

## Cultural Archipelagos and Immigrants' Experiences

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In his essay in this issue of *City & Community*, Amin Ghaziani describes cultural archipelagos as providing a “conceptual framework” to explain “the unexpected emergence of new clusters for specific subgroups of queer people” in cities that are known for their distinguishable “gayborhoods.” This essay centers the experiences of transnational immigrants from countries in the so-called global South who relocate to cities in richer countries such as the United States. While transnational immigrants’ distinct experiences pre- and post-migration confirm the usefulness of the cultural archipelagos framework, those experiences also clarify that cultural archipelagos need not be conceived (as Ghaziani implies) as a subsequent stage of gay/queer culture that necessarily and always is preceded by the formation of strong and identifiable gayborhoods. I therefore argue that the experiences of transnational gay/queer immigrants invite us to take a step back and consider how those immigrants relate or not to the notion of gayborhoods in the first place.

How might the study of immigrants’ experiences help improve our understanding of the concept of “cultural archipelagos”? In his essay in this issue of *City & Community*, Amin Ghaziani describes cultural archipelagos as providing a “conceptual framework” to explain “the unexpected emergence of new clusters for specific subgroups of queer people” in cities that are known for their distinguishable “gayborhoods.” He further suggests that cultural archipelagos may become evident if we examine the experiences of various specific groups, including immigrants. Taking that statement as a point of departure, this essay centers the experiences of transnational immigrants from countries in the so-called global South who relocate to cities in richer countries such as the United States—cities that have reputations as havens of acceptance for LGBTQ people and as having clearly delimited gayborhoods. My discussion is primarily based on the case that I know best: the sexual migration of Mexican gay men from a variety of locations in Mexico to San Diego, California (Carrillo 2017).

In some ways like domestic LGBTQ immigrants (Weston 1998), LGBTQ transnational immigrants who move to U.S. cities often gain access to hubs of gay/queer culture that have been linked to modern notions of gay/queer identities and identified as sites of LGBTQ rights and politics (Ghaziani 2014). While transnational immigrants’ distinct experiences pre- and post-migration confirm the usefulness of the cultural archipelagos framework, those experiences also clarify that cultural archipelagos need not be conceived (as Ghaziani implies) as a subsequent stage of gay/queer culture that necessarily

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and always is preceded by the formation of strong and identifiable gayborhoods. I therefore argue that the experiences of transnational gay/queer immigrants invite us to take a step back and consider how those immigrants relate or not to the notion of gayborhoods in the first place. I begin by addressing this question and then discuss the participation of Mexican gay immigrant men in the cultural archipelago that becomes available to them, and that they contribute to shaping, in the metropolitan area of San Diego.

## GAYBORHOODS AND MEXICAN GAY MIGRATION

How familiar are non-heterosexual Mexicans with the notion of a gayborhood? The answer to this question may be shifting with increasing access to the internet and growing availability of smartphones throughout the very diverse country that is Mexico. The same may be said of many other countries in the global South. However, in the years when my study participants arrived, mostly in the late 1980s and 1990s, the internet was not widely accessible to them. Similarly, in the absence of smartphones people lacked the instant access to the kinds of GPS-based information that is now available to most as they traverse urban spaces. Finding out where there was a high concentration of gay or queer people, services, institutions, and businesses required other means.

Mexican gay immigrant men most often arrived in San Diego having little sense of where they could find gay or queer people, although most suspected that, just like in their places of origin, they would eventually find them. Furthermore, when they first arrived in San Diego many of them had never heard that San Diego has a gayborhood.

The reasons for this lack of knowledge are multiple, and this fact should not be taken to mean that these men had not yet acquired a gay identity or were ignorant about global gay identities and LGBTQ movements (in fact, most already identified as gay themselves and felt they were part of Mexican gay communities). Instead, as I have argued elsewhere, to understand their lack of knowledge about gayborhoods we must consider the different meanings and social constructions associated with the modern notion of “gayness” that have emerged outside of the United States and other rich countries. In Mexico, how gayness has been constructed depends on particular expectations of family life, (now changing) expectations about marriage as the only acceptable justification for a son or daughter to move out of the family home if they are to live in the same city, and expectations of collective gay life that do not rely on the idea of forming a separate and exclusive affinity community. With few exceptions, Mexicans have generally not pursued the formation of gayborhoods, even when an LGBTQ social movement has been active for decades and has effectively generated policies such as the approval of same-sex marriage in Mexico City and several Mexican states, among other tangible successes (de la Dehesa 2010; Díez 2011, 2012; Fuentes Ponce 2015).

This does not mean, however, that gay people have not sought to concentrate within the cityscape in a growing number of locations around the country. In Mexico City, for instance, Zona Rosa came to be known since the 1970s as a gay-liberated area where LGBTQ people could express themselves relatively freely and meet each other (Laguarda 2010, 2011; List 2005). This is now true particularly in the area around Amberes Street, as Laguarda (2011) has noted. But Zona Rosa functions more as a commercial and social hub than a residential one. In nearby Colonia Condesa, gay men, and some lesbians, became highly visible and, as this neighborhood gentrified, they came to share the space with

bohemians, artists, professionals, intellectuals, and some of the original long-term residents. Arriving groups transformed this decaying 1920s central-city neighborhood into one of the most fashionable and desirable areas in the city. However, in spite of this transformation, Condesa never acquired an official status as a gayborhood, at least not to the same degree as neighborhoods in San Francisco, Chicago, New York, Sydney, London, or Madrid that constitute central markers for global gayness. Moreover, just like in other vast megalopolises, gay/queer culture in Mexico City spread and formed various pockets around the metropolitan area (see List 2005), defined in terms of differing tastes and class divisions, generating what could be characterized as a cultural archipelago. Note, however, that the variety of cultural gay/queer hubs in Mexico City to which I am referring emerged without the prerequisite of a clearly defined residential gayborhood that is being left behind in favor of LGBTQ incorporation into heteronormative life.<sup>1</sup>

In another interesting example, the Zona Romántica in the Pacific Coast resort of Puerto Vallarta is now widely recognized as a gayborhood. However, its emergence is tightly connected to national and foreign LGBTQ tourism and the transformation of Puerto Vallarta into one of the largest gay resorts in Latin America. In this case, as a gayborhood, Zona Romántica is sustained primarily by the confluence of U.S., Canadian, and Mexican LGBTQ tourists, and many of its non-heterosexual residents are either temporary or long term “expats” (both those who live there permanently or only part of the year).

## ARRIVALS: ENCOUNTERING GAY SAN DIEGO

Despite the various examples I described, which illustrate the emergence of locations throughout Mexico where LGBTQ people are increasingly visible, at the time of their arrival in the U.S. many Mexican immigrant men in my study had no idea that gayborhoods exist in U.S. cities. Furthermore, only those who had previous direct contact with U.S. gay men, or who used the internet to learn about gay life, knew that San Diego had a gayborhood called Hillcrest. The rest found out about Hillcrest only after migrating, often after living in the city for a relatively long time.

These data indicate the need to learn about the diversity of experiences that LGBTQ immigrants have upon arrival in a new location—to inquire about what Leo Chávez (1992) calls their “landing pads”—and also their pathways of incorporation into U.S. society and gay/queer life. In my own work, I describe Mexican gay immigrants in San Diego who found out about Hillcrest only by chance, when they overheard straight people talking about the area as a gayborhood (not always in positive terms). I also describe cases of immigrants who found themselves in Hillcrest without realizing that it was San Diego’s gayborhood, in part because they did not possess the cultural capital to identify the many physical markers, behaviors, and practices that signify the gayborhood. Some also gained access first to other gay/queer enclaves throughout the metropolitan area. Those include formal ones, such as the LGBTQ organizations and gay clubs in distant suburban cities like Vista and Oceanside in North County, which are closer to the agricultural parts of the metropolitan area. In those suburbs of San Diego, a distinctively Mexican gay culture had emerged and Mexican LGBTQ activists and service providers had created their own local network of support. Alternatively, they also accessed informal LGBTQ spaces, including adult bookstores, in the working-class cities of South Bay, in areas that are heavily

Mexican and closer to the U.S.-Mexico border. Or they had directly reached LGBTQ organizations, bars, and dance clubs in North Park, a neighborhood adjacent to (and less expensive than) Hillcrest where LGBTQ people of color were concentrating.

These various possibilities are indicative of an LGBTQ cultural archipelago in San Diego, albeit one that does not necessarily depend on a reaction toward Hillcrest. In other words, at least for Mexican immigrants, the cultural archipelago is not the product of an urban transition away from a well-defined gayborhood that acts as a necessary point of passage from a pre-gay to a post-gay moment, and that occurs at the point when the gayborhood is no longer deemed relevant. Let me emphasize this point: My view is that Ghaziani's notion of cultural archipelagos should not be reduced to an understanding of them as inevitably or necessarily the direct consequence of the decline of traditionally primarily white, middle-class gayborhoods—neighborhoods that are often seen as an essential component of the history of gay modernity.

In other words, I welcome Ghaziani's point that we need to resist "flattening the city into a binary between the gayborhood versus all other undifferentiated, presumably 'straight spaces.'" But I would take this agenda further by examining gay/queer enclaves that emerged in the absence of a gayborhood, or by analyzing cultural contexts, including those in which many immigrants participate, that do not require a gayborhood as a generalized point of reference. One clear example relates to the need to study hubs of gay/queer culture that could be seen as "indigenous" to communities of color, ethnic enclaves, and immigrant communities and that should, in their own right, occupy a place in analyses of cultural archipelagos. Only then, I feel, can we fully account for the diversity of cultural expressions that are part of the cultural archipelago and achieve a more complete understanding of the "spatial plurality" that Ghaziani emphasizes. Only then can we avoid the pitfall of assuming that a well-recognized (white, middle-class, mainstream) gayborhood is a necessary precursor to LGBTQ cultural archipelagos. And only then can we fully appreciate the urban processes that give rise to a wide variety of alternatives within the complex racial and social class dynamics of large cities, not only in rich countries such as the United States, but also in countries of the global South such as Mexico.

As part of this effort, we must resist viewing ethnic gay/queer cultures and concentrations in U.S. cities simply as new gayborhoods. For instance, Ghaziani refers to an article on "new gayborhoods" by the journalist Michael Lavers, who describes "Hell's Cocina" in Jackson Heights as New York's "main Latino gayborhood." In my opinion, thinking of ethnic gay/queer enclaves simply as new gayborhoods risks erasing the local social and cultural processes that gave rise to what Lavers there describes as "an enclave for Latino gays." Ghaziani appears to accept Lavers's descriptions and uses them as evidence of "cultural archipelagos." My own view is that Ghaziani's arguments about spatial plurality could in fact be strengthened if we resist interpreting ethnic gay/queer enclaves as merely copycats—or culturally adapted versions—of mainstream gayborhoods such as the West Village or Chelsea.

Finally, specifically in relation to LGBTQ immigrants, I find it advantageous not to begin by asking them whether gayborhoods remain relevant to them. Rather, it is more productive to step back and start with questions about the extent to which gayborhoods were ever a part of their day-to-day reality before their relocation. That conversation opens up the possibility of learning how gay/queer cultures—as well as cultural archipelagos—function in their original locations. It also provides an avenue for them to describe what they found when they first arrived in their destination—what surprised them, if anything;

as well as the degree to which (if at all) gayborhoods became a part of their identities, lifestyles, and cultural understandings. Immigrants' experiences, therefore, may help us expand Ghaziani's concept of cultural archipelagos in very productive ways.

<sup>1</sup>Among the spaces where gay individuals and same-sex couples are quite visible is the extensive Mexico City subway system, or Metro, where the LGBTQ community has successfully defended their perceived right to be present and romantic in platforms and cars, and also even sexual in the last car of Metro trains during certain hours. For more on this see Carrillo 2017, pp. 167 and 293n1.

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