along with fifteen Latino gay men, were in attendance. While

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the goal of the dinner party was to define strategies to include a Latino float in the upcoming San Francisco gay parade, the party was, de facto, GALA's founding event. As the night progressed, and more people were in attendance, the discussion shifted from the necessity of having a float in the gay parade to San Francisco's racial and sexual politics. The Latino men in attendance decided to form an organization and to recruit more members.

In order to recruit members, Reyes, Hernández Valadéz, and Barragán posted flyers in the bars of the Castro, Polk Street, the Tenderloin, and the Mission, where Latino gay men socialized. These flyers informed gay Latinos of an upcoming meeting at the Society for Individual Rights center for a still nameless Latino gay organization. At this meeting, sixty individuals, mainly men, voted to form an official organization. Hernández Valadéz first suggested naming the organization Gay Latinos Unidos, adding the slogan "Like glue we stick together." Reyes, however, coined the name of the organization, GALA, which he insisted on pronouncing "gay-la."

A few lesbian Latinas attended GALA's first meeting. Diane Felix, considered one of the early female founders, was present. Originally from Stockton, California, Felix had left her hometown for the Bay Area in 1975. A San Jose resident, Felix was politically involved in the Latino community, as were many of her male peers. She had participated in protests against the Vietnam War, in the Chicano Moratorium movement, in protests against the Los Angeles Police Department's murder of the Mexican American journalist Ruben Salazar, and in solidarity movements with Chile and Cuba. Like many of GALA's founding male members, she had not been previously involved in any gay organizations.

Negotiating Gay and Latino Identities

While most of GALA's members were socially and politically active in Latino communities, many of them had never been involved in gay politics. The organization's main goal, therefore, was to help its members develop strategies to express gay identities in Latino communities. Although San Francisco's Latino and gay communities occupied different spaces in the city, negotiating between these two communities was not part of GALA's main political agenda. GALA's members experienced racism in gay communities but also experienced homophobia in Latino communities, and they sought to gain acceptance in Latino communities first. In a 1981 article published in *Nuestro* magazine and then reprinted in the gay newspaper *Coming Up!*, in which Reyes narrated the history of the organization, he also discussed the difficulty of being gay in Latino families:

Homosexual. The word alone elicits responses that range from nervous giggles to physical violence.

For Latina lesbians and Latino gays, growing up and maintaining an existence in Latino communities has been a painful process, often endured in silence and isolation. "The love that dares not speak its name," as the Victorians called it, dares even less to speak it *en español*. But even in *la comunidad*, times have changed. A group of gay and lesbian San Franciscans, deciding to organize for their right to a place in the community, formed GALA, The Gay Latino(a) Alliance in November of 1975.

(REYES 1981, 3)

Rooted in the Mission District, where most of its members socialized, GALA was defined as a Latino organization, grounded in San Francisco's Mission District and designed to address the specific needs of gay Latinos in their home neighborhood.

In order to help its members, GALA became both a social and political organization. GALA's leaders organized not only fund-raisers and marches but also dances and drag balls. GALA participated mainly in mainstream Latino events, such as Cinco de Mayo festivities and Carnival festivals, but also in gay-dominated happenings, such as the Gay Freedom Day parades. Composed of several committees, the organization offered its members a wide variety of groups and boards: a social committee, a bylaws committee, a political committee, and a coordinating committee. Although only the most active members attended the political biweekly meetings, hundreds of gay Latinos and lesbian Latinas attended GALA's social parties.

GALA managed to integrate and rally other political (predominantly heterosexual) Latino organizations by underlining the similarities between gay and Latino political struggles. By emphasizing issues around immigration, labor, violence, discrimination, and racism, which both gay Latinos and heterosexual Latinos experienced, GALA associated with many Latino organizations in the Mission. For example, El Comité Salvadoreño (the Salvadorian Committee) marched with GALA at a Gay Freedom Day parade, because GALA had supported them in a march they had organized. By sharing their means of resistance in workshops and meetings with the wider Latino community, GALA became a staple in San Francisco's Latino political landscape. As a result of being involved in many nongay political activities, GALA was also supported by many Latino organizations in San Francisco.

At the same time, however, conflicts between GALA's community and the mainstream white gay community were intense. Racial tensions reached a climax during the 1977 San Francisco Board of Supervisors election. For District 6, which encompassed the Mission, white gay leaders supported white lesbian Carol Ruth Silver. The *San Francisco Sentinel*, a gay-owned newspaper, argued

that Silver best represented the interests of the Latino district. The members of GALA, however, forcefully rejected the white gay leaders' choice and endorsed a straight Latino candidate, Gary Borvice.

As a result, the organization found little acceptance in San Francisco's gay communities. In 1981, for example, a heated debate in *Coming Up!* forced GALA to denounce racism in white gay communities, in writing. Shortly after its sixth anniversary, GALA had organized a party called "Night in Havana," based on a Cuban theme, which was criticized by white gay leaders. Tim Speck, a gay white man and Mission resident, had written a letter to *Coming Up!* to express his discontent. In his letter, Speck claimed that he enjoyed living in the Mission because "one of the greatest joys in my life is to walk through my neighborhood and be in the middle of such stunningly beautiful latino people, and hear their marvelous language." Speck noted, however, that "the only problem is that I have to be back in my room before dark, when the teenagers come out with lead pipes, knives, and guns" (quoted in Roque Ramírez 2003, 248). GALA responded to the letter, noting that "[Speck's] generalization of our youth as violent marauders is an affront to all latinos," calling him "racist" (249). GALA's letter also condemned Speck's objectification of Latinos.

As a Latino group, GALA managed to integrate many of San Francisco's Latino political organizations, mainly because of its anchorage in the Mission neighborhood. It also, however, forcefully denounced racism in gay communities, which further separated it from the Castro's mainstream gay political agenda.

GALA's Demise

In the early 1980s GALA further disconnected from white gay communities and experienced growing tension between its male and female members. For many, the 1979 opening of the gay Latino bar *Esta Noche* in the Mission symbolized the beginning of the organization's decline. While the opening of *Esta Noche* was a victory for many Latino gay men who previously did not have a Latino-owned bar in which to socialize, GALA's leaders also started to organize meetings, dances, and fund-raisers at the bar, a space designed for gay men's entertainment. This spatial shift forced many women to leave the organization and many men to reassess their involvement in the organization.

GALA had not originally been created to recruit women. The first meetings were male-centered. The subsequent dances and fund-raisers focused mainly on male entertainment. Some lesbian Latinas, such as Diane Felix, were involved in the organization, but women remained a minority. GALA's male members, unaware of their own misogyny, did not embrace the specificities of lesbians' political agendas. Barragán, for example, remembered his

male peers' lack of concern for GALA's lesbian membership: "GALA had thrown all these dances, basically for *men*. And, yes, women went, but I remember the first GALA dance ... some idiot shows gay porno on the walls during the dance and of course some of the women complained" (quoted in Roque Ramírez 2003, 252). Felix remembered experiencing tension since the first meetings:

Most of the men were very welcoming, very happy. It wasn't until like later on, like the third, fourth meeting that some people had approached me and told me, "You know, I'm really sorry you came back, because I wanted to be just around Latino men, I didn't want to be dealing with women." I said well, too bad [laughter]. Sorry you feel that way. Once you get to know me you'll love me [laughter]. And we fought all through the eight years. I wouldn't leave and they wouldn't leave.

(252)

Early on, Felix had insisted on adding the word *co-sexual* to GALA's official description. It must be noted, however, that GALA did not completely ignore women's issues; a women's caucus was formed in 1976, and the name of the organization was changed from Gay Latino Alliance to Gay Latina/Latino Alliance in either 1976 or 1977.

GALA was not only a social organization that organized balls, dances, and drag shows but also a political organization that supported Latino causes in San Francisco, the nation, and around the world. Challenging heteronormativity in Latino communities and racism in gay communities, GALA remained rooted in the Latino neighborhood of the Mission. Its main founders—Barragán, Reyes, and Hernández Valadéz—created what Roque Ramírez called a "hybrid culture, in which members reformulated the meanings of both 'lesbian/gay' and 'Latina/Latino'" (2003, 258). By aggressively challenging the discourses at the intersection of race, place, gender, and sexuality, GALA was, between 1975 and 1983, a safe space for gay Latinos and lesbian Latinas to develop strategies for acceptance and resistance in both the wider gay communities and Latino communities of the San Francisco Bay Area. Like their African American counterparts, who had created their own associations away from mainstream white gay organizations, LGBT Latinos were more comfortable addressing the needs of their own community with their own political groups. The American LGBT political landscape, in the early 1980s, had become fragmented, by race, class, and gender.

SEE ALSO *Diasporas, Queer; Urban Queerness*

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Gay Liberation Front

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An international network of gay rights organizations active in the 1970s, which represented a shift to a more militant approach.

The Gay Liberation Front refers to an international network of organizations founded in New York City in 1969 following the Stonewall riots, the prominent uprising in response to police raids on a popular gay bar in Greenwich Village. Following the riots, activist Michael Brown reached out to Dick Leitsch, president of the Mattachine Society (a homophile organization working to educate the public about homosexuality with the intent of reducing discrimination in civic society and legal policies), who had recently published "The Hairpin Drop Heard around the World," one of the best-known accounts of the event, which focused specifically on events following the first night of riots and was influential in shaping

dominant narratives of the events. Together, they formed the Mattachine Action Committee, which soon branched off into the Gay Liberation Front (GLF). The formation of the GLF marked a turn in gay rights organizing from promoting inclusion to making more militant, radical demands, represented in part by the explicit reclamation of the word *gay*, which had previously been played down by existing movements.

The GLF Manifesto

The GLF proposed broad, sweeping social and political revolution based on the premise that all of society was oppressed by heterosexual gender norms and that a radical rethinking of self and interpersonal relations through sexual liberation could achieve structural change. While perhaps an idealistic mind-set in retrospect, this shift denoted a significant reframing of sexual politics at the time: *gay* came to mean freedom, liberation from embedded systems of oppression, rather than naming a particular identity or even a set of sexual practices. As the GLF manifesto asserts,

Gay shows the way. In some ways we are already outside the family and we have already, in part at least, rejected the "masculine" or "feminine" role society has designed for us.... Gay men don't need to oppress women in order to fulfill their own psychosexual needs, and gay women don't have to relate sexually to the male oppressor, so that at this moment in time, the freest and most equal relationships are most likely to be between homosexuals.

(MANIFESTO GROUP OF GLF 1971)

The Gay Liberation Front manifesto identifies a number of means by which society is oppressed: family, school, church, the media, words, employment, the law, physical violence, psychiatry, and self-oppression. In each case, the manifesto connects individual suffering and oppression to larger structural logics of power, primarily heteropatriarchy. These connections tease out how each institution perpetuates stereotypical binaries that position male roles as oppressors and female roles as oppressed. In a section titled "WHY We're Oppressed," the manifesto spells out the justification for a revolutionary rather than reforming stance, pointing to the shortsighted nature of legal and social reform, which emphasizes tolerance in order to preserve broader structures of power rather than altering deeply seated attitudes, which the manifesto locates in the institution of the patriarchal family. The patriarchal family structure naturalizes oppressive divisions between the sexes, and then social structures, including industrialized labor, work to reflect and engender these norms as truths.

Throughout the document, the organization asserts its belief that because gay people defy normalized gender roles, the sexual liberation that would be more accepting of gay people could potentially offer alternatives to the