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Recommended Citation

Gonzalez, Kassondra, "Stonewall's Parallel Queer Latinidad" (2019). *Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino Studies Honors Program*. 6.

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17 May 2019

Professor Vassallo-Oby

Research Paper

Stonewall's Parallel Queer Latinidad

The Stonewall Riots in New York City marked the official beginning of the U.S. gay rights movement in 1969. Following a police raid, the intense fight between officers and LGBTQ+ bar goers at Manhattan's Stonewall Inn developed into a series of organized uprisings over the following days. Despite the bar's predominantly white population, people of color were on the front lines of most physical incidents during the riots as well as other forms of activism (Gan 2007, 131). According to scholar Jessi Gan, the legacy of black and brown activism during this time period has historically been glossed over, particularly the activism of one of Stonewall's most prominent figures, Puerto Rican and Venezuelan transwoman, Sylvia Rivera (2007, 127-128). The problematic nature of attributing crucial activist work to a general queer population while ignoring Latino/a/x contributions to the LGBTQ+ movement is endemic to the misinterpretation of LGBTQ+ identities both inside and outside of the queer community.

Queerness and Latinidad are social classifications that do not run parallel to one another, but instead function as aspects of individuality that should and do intersect. The acknowledgement of intersectionality within the context of Stonewall is key for both queer and non-queer communities to more thoroughly understand the importance of individual identity within minority groups and how racism and homophobia work in collaboration to oppress queer communities of color. In an interview with art historian Cary Cardova for the Smithsonian Institution's Archive of American Art, queer Latino artist Angel Rodriguez-Diaz describes being

gay in addition to being Puerto Rican while living in the United States as, “layers of discrimination” and characterizes those layers in his life as “different layers of how you somehow disappear” (2004). This notion is especially relevant when applied to the historical context of the United States gay rights movement and its erasure of Latinx individuals which involves the layer of racial oppression that very much exists to seemingly disappear, therefore a critical understanding of intersectionality is rendered insignificant.

This research project investigates the effects of how identity intersections were regarded during the period of the Stonewall Riots in New York City, specifically through the lens of identifying as queer and Latinx. It is necessary to historically analyze the concept of intersectionality because of the crucial role it plays in lived experience and identity formation, particularly regarding the cultural construction of race and ethnicity in relationship to queerness. I argue that individual queer Latinx experiences have been wrongly simplified into the singular cultural narrative of, “*The Queer Experience*,” due to the lack of attention to the intersection of queerness and Latinidad, particularly during the Stonewall era of the U.S. gay rights movement. Rather than shifting the mainstream understanding of queer experiences to be understood on an individual basis, racial overlap was often ignored during the gay rights movement, though racism within and outside the movement persisted. This disregard of race among key queer activists and participants led to the oppression of queer black and brown individuals being inaccurately equated to the oppression of queer white individuals by using their collective queerness as a common umbrella. Layers of oppression become much more complex when class, religion and other factors are considered, therefore, the specific experiences belonging to one minority group should not be reduced to a single narrative.

Intersectionality is a relatively new term that was not a well-understood concept throughout the 1960s and '70s, nor was it a definable word that even existed during that time in history. It describes a variety of sociocultural categories that individuals identify with or fit into, and implies how certain overlapping identities in combination with one another affect personal experiences. "To take intersectionality seriously means to acknowledge that one identity, in its limitations, cannot represent all identities and narratives" (Cor et. Al. 2018, 79). Understanding how different identities (i.e. racial, sexuality, gender) link to one another is a facet of queer theory that needs greater examination.

The Columbia Journalism Review cites black feminist scholar and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw as the first to coin the term in 1989 within feminist scholarship . Crenshaw notes the tendency in traditional feminism studies to exclude issues specific to black women, thereby failing to fully encompass women's issues. Although womanhood in itself comes with issues that extend to women across the board, the ways in which white women and black women are oppressed are completely incomparable, as black women face systemic racism in combination with systemic misogyny. Crenshaw's implies that scholarly work and activism should reflect this. When related back to the Stonewall Era, it is imperative that queer activism is studied from the same position that Crenshaw studied the feminist movement. Much like First Wave Feminism, the absence of acknowledging the additional layer of racial marginalization within the fight for equality is an issue seen in early queer activism in the United States.

The most prominent Latinx Stonewall activist, Sylvia Rivera, brought her frustrations about the public's ignorance of intersectional identities to the forefront during one of her most

famous speeches at New York City's 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day Rally. Despite being booed by the predominantly white audience, she proclaimed:

“I have been to jail. I have been raped and beaten many times. By men, heterosexual men that do not belong in the homosexual shelter. But, do you do anything for me? No. You tell me to go and hide my tail between my legs... The people are trying to do something for all of us, and not men and women that belong to a white middle class, white club, and that’s what you all belong to” (Rivera 1973).

In her speech, Rivera is assumed to be characterizing, “the people,” as gender-variant people of color, the majority of early gay rights movement activists, in contrast to the majority of cisgender, upper-class homosexuals who seemed to disregard or possibly even deny the additional layers of oppression in queer black and brown trans communities. In addition to her working class and Latina background, Rivera’s identity as a transgender woman resulted in ostracization and attempted silencing from the queer community. Trans identities were widely shunned by the mainstream gay community, as most were cisgender, and the trans community continues to be oppressed within their own LGBTQ+ spaces today.

As apparent by studying Rivera, Stonewall activists were aware of their place in the resistance as gender-variant people of color. Rivera describes the queer community’s relationship to transgender folk as mere tolerance due to the fact that they were the leaders of the LGBTQ+ rights movement, commonly referred to as the movement’s “front-liners” (Rivera 2001). She also details how gay activists who identified as white, male, and conservative adversely treated trans activists of the time. Rivera noticed this difference in the public’s reaction to the two hate crimes based on sexual orientation, including the tragic murders of two young queer individuals, Matthew Shepard and Amanda Milan. Rivera argues, “It seemed like everybody and their mother

came out for Matthew Shepard. A white, middle class gay boy that was effeminate! Amanda Milan got killed last year, five days before Gay Pride. We waited a month to have a vigil for her” (2001, 123). Rivera’s ideas exemplify how layers of oppression against POC members of the LGBTQ+ community may manifest. Milan was a black transgender woman, whose ethnicity remains unstated, and therefore her complex lived-experiences as a racialized trans woman were minimized by both members of LGBTQ+ communities and mainstream society. Although both deaths should be equally acknowledged as reprehensible anti-LGBT hate crimes, the mainstream queer community’s responses to them (or lack thereof in Milan’s case) are clear illustrations of the general distinction between what white queerness signifies in comparison to black and brown queerness. In our current time, the racist notion that black and brown lives matter less than their white counterparts is still perpetuated through the demonization of people of color, particularly Latin American immigrants and black Americans. Racial disparity has been crystalized with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. The notion that trans and gender non-conforming lives are worth less than cisgender lives also prevails through transphobic hate speech and violence. Therefore, it is crucial to amplify the voices and lives of people in society that have been marginalized as awareness will expand the understanding of their lived experiences without the presence of a wrongly summative and singular historical narrative. Shifting marginalized voices into both every day and academic conversations is exceedingly necessary as they deserve to be heard and possess the power to advance academic and non-academic knowledge of the queer black and brown community.

It is known to those aware of Stonewall history that Sylvia Rivera had and continues to have one of the most powerful Latinx voices in the movement. Her words and actions hold

insurmountable weight and are vital to this research in being most compelling and telling of the time period. However, obtaining information from one individual is not sufficient to fully describe such an expansive subject, which is why it is crucial to hear from multiple perspectives and identities within the LGBTQ+ community. Two years following the Stonewall Riots, an interview with three gay men by the Gay Peoples Union was broadcasted on a Wisconsin radio station. Two interviewees, Sam and Ron, were white men while the third, 19-year-old Roberto, identified as Chicano. The interviewer made a point to ask Roberto about his cultural upbringing and how it affected him as a gay man, to which Roberto responded in a way that pointed to more intense sexual repression than the other two interviewees. While Sam and Ron dated freely as young men, Roberto hid his intimate experiences and relationships, not only because of his homosexuality, but due to teenage dating being completely removed from his culture. Roberto described chaperoning his older sister on outings with male partners. Roberto felt separated from particular milestones common to young, white American life, like going to prom. He poignantly reflects, “you don’t feel you belong to the system of the white man, of the Anglo” (1971). Roberto detailed his life at school as one where he was not accepted by white students nor his Chicano friends after finding out he was gay and agreed when the interviewer explained the situation with the comment, “It’s like having two strikes against you, being of a different culture in America [being a gay Chicano]” (1971). The earlier observation made by Angel Rodriguez-Diaz about seeing being gay and Latino as layers of oppression is emphasized by Roberto’s statement. Both of these characterizations of the queer Latino experience support the idea that queer marginalization cannot not be accurately leveled to a universal issue for queer people as a whole. Roberto’s story exemplifies a negative effect of negotiating colorism and homophobia

within the LGBTQ+ community and in mainstream society. Identifying as both a sexual and racial minority significantly impacts one's everyday experiences which leads to a sense of alienation from the both family and mainstream culture.

Despite being from Texas, the New York City-rooted Gay Liberation Movement had a lasting effect on Roberto. In fact, during the interview, he was the only one of the three men who brought up the movement and did so multiple times. This is significant because Roberto was the only man of color in the trio and the Gay Liberation Movement was created and carried out by people of color. Although confrontation within the movement rendered him "scared," he also attributes feeling unashamed about being homosexual in the Gay Liberation Movement and gained a sense of support from this specific organization (Gay Peoples Union 1971). His found comfort speaks to the importance of visibility and representation of marginalized communities.

During an interview for the Archives of American Arts, queer Latinx artist, activist and historian Graciela Sanchez also makes an important point about erasure in the context of queer and racial intersectionality:

"they continue just to see race and class, race and class, and not gender and not sexuality, none of that other sort of stuff. And you know, I don't see much organizing within the white women's community right now at all, or the lesbian/gay community of San Antonio at all. Again, they've become – it's more about assimilation and they don't really want it to be part of coming out; they don't really want to do the stuff with connecting to other issues. And that's where we've been attacked" (Cardova 2004).

Sanchez describes the attack carried out by gay conservatives in 1997, but does not elaborate, as the interview is steered elsewhere. Although Sanchez was only a child living in San Antonio, Texas when the Stonewall Riots occurred, she grew up during a pivotal period in the fight for

gay rights in the United States. She describes her fear of gay organizing stems from single-issue identity politics in relation to gay conservatives refusing to acknowledge other issues interwoven within gay issues. Sanchez states that she, “couldn’t just be a gay activist” (2004). For her, it is essential that all of her identities are considered within social justice organizing and LGBTQ+ activism

Encounters and issues faced by individual queer Latinxs with a number of intersections have unjustly been shrunk to fit underneath a single umbrella side by side with those of the queer white middle class and have resulted in ignorance. The acknowledgement of this idea may have positive implications on future formations and developments of how LGBTQ+ Latinx identities are understood and intellectually processed by individuals themselves as well as the world around them. Furthermore, it is important to individually recognize the contributions of queer activists with unique intersections for proper attribution and representation purposes. Research indicates the significance of queer black and brown activists receiving the proper credit deserved for making unprecedented strides toward defending and fighting for the LGBTQ+ community as pioneers of the movement’s beginning. Not only is it necessary for queer people of color to know their revolutionary place in history, but it is necessary for queer white individuals and non-queer individuals to understand this history.

The significance of LGBTQ+ POC pioneers have upon queer Latinx individuals in our current day and age is also a key takeaway. Representation in the historical record and in the media is an important form of positive intersectional embodiment for minorities to be able to witness. Representation matters because visibility of strong Latinx figures, who remain underrepresented in popular history and media, creates a sense of belonging that minority groups

are generally not provided by dominant society. Moreover, these figures and their stories serve as inspirational role models who have made a mark on the world with a potential to instill pride and hope in future generations of queer Latinx individuals.

Further research and dialogue about the issue of turning a blind eye to the intersections of the queer Latinx community possesses the potential to delve deeper into Latinx contributions during the gay rights movement and to study the stories that remain generally under-discussed in the mainstream media. An example of a contribution with a high likelihood of being studied more deeply is Sylvia Rivera's work in being one of the main founders of the organization Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, also known as STAR. Analyzing and unpacking this groundbreaking organization and Rivera's key contributions would bring necessary attention to the bold actions that Rivera, a transgender Latinx woman, took in order to effectively help and protect queer youth from the harsh New York City streets. It would also be a reasonable to study specific obstacles that racism and whitewashing presented to queer Latinxs during the time of the gay rights movement and how those obstacles continue to manifest today. These obstacles could include the sexual fetishization of queer Latinx bodies, xenophobic anti-immigrant ideals, and the colorism and anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes held within the Latinx community itself.

The study of LGBTQ+ Latinxs presents the opportunity for growth and expansion in several other ways including a deeper analyzation of queer performativity, religious influences, and what it meant to be queer and Latinx in the 1960s to the 1970s in comparison to what possessing those identities means now. The current research, however, aids in increasing awareness of just how important individual queer Latinx identities and experiences are. It

contributes to the larger conversation around intersectionality, making room for the stories of queer POC to be heard in a world that is so conditioned to disregard them.

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