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Une « révolution des droits » LGBTQIA+ en Amérique latine ?

Dossier. Une « révolution des droits » LGBTQIA+ en Amérique latine ?

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## ***Crear nuestra propia munda: The stakes of space appropriation by lesbians in Mexico City***<sup>1</sup>

*Crear nuestra propia munda : les enjeux de l'appropriation de l'espace par les lesbiennes dans la ville de Mexico*

*Crear nuestra propia munda: los desafíos de la apropiación del espacio por las lesbianas en la Ciudad de México*

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### **Résumés**

English Français Español

The appropriation of space has historically served as an important tool for the visibilisation of women and queer peoples. Reclaiming space has not only enabled queers to normalise their existence in some urban contexts, but it has also been the basis for the construction of collective identities, which in turn nourish political vindication. This article seeks to cast light upon some of the material aspects of LGBTQI+ collective action from the vantage point of the use of space by lesbians living in Mexico City. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and participant observation, it discusses dynamics linked to spatial segregation, lesbians' experiences of gay spaces, and the ways in which space constitutes both a stake and a resource for lesbian political mobilisation.

L'appropriation de l'espace a historiquement été un outil majeur pour la visibilisation des femmes et des personnes *queer*. Les espaces ainsi récupérés ont non seulement permis la normalisation des personnes *queer* dans le paysage urbain, mais ont également constitué un tremplin pour la construction d'identités collectives, qui sont elles-mêmes à la base de revendications politiques. Cet article essaie de mettre en lumière certains aspects matériels des mobilisations LGBTQI+ à partir de l'étude de l'usage de l'espace par les lesbiennes habitant la ville de Mexico. S'appuyant



sur des données qualitatives issues d'entretiens semi-directifs et sur l'observation participante, il analyse certaines dynamiques de ségrégation spatiale, les expériences de lesbiennes dans des espaces gays, et montre que l'espace est à la fois un enjeu et une ressource pour la mobilisation politique des lesbiennes.

La apropiación del espacio ha sido una herramienta histórica para la visibilización tanto de las mujeres como de las personas cuir. Los espacios reapropiados contribuyen no solo en normalizar la presencia de personas cuir en el contexto urbano, sino también constituyen la base para la construcción de identidades colectivas que, por su vez, alimentan reivindicaciones políticas. Este artículo trata de arrojar luz sobre algunos aspectos materiales de las movilizaciones LGBTQI+, a partir del análisis del uso del espacio por las lesbianas viviendo en la Ciudad de México. Así, con base en datos cualitativos procediendo de entrevistas semiestructuradas y de la observación participante, se discuten dinámicas de segregación espacial, las experiencias de lesbianas en los espacios gays, y cómo el espacio es tanto un desafío como un recurso para la movilización política lesbica.

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## ***Entrées d'index***

**Mots-clés :** LGBTQI+, lesbienne, appropriation de l'espace, identité collective

**Keywords:** LGBTQI+, lesbian, space appropriation, collective identity

**Palabras claves:** LGBTQI+, lesbiana, apropiación del espacio, identidad colectiva

### **Notes de la rédaction**


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## ***Texte intégral***

“¡No vamos a esperar que se caiga el patriarcado para *crear nuestra propia ‘munda’!*”<sup>2</sup>  
one of the hosts at a lesbo-feminist anti-slam.

- 1 Around noon on a Saturday in late February 2020 the inhabitants and regulars of Comuna Lencha start setting up a feminist bazar that will be followed by a lesbian feminist poetry anti-slam. Comuna Lencha, which can be roughly translated as “dyke commune”, is made up of seven women who live in a three-storey house in Santa María la Ribera, a *colonia* (neighbourhood) in the North West of Mexico City. During the week the courtyard is converted into a *comedor* (canteen) where affordable vegetarian set lunches are served, usually soup with a rice dish and a fresh fruit drink. As you enter you can order and collect your food from the small kitchen window. After you finish your meal you wash your own dishes in the corner sink, and if you want to use the bathroom before you leave you will need to enter the house and walk through the living room to a door with a paper sign that says *baños*. Today, the courtyard has been converted into a feminist bazar and several women have set up folding tables on which they are laying out clothes, stickers, fanzines, homemade cosmetics, and organic cigarettes, to be sold at a fair price to other women. The crowd is unlike anything you might find in your average bazar: there are women with all sorts of haircuts in all sorts of colours, wearing skirts, shorts or jeans, many of them sporting tattoos and piercings. As the sun goes down, everyone present helps to clear the outdoor space, replacing the tables with chairs set out pointing towards the end of the courtyard where a red velvety curtain hangs loosely, adorned with a few strands of fairy lights. One of the hosts grabs a microphone and starts explaining the rules of the anti-slam. In effect there are none, other than mutual respect.

 Comuna Lencha is one of a handful of places in Mexico City that specifically cater to lesbians. The discourse held by the members of the collective is resolutely revolutionary and what is happening on its premises does indeed amount to a revolution. The space it

affords and the people within it openly flout constraining social norms. In the alternative normative framework that emerges, it is not unusual for a woman to have shaved her hair, for a woman to love another woman or for a woman to love several others: the examples are endless. In many respects all the people present feel like outsiders [Becker, 1963], but in this microcosm they become insiders as they build a community in which they can exist freely. Community-building constitutes one of the bases for social movements: individuals meet comrades in the space they occupy, they identify common grievances and an identity that may not have been considered to be political can become a foundation for protest. Through its emphasis on collective identity, the concept of social movement community underlines the cultural aspects of concerted political action [Staggenborg, 1998]. Collective identity is here understood as resulting from one's identification to a group based on a shared individual characteristic—which is inherently oppositional in this case.

3 Unlike the children of workers struggling with classism or of ethnic minorities grappling with racism, queers<sup>3</sup> hardly ever inherit from their own parents a protest culture linked to the sexual discriminations of which they are the object. As a result of queers' dispersion over wide areas and their relative invisibility, queer socialisations—and potentially the politicisation of one's queer identity—often intervene later in life. In urban contexts, sociable spaces most notably include commercial venues such as restaurants and bars [Laguarda, 2005; List Reyes, 1999] which are often concentrated in gay quarters in large metropolises [Córdova, 2014; Giraud, 2014], as well as associational organisations [Camacho Rodriguez, 2019] and festivals [Eleftheriadis, 2018]. Historically, public baths have also been important spaces for homosexual sociability [Boivin, 2014; Manin, 2013]. The importance of space, in its physical and material acceptance, for the development of contestation has been highlighted by geographers [Ripoll, 2005]. Though it has been shown that gays' and lesbians' representations of possibilities and, hence, practices in public space are asymmetrical [Cattan, 2010], the spatial dimensions of lesbians' identarian construction have only been lightly touched upon in the literature [Russo Garrido, 2009]. Using the case of lesbians living in the urban area of Mexico City, I hereafter provide a narrative showing the centrality of spaces specifically dedicated to lesbians in the construction of lesbian collective identities. In other words, this article is an attempt to cast light upon some of the stakes that the material control of spaces holds over the genesis of concerted lesbian political action. As such, it provides insights into the spatial dynamics that contribute to establishing alternative frameworks of existence and allow the consolidation of minoritised identities, particularly sexual and gender identities.

4 The study of lesbian spaces in Mexico City underscores great contrasts in terms of women's and queers' rights in the country. On the one hand, Mexico is somewhat of a vanguard at the regional and international level in several respects. In 2010, Mexico City became the first Latin American federal entity to legalise same-sex marriage, which was before—if not despite [Encarnación, 2016]—most Western countries. Some of its destinations, such as Puerto Vallarta or the Zona Rosa (pink zone) neighbourhood in Mexico City, are well known to international gay travellers for their gay hotels, festivals, and parties. However, on the other hand, feminist movements face fierce opposition and much violence, despite the country being home to one of the world's strongest feminist movements. Historically, it has held much influence over the reformulation of transnational feminist and queer discourses [Grinnell, 2014], the country remains riddled with strong social inequalities between states, territories, and even neighbourhoods. The disparity between local realities for women and queers is even more marked owing to the differentiated legislation on controversial issues that were long deemed to be state matters.<sup>4</sup> As such, Mexico presents a complex case, having been



a precursor in some respects, but offering very unequal living conditions to women and queers across the country. Its capital is but one example crystallising some of these contrasts and tensions.

5 The analysis that follows is based on eighteen biographical interviews that I conducted with people who self-identified as lesbians at a given point in time and lived in the urban area of Mexico City between 2019 and 2020. Interviewees are for the most part politicised, in that they consider their homosexuality to be political and/or they claim to be activists, but I was careful to include non-politicised individuals in the sample. In addition, I held several participant observation sessions in various settings including festive and artistic events, formal and informal gatherings, and demonstrations.<sup>5</sup> Instead of looking solely into the spaces that are used for formal protest by lesbian activists, this ethnographic method made it possible to identify a greater diversity of actors—in terms of their political positioning and the repertoires they mobilise for example—and allowed a broader outlook emphasising the plurality of factors and dynamics that shape lesbians’ daily relationship to space.

6 Most of the women I spoke to had moved from a peripheral area, either another state or a remote neighbourhood, to a more central zone in the urban area of Mexico City. If not, then they often expressed the desire to do so. This desire to leave the peripheries is systematically motivated by their condition both as women and as homosexuals. Central areas of Mexico City may be perceived as being safer for they are home to gay quarters, which are virtually non-existent elsewhere. While gay spaces provide safer spaces for lesbians, their depoliticisation and co-optation is often lamented. It is in other spaces, free spaces, that lesbians consolidate both individual and collective identities through the construction of alternative normative frameworks of existence. The following sections of the article will develop the aforementioned frames of analysis: lesbians’ geographical mobility, their relationship to gay spaces, and the particularities of lesbian free spaces.

| Name, age  | Self-denomination             | Highest level of study <sup>6</sup> | Professional classification <sup>7</sup>              | Social origin <sup>8</sup> | Home state       | Interview date |
|------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|----------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Ali, 45    | <i>Cuir, lesbiana</i>         | Professional degree                 | 4. Merchants, salesclerks and sales agents            | Working class              | Veracruz         | 08/08/19       |
| Ava, 28    | <i>Cuir, lesbiana, lencha</i> | Bachelor's                          | 2. <i>Profesionistas</i> <sup>9</sup> and technicians | Upper class                | Veracruz         | 18/08/19       |
| Camila, 26 | <i>Lesbiana, gay</i>          | Bachelor's                          | 0. No professional activity                           | Upper class                | Estado de México | 30/01/20       |
| Luna, 32   | <i>Lesbiana, lencha</i>       | Bachelor's                          | 2. <i>Profesionistas</i> and technicians              | Middle class               | Estado de México | 30/01/20       |
| Martha, 76 | <i>Lesbiana, gay</i>          | Secundaria <sup>10</sup>            | 9. Support workers (retired)                          | Working class              | Veracruz         | 03/02/20       |



|                 |  |                                   |   |               |                  |          |
|-----------------|--|-----------------------------------|---|---------------|------------------|----------|
| Lucía, 29       | <i>Gay, lesbiana, queer</i>                                  | Bachelor's                        | 2. <i>Profesionistas</i> and technicians                  | Middle class  | San Luis Potosí  | 08/02/20 |
| Gloria, 73      | <i>Lesbiana</i>  | Master's                          | 1. High-level public servants, directors and chiefs       | Middle class  | Jalisco          | 10/02/20 |
| Melania, 25     | <i>Lesbiana</i>  | Bachelor's                        | 4. Merchants, salesclerks and sales agents                | Middle class  | Estado de México | 20/02/20 |
| Isabella, 43    | <i>Gay</i>   | <i>Preparatoria</i> <sup>11</sup> | 8. Industrial machinery operators, drivers and conductors | Working class | Ciudad de México | 20/02/20 |
| Sandra, 45      | <i>Gay, lesbiana</i>   | Master's                          | 1. High-level public servants, directors and chiefs       | Upper class   | Oaxaca           | 20/02/20 |
| Alex, 31        | <i>Trans, formerly lesbiana</i>                              | PhD                               | 2. <i>Profesionistas</i> and technicians                  | Middle class  | Ciudad de México | 21/02/20 |
| Ximena, 31      | <i>Lesbiana, lencha, marimacha, machorra, transcamionera</i> | Preparatoria                      | 7. Craft and construction workers                         | Middle class  | Ciudad de México | 27/02/20 |
| Antonella, 41   | <i>Lesbiana</i>  | Bachelor's                        | 4. Merchants, salesclerks and sales agents                | Working class | Ciudad de México | 04/03/20 |
| Valentina, 31   | <i>Lesbiana</i>  | Bachelor's                        | 2. <i>Profesionistas</i> and technicians                  | Middle class  | Ciudad de México | 04/03/20 |
| Gabriela, 26    | <i>Lesbiana</i>  | Bachelor's                        | 2. <i>Profesionistas</i> and technicians                  | Upper class   | Baja California  | 05/03/20 |
| María Luisa, 28 | <i>Gay, lesbiana</i>   | Master's                          | 2. <i>Profesionistas</i> and technicians                  | Working class | Estado de México | 06/03/20 |



|               |                              |                     |  |               |                  |          |
|---------------|------------------------------|---------------------|--|---------------|------------------|----------|
| Elly, 23      | <i>Lesbiana, lencha</i>      | Professional degree | 3. Auxiliary administrative worker       | Working class | Estado de México | 06/03/20 |
| Alejandra, 47 | <i>Gay, lesbiana, lencha</i> | Master's            | 2. <i>Profesionistas</i> and technicians | Upper class   | Ciudad de México | 12/03/20 |

## Out of the periphery: lesbians in and out of Mexico City

7 Lesbians, as well as other queer populations, are for the most part (visibly) concentrated in urbanised areas and tend to gravitate towards central zones to gain access to lesbian or queer spaces and, more generally, to improve their conditions of existence. About two thirds of the women that I spoke with had moved from a peripheral state to Mexico City, half of them from the State of Mexico and half from other states. In contexts where homophobia is strong, queer people are often prompted to leave the place they grew up in out of fear of violence and other uneasy situations. *Sexilio político* (“political exile”) is characterised by Norma Mogrovejo as “an exodus from a village to another, from a region to another, or from a neighbourhood to another in large cities [...] it is a possibility for survival for some, a political option for others” [Mogrovejo, 2015, p. 203]. In Mexico, the Catholic church has contributed to the legitimisation of homophobic attitudes and stands as the most influential detractor of queer rights [Magaña Moreno, 2015]. Undoubtedly, religious clout in one’s home state, hometown or neighbourhood can be an important motivation for exile. In a context where attitudes towards homosexuality vary quite substantially from one locality to another,<sup>12</sup> it is important to understand lesbians’ relationship to space on a larger scale in order to contextualise more effectively the emergence of, and stakes presented by, lesbian spaces as such. Just as one’s representations of a particular space influence one’s practices within it [Blidon, 2008], these representations may motivate geographical mobilities.

8 For lesbians who grew up in peripheral states, a typical trajectory is to leave their home state in their early adulthood and to settle in the capital city. Most of them consider flight as necessary to the exploration of their own sexuality, which is otherwise repressed:

I met a girl who was a lesbian when I was nineteen, that’s when I really had to confront it. Like, all that time before, I was surviving, I was trying to hide it, but at that point I couldn’t any more. It was like “I can’t date dudes, it’s crap, I don’t like it, I don’t feel any physical or emotional attraction”. And so that’s how, at nineteen, I told myself, “I’m gay”. But I only told myself because I lived in San Luís Potosí. There, society is very Catholic, very closed and very homophobic. So, I had fucking terrible internalised homophobia. I felt really bad, so bad that I decided to leave the place. Like, to explore that sexual part of me that I couldn’t explore there.<sup>13</sup>

9 Being openly homosexual in her hometown wasn’t an option for Lucía. In Mexico City, she benefited from anonymity, which opened up a whole range of possibilities for her. It was only after moving there that she felt safe to reveal her homosexuality to her family, her friends or strangers, thus multiplying and enlarging the spaces in which being a lesbian openly would become feasible for her.



10 Besides the prevalence of homophobia in the place where one grew up, flight may also

be motivated by the desire to escape strong family pressure. Most lesbians I spoke to said they have to dissimulate their homosexuality when they attend family gatherings, and as a result they often avoid such occasions. Sandra's experience is very telling with regard to the oppression that lesbians may experience within family circles:

My family is very traditional. For my mom, it's man and wife, the woman serves the man. It really changed my vision of things when I arrived in Mexico City. When I told them, they said "No! no, you can't be!", it was horrible. They make you doubt yourself. My mom thought I was sick, she said "Ok, let's go see a psychiatrist and if he says you're fine then I'll let it go", so I went. So we went to see the psychiatrist and he said, "That's great! What's her name? How do you feel?" and my mom said, "No! no! no!" like super angry. She said, "This man is wrong, he doesn't have any morals, let's go see the priest!". So, we went to see the priest and he said, "That's great! What's her name?", the priest! We went to see three or four more people, and so on. I understood that nothing was going to make her change her mind. And she had me going around with her chauffeur—she was a deputy back then—I had to ask my ex to help me escape from Oaxaca!<sup>14</sup>

11 As she was being sequestered and blackmailed by her own mother, Sandra had to leave her hometown in the middle of the night with nothing but a small bag containing a few items of clothing. Because of her mother's behaviour and notoriety—she is involved in local and national politics—Sandra believes that she will not return to live in Oaxaca. She now lives with her fiancée in Mexico City where her family cannot impose constraints on her life. Sandra's story is not an isolated case: a large proportion of lesbians who live in Mexico City fled their home state for similar reasons and decided to settle in the capital city, where people are perceived to be more willing to accept those whose sexuality does not correspond to the dominant norm.

12 Despite the sometimes haven-like image that queer people coming from peripheral states may have of Mexico City, the reality is much more complex. Mexico City and the urban areas of the State of Mexico in the immediate periphery are marked by strong socio-economic inequalities, which are reflected in a high degree of spatial segregation. The unequal distribution of urban space has a major effect on access to lesbian spaces and queer spaces generally. In the peripheral parts of the urban area, both within Mexico City and elsewhere in the State of Mexico, establishments catering to a queer clientele are virtually non-existent. While there are some well-known cruising spaces for gay men and the odd gay bar, there are no public spaces catering specifically to lesbians. In fact Melania, who lived in Nezahualcōyotl in the State of Mexico for the past twenty years, has now moved to a Southern *colonia* of Mexico City and says that she does not recall ever seeing a lesbian in her home city. She explains:

It's a very ignorant place, it's a very violent zone, full of feminicides. There's quite a lot of gays, but you only see those shady forty year-old gays... It's really hard there. And lesbians... Actually, I don't think I've ever even seen a lesbian there. Obviously, there are lesbians, but it's never public, it can't be [...] At night, it's very unsafe. I've never really explored my neighbourhood because I'm scared they'll rob me and rape me. And they've tried to, more than once. More than once I've had to run for my life, day like night.<sup>15</sup>

13 To Melania, the invisibilisation of lesbians in Nezahualcōyotl is strongly linked to the levels of violence against women in this area. Feminicides and sexual violence against women are rampant in the poorest parts of the urban area. In the context of the coronavirus crisis, some speak of "the other pandemic" hitting the State of Mexico [Muedano & Lázaro, 2020].

Located at the extreme eastern edge of the urban area adjacent to Nezahualcōyotl, Chimalhuacán has remained one of the city's poorest districts ever since the 1960s when





it came into existence in the form of a number of unregulated settlements with many self-built houses. María Luisa<sup>16</sup> grew up and lives in Chimalhuacán, where she is a primary school teacher. Her girlfriend, whom she has been living with for several years now, hasn't told her parents she is a lesbian. When María Luisa was fifteen and told her parents, her mother kicked her out of the family home. María Luisa and her girlfriend never exhibit any sign of affection towards each other outside their apartment, either in the staircase of their building or on the street. Besides the risk of exposing themselves to direct violence, they fear being recognised. María Luisa particularly dreads coming face to face with one of her students or their parents. She maintains a good relationship with most of her colleagues, who know that she is a lesbian. However, what she fears most is the unpredictability of the reaction of parents if they were to find out. Out of fear of violence, harassment, and losing her job, María Luisa has decided to live openly as a lesbian in a few carefully chosen places. These are the confines of her own apartment, provided she is away from prying eyes, the bars of Zona Rosa, which she rarely frequents since they are over two hours away from her home, as well as online spaces like Facebook where she met her partner.

15 Although Mexico was somewhat of a vanguard for queer rights in Latin America, the country remains riddled with deep socio-spatial inequalities. The current reality of queer people varies hugely from one state to another and from one neighbourhood to another. This is quite clearly reflected in the places that lesbians choose to live out their sexuality openly: they assess the lesbian potential of the spaces they have access to, that is whether they deem a place safe or not for lesbians, and choose spaces to move into openly according to their conclusions. Many lesbians explain that their geographical mobility is due to violence against women and to homophobia. Geographical mobility towards a capital city is often conditioned by social origin [Rault, 2016]. In this sample, amongst all those who moved to Mexico City, lesbians who grew up in distant peripheral states tend to come from relatively well-off families middle or upper class—and the trajectories of those who grew up in the State of Mexico are characterised by upward social mobility, often attained through a university education.

16 That being said, it is worth recalling that these accounts, however close they are to reality, are those of lesbians who left the peripheries to settle in the capital city some years ago. Queer mobility is, in fact, much more complex than the rural-to-urban paradigm [Blidon & Guérin-Pace, 2013]. Moreover, queer realities in the peripheries can contrast markedly with the representations of which they are the object [Giraud, 2016]. The emergence of visible feminist movements in the peripheries suggests that local lesbian and queer realities are undergoing transformations. For example, on the morning of March 8, 2020, about five hundred women protested in Nezahualcóyotl for the first time in the area, in a move to denounce the rising rates of feminicides and the lack of government intervention in the periphery. They later joined the march departing from Monumento a la Revolución in Mexico City. Despite ongoing transformations, access to spaces dedicated to lesbians or queers remains very unequal in geographical terms and the distribution of these spaces reflects deep-seated socio-spatial inequalities. The existence of gay quarters in central areas may draw the attention of lesbians and other queer people who seek to gain autonomy, and whose mobility may consequently open up new possibilities.

## **Confronting homonormativity: lesbians in gay spaces**

17 Zona Rosa in Mexico City has gained much fame both nationally and internationally. What was formerly a business quarter has become the epicentre of gay life in the capital. Located right in the city-centre, it is bordered to the north by Paseo de la Reforma, a large avenue lined with countless luxurious hotels and corporate headquarters stretching all the way from the emblematic Castillo de Chapultepec to the Zócalo, otherwise known as Plaza de la Constitución, where the seat of government is located. To the south, Zona Rosa borders on La Condesa and La Roma, two of the most posh and trendy *colonias* of the city. During the day the streets are filled with locals and tourists enjoying the many restaurants and shopping facilities in the area. As the night begins to fall the bars and nightclubs bearing rainbow flags deploy their large *terrazas* onto the street blasting the latest commercial hits. After a short stroll down Calle Amberes you might find yourself entering one of these bars. Take a quick look around and you will probably see there are dozens of men ordering buckets of beer and sipping *palomas* (tequila and lime cocktails). You may also notice there are very few women, if any.

18 The economic and commercial appropriation of space in urban areas has been an important factor in the visibilisation of queer populations [Córdova, 2014], it has contributed historically to the creation of large communities and strong identities [Castañeda, 1999; Laguarda, 2009]. Though a re-articulation of social relations often takes place in the spaces thus created, they do not escape from pre-existing dynamics of power [Russo Garrido, 2009]. They may contribute to the reproduction of patterns of class segregation [Boivin, 2014] or of patriarchal structures. As Melania puts it, “Gays live their sexual liberty from the privileges that patriarchy gives to them”.<sup>17</sup>

19 The organisation of gay festive spaces, although they are not the only gay spaces, reflects some of the unequal social relations that persist within queer populations. These spaces are in fact frequented by a minority of lesbians, Melania adds:

If you go to Pervert, it's a gay pride party, you just end up surrounded by muscular, hairless men, and you think that it's not your place either. It's really complicated. Being part of the [queer] community doesn't make you part of the places that exist for the community, they're only for gays.<sup>18</sup>

20 Melania feels that those spaces that are provided by Zona Rosa and some mainstream queer organisations do not correspond to the needs of all queer people. For her, most spaces that claim to provide safe environments for queer people actually fail to do so for lesbians, in this case.

21 Lesbians' relationship to gay spaces may be difficult but this is not only true of lesbians. Although gay spaces have contributed to the redefinition of homophobic norms and in some regards to the normalisation of homosexuality, they have only done so to a limited degree. In 1970s Mexico City, Rodrigo Laguarda has shown how homosexual spaces have contributed to creating a distinction and a segregation between the middle or upper-class gay and *el joto del barrio*, the faggot from the hood [Laguarda, 2009]. The term gay itself, which has travelled through borders and has been extensively adopted in non-English speaking contexts, hints to the crafting of a hegemonic and supposedly universal gay subject in the collective psyche.<sup>19</sup> This ideal-typical gay is a cisman who is sophisticated, who appreciates the fine things of life and whose taste is impeccable: he bears some traditionally feminine characteristics but not to the point where his virility is put into question. In all regards but his homosexuality, he is at the top of social hierarchies; he is the incarnation of homonormativity, that is “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility for a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” [Duggan, 2003, p. 50]. In other words, he assumes the struggle for queer



rights to be complete, thus delegitimising ongoing struggles and contributing to the perpetration of a narrowly redefined heterosexual order. In Mexico, the ideal-typical gay is one who formulates a claim to cosmopolitanism and “ascends over the ‘third or second world’ Mexican, the working poor and the perverse *lesbiana*” [Russo Garrido, 2009, p. 37].

22 Considering their depoliticisation and the fact that they are largely dominated by homosexual men, it is hardly surprising that gay spaces do not necessarily constitute safe environments for queer persons in a wider meaning of the term. The Marcha del Orgullo, initially inspired by the 1969 Stonewall riots, attracts tens of thousands of people to the streets of Mexico City every year. Like in many other contexts, it is considered to have become the most important space and event for queer people. However, many of them lament its co-optation, that is its absorption and commodification by large commercial organisations in this case:

Last year, the place was filled with big business trucks. The people who were on foot with signs, they just couldn't... You could hear the big speakers blasting music, but not the people shouting slogans.<sup>20</sup>

23 Valentina works in a government funded queer organisation and in this capacity she has been on the organisational committee of the Marcha del Orgullo on several occasions. Here, she is referring to the march that took place on June 29, 2019. At noon, the large roundabout of the Ángel de la Independencia was filling up with trucks blasting loud music surrounded by masses on foot. The crowd was so dense that it soon became impenetrable. People wearing rainbow-coloured shirts adorned with a multinational logo were throwing goodies into the crowd. You could easily spot a dozen companies sponsoring the march in the blink of an eyelid, but spotting an activist group in the parade was more akin to looking for a needle in a haystack.

24 Though the gay spaces that I have described and defined here are often the first homosexual socialisation venue that lesbians frequent, they often come to criticise and reject them as they have consolidated their lesbian identities outside of them with some of the tools offered by feminism and lesbian-feminism [Cardoza, 2005]. In the Mexican context, discourses that criticise these spaces often mobilise anti-neoliberal and decolonial arguments that denounce imperialist and Eurocentric conceptions of dissident sexualities and the co-optation of queer struggles:

We went to that Gay Pride<sup>21</sup> counter-march. It's because we're against the absorption of this type of movements by capitalism, for fucking consumption.<sup>22</sup>

I've always been against what I call the *gay mainstream*,<sup>23</sup> it's like Zona Rosa: consumption and superficiality. In the end, I think that *cuirs* like us, we are the punk gays.<sup>24</sup>

25 Both Ava and Ali associate gay spaces to consumerism, which they resist. This contestation may take the form of the organisation of counter-marches. For example, an Orgullo Disidente—Dissident Pride—was organised by lesbo-feminist collectives in June 2020, whose aim was to create a space which enables the expression of those whose bodies and identities remain stigmatised in the heterosexual order and in those gay spaces that only admit a narrow conception of dissident sexual identities. Contestation may also be expressed through the rejection of some terms and the adoption of an alternative vocabulary. For example, *cuir* is the hispanisation of the term queer: its use denotes a proximity to queer theory but from a decolonial perspective, hence the rejection of the English spelling [Blanco, Pecheny & Pierce, 2018]. Finally, it is worth noting that the objects criticised in the two citations are named in their English form, and it may be assumed that this is because they are considered to be western imports



that turn a blind eye to local issues.

- 26 Though gay spaces are not limited to festive settings alone, the latter are nevertheless the most visible and easily accessible spaces. As such, they offer excellent opportunities for understanding the relationship of lesbians to the “gay world”. And, partly on account of their co-optation and their depoliticisation, they only provide a safe environment for a limited number of persons, of which lesbians and most queers are excluded. The creation of lesbian spaces, and more generally of spaces that are safe for women and queers, is a crucial tool for lesbo-feminist activists, especially in a context where, as Adrienne Rich eloquently puts it, “lesbians have historically been deprived from a political existence through their ‘inclusion’ as female versions of male homosexuality” [Rich, 1980, p. 28].

## Making weak identities strong: lesbians in free spaces

- 27 In 2017, in the working-class neighbourhood of La Doctores, a lesbian couple opened a *marisquería* where they serve fresh seafood to enjoy with a cold beer and wash down with some mezcal. La Cañita is run by Ali aka DJ Guaguís and Diana aka La Pornoterrorista and mostly caters to a queer clientele. Its doorless entrance leads directly to a tiny bar above which you’ll find the menu on a blackboard and a jersey of the Veracruz football team. The wall opposite the entrance is covered with postcards sent by customers from all over the world. To the left, a curious dollhouse inhabited by countless figurines and mounted with colourful fairy lights fills the wall. As you look up, you’ll find a poker table hanging upside-down from the ceiling. In the afternoon, Ali is usually found chatting away on the bench out front sipping a traditional *agua de horchata*; she greets you with a warm hug and a *qué pedo* (a local expression for “what’s up”). She is short and big, her hair is grey and closely cut (it’s been blue or red, dreadlocked or shaven before), she wears a straight cut t-shirt that says Kumbia Queers or Traicion, and before she gets behind the decks, she always applies some bright red lipstick. The small room at the back can only sit about twenty people, and only one person can fit in the DJ booth. On a Thursday evening, that’s where you’ll find Antonella running a tasting of craft mezcal. Her short, dark, curly hair is always impeccably combed, she wears an ironed shirt, and a bow tie on occasions. As the sun sets, the place progressively fills up with eager-to-dance partygoers, until it is completely packed, and you have to wiggle your way through to the entrance where the party starts spilling out onto the street.

- 28 Mexican lesbo-feminist activists have long sought to create non-mixed and autonomous spaces in order to reflect critically on heterosexism and neoliberalism as instruments of control over women’s bodies and sexualities, and to weave networks of solidarity amongst lesbians [Hinojosa, 2001; Cardoza, 2003]. Creating safe spaces is often considered as one of the most important means of action for lesbians considering that, as Melania puts it:

There aren’t as many safe spaces [for lesbians as for gays] compared to Zona Rosa. It is definitely a challenge. With La Gozadera<sup>25</sup>, with La Cañita, little by little there are more and more feminist spaces that are open to dialogue. I think that’s where the struggle is: in creating spaces, spaces where we can be ourselves, feel good, be safe, and organise ourselves.<sup>26</sup>



Encompassing different political logics, a multitude of spaces have hence been created over the past few decades, most of them were however ephemeral, whether that

was their intention or not. Nonetheless, safe spaces, as they provide individuals with a physical setting in which they can explore different facets of their sexuality, have played and continue to play an important role in lesbian socialisation and political organising. As free spaces [Evans & Boythe, 1986], they enable those they host to imagine an alternative future through the elaboration of alternative normative frameworks of existence. The ties established between individuals in spaces such as these legitimize the expression of grievances and vindication, and hence participate in generating collective identities or mobilising identities [Polletta, 1999].

30 In spaces such as those provided by La Cañita or Comuna Lencha, the heterosexual order is openly flouted. In this respect, one of the most visible trends is to provide a safe space for corporal expression and exploration. Through the rejection of heteronormative expectations of bodily representations, queers and lesbians performatively contest heterosexuality as a social and political order [Butler, 1993]. These spaces give visibility to alternative frames of existence in which deviance [Becker, 1963] from heterosexuality may be normalised. For example, María Luisa reflects upon the first time she accessed a queer space:

Well, you see, it's that Zona Rosa is a place where you see... Sorry for these words... But that there are loads of people like you [she is referring to my androgynous appearance], and you feel safe. Really, you finally feel like you're not the only one, that there are more people like you. Like, you see the LGBT community like a family [...] You see lesbian couples, gay couples, and you start thinking "it's normal".<sup>27</sup>

31 Seeing women whose looks did not correspond to the traditional norms of femininity and same-sex couples walking down the street was an important moment for María Luisa. In a context where homosexuality remains marginal, such a sight contributes to the normalisation of same-sex desire. It is interesting that María Luisa should compare "the LGBT community" to "a family", in that the family is the first instance in which one is socialised to heterosexuality. Considering queers like a family is akin to identifying a new social space, which becomes an instance of homosexual socialisation and of deconstruction of the dominant norm. Visibilising non-conventional forms of bodily presentation and amorous affection contributes to the demarginalisation and normalisation of lesbianism.

32 Ximena is thirty-one years old, had her first lesbian amorous relationship at the age of five, and has only been calling herself a lesbian since a year ago. She started to do so when she and a friend, tired of being exposed to sexist and homophobic behaviours in the music industry, started a band called Corroncha Son. This band is composed only of women and has become a space for its members to reflect on their identities as women of colour and as homosexual women. Artistic expression has become a means for Ximena to not only express her doubts, her anger, and her ideas, but also to politicise her identity and to meet peers:

Now that I know more *compañeras*,<sup>28</sup> even though sometimes we may have different ideologies, and even though we may think in different ways... Well, I think that now I feel more support. I feel that I am not alone. And I think that's what a movement creates. I mean that despite all the different things that exist: experiences, information, self-doubt... When there's a movement, there's also a base that you can integrate knowing there's more people supporting you in the same struggle. And that, well it makes you feel like it's all worth it, it gives you courage!<sup>29</sup>



Lesbian identities can be "weak identities" in that, outside of lesbian spaces, they find little resonance and anchorage [Osborne, 2008]. Meeting peers who have had similar

experiences to one's own is a pivotal moment to appropriate an identity, especially when that identity is one that causes stigmatisation and exclusion. As such, self-identification to a group, as well as peer-acknowledgement, contributes to strengthening hitherto weak identities.

- 34 Accessing lesbian spaces also facilitates one's introduction to rich subcultures and histories linked to lesbians' political existences. Gloria recalls her first steps in lesbo-feminist activism in the 1970s and 1980s:

I came to Mexico City for my master's degree. Here, I started to get to know the feminist movement a little bit more. And then I met some lesbians, some of them were organised, but they were a bit too... I don't know if too radical, but I didn't like their way of working [...] In 1989, in a feminist *encuentro*,<sup>30</sup> I met more lesbians. They invited me to a gathering and there I met Patria Jiménez.<sup>31</sup> Patria Jiménez, she opened a whole world to me, that of feminist organising, its history... With Patria, I learnt everything about the lesbo-feminist movement. And then she became my partner, and I learnt a lot more about all of this.<sup>32</sup>

- 35 University is often an important vector for the discovery of feminism and lesbian-feminism for it opens both conceptual and social spaces for the identification of injustices and of means to combat them. However, initiation to lesbo-feminist thought and methods can also take place in more accessible spaces as was the case for Ximena. They are often akin to those aforementioned places, such as Comuna Lencha, La Cañita, and La Gozadera. These spaces may facilitate the acquisition and activation of a protest culture as they contribute to the social legitimisation of worldviews that are otherwise dismissed [Albenga & Bachmann, 2015]. It is finally worth noting that the couple may constitute a space for the social legitimisation of a marginal identity [Chetcuti, 2010] and the instigation and appropriation of an oppositional identity.

- 36 Free spaces for lesbians and queers are essential to their political mobilisation for they allow the normalisation of marginalised experiences, as well as the identification of common grievances and of possible means of action. Access to lesbian spaces enable lesbians' insertion into solidarity networks where membership is based upon their homosexuality, and thus a trait that is otherwise a criterion of exclusion becomes one of inclusion. Besides legitimising factors of difference, these spaces also contribute to the legitimisation and appropriation of dissenting discourses that are dismissed in mainstream spaces. They are hence important supports for the strengthening of identities and ideas that become the basis for lesbians' political organising.

## Conclusion

- 37 Space can be a vector for both the rapprochement and the dispersion of people. In the context of queer mobilisations, space plays an important part in determining their forms, strengths, and even possibilities, especially in consideration of the high dispersal and relative invisibility of queer populations. The interactions between queer collective action and space are multidirectional. One's position in space strongly affects the possibilities one is afforded in terms of access to queer spaces, and hence of opportunities for self-identification to dissenting groups and for the consolidation of collective identities. Though free spaces alone are not a sufficient condition to generate collective action, they are a necessary condition to the formation of social movement communities which, in this case, nourish both queer and feminist social movements.

The overall rarity of queer, lesbian, and feminist spaces and their concentration in urban areas are important restraints to the development of collective action in the peripheries. Although the absence of safe spaces often prompts the movement of queer



individuals from the peripheries to more central areas, the emergence of visible feminist mobilisations in peripheral areas nonetheless hints at the development of free spaces and shifts in the political logics that motivate them. As such, the multiplication and generalisation of such spaces, and hence the appropriation of new spaces, is vital to the renewal and enlargement of political mobilisations.

38

The focus on lesbian spaces reveals some of the unequal dynamics of representation that exist within queer movements, as well as some of the means that are used to address them. At the intersection of queer and feminist mobilisations, the case of lesbian mobilisations stresses the importance of the creation of *mundas propias*, that is to say, microcosms in which alternative realities and futures are envisioned, both outside and within social movement communities. Through the appropriation of space, that is their transformation into spaces of reflection, discussion, and vindication, marginalised groups seek to tear down the power dynamics which are hostile to their well-being as they redefine the rules that exist within these spaces in opposition to the dominant social paradigm. The occupation and appropriation of space is a meaningful and indispensable tool for those who fight systemic forms of oppression. More comparative approaches are needed to enlighten the motions transforming social movements, as well as prospective directions.

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## Notes

1 Dans cet article, nous respectons les spécificités de l’anglais irlandais.

2 “We are not going to wait for patriarchy to collapse before we create our own world”. It should be noted that the term *mundo*, which means world, is given a feminine form by replacing the final “o” with an “a”. The feminisation of masculine terms is a political tool that is often used by feminist activists, generally to signify the re-appropriation of the term, or to indicate that it refers to a non-mixed space.

3 In the interest of inclusivity and readability, and to highlight categorical asymmetries in the use of acronyms, I will henceforward use the term “queer” to refer to people who are not heterosexual and/or cisgender. However, it should be noted that those whom I refer to as queers may not necessarily define themselves as such.

4 It was the case with abortion and same-sex marriage for which legislation differs significantly from one state to the other. Over the next few years, the situation may however become more homogenous in the country following Supreme Court rulings of June 19, 2015, and September 7, 2021, respectively defining the banning of same-sex marriage as unconstitutional and decriminalising abortion.

5 My integration in these groups was relatively straightforward considering my own identification as a lesbian. Although I had been worried that being a European-born, non-native Spanish speaker might be a hurdle, in fact it prompted interviewees to explicit certain cultural practices and the meanings they associated with them.

6 I indicate the highest level of study and not the highest degree achieved considering that, in Mexico, a minority of university students actually graduate from their course.

7 According to the *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Geografía’s Sistema Nacional de Clasificación de Ocupaciones 2019*.

8 Determined according to parents’ professional occupation.

9 In the official nomenclature, *profesionistas* corresponds to positions requiring a university-level qualification.

10 Secundaria is the education students usually receive from age 12 through 15.

11 Preparatoria is the education students usually receive from age 15 through 18.

12 For some figures of attitudes towards homosexuality in different states, see the Encuesta Nacional sobre Discriminación—the National Survey on Discrimination. For example, in 2017, 40.5% of respondents living in Mexico City declared that it was to a large extent or totally unacceptable for two persons of the same sex to live under the same roof as a couple, making it the federal entity with the least negative attitudes towards homosexuality. The rate was 69.8% in the State of Mexico and between 72.1 and 79.4% in eight other states.

13 Interviewee: Lucía, 29, middle class, bachelor’s degree.

14 Interviewee: Sandra, 45, upper class, master’s degree.

15 Interviewee: Melania, 25, middle class, bachelor’s degree.

16 Interviewee: María Luisa, 28, working class, master’s degree.

17 Interviewee: Melania, 25, middle class, bachelor’s degree.

18 *Idem*.

19 I here refer to collective representations. Gay identities should be understood in relation to the local setting in which they are embedded [Altman, 1997].

20 Interviewee: Valentina 31, middle class, bachelor’s degree.

21 In English in the original citation.

22 Interviewee: Ava, 28, upper class, bachelor’s degree.



23 In English in the original citation.

24 Interviewee: Ali, 45, working class, professional degree.

25 La Gozadera, full name Punto Gozadera, is a lesbo-feminist cultural centre and restaurant which was located on Plaza San Juan in a working-class neighbourhood. However, as is the fate of most lesbian venues, it shut down in November 2020 due to financial difficulties and a new location is being sought at the time of writing.

26 Interviewee: Melania, 25, middle class, bachelor's degree.

27 Interviewee: María Luisa, 31, working class, master's degree.

28 A *compañera* is not only another woman, she is not only a friend, she is a comrade. This term is widely used in feminist circles to designate other women who share critical political stances and are in the same fight for the advancement of their cause. It conveys a strong feeling of comradeship amongst women.

29 Interviewee: Ximena, 31, working class, *preparatoria* (secondary education).

30 An *encuentro* is a gathering or a meeting. In this context, it is used to refer to a political event bringing together individuals and groups that are not necessarily acquainted with each other yet.

31 Patria Jiménez (Elsa Patria Jiménez Flores) is a well-known Mexican lesbian activist. She co-founded El Clóset de Sor Juana, a refuge for queer youth, with Gloria Careaga Pérez (the interviewee) and in 1997 she became the first openly homosexual person to be elected to Parliament.

32 Interviewee: Gloria, 73, middle class, master's degree.


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### *Référence papier*

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