

ROOTS THAT BIND, ROOTS THAT DIVIDE:
LESBIAN FEMINISM AT THE 2010 VIII ENCUESTRO LÉSBICO FEMINISTA
LATINO AMERICANO Y CARIBEÑO IN GUATEMALA CITY, GUATEMALA

by

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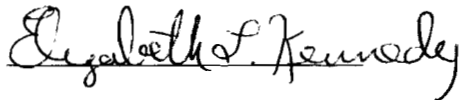
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Thanks to Dr. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy,
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responsibility for my own thoughts, and who has patiently and generously guided me
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Abstract:

In October 2010 I attended VIII Encuentro Lésbico Feminista Latino Americano y Caribeño (VIII ELFLAC), the eighth lesbian feminist conference held by and for lesbian feminists in Latin America and the Caribbean, which took place in Guatemala. My thesis is an analysis of the politics and events surrounding lesbian feminism in Guatemala using VIII ELFLAC as a case study and as the context upon which my analyses are based.

Drawing primarily on printed and web-based sources, Chapter 1 introduces the historical context of VIII ELFLAC by tracing the history of the Latin American lesbian movement and of past ELFLAC *encuentros*, including the politics of the *encuentro* organizers and the driving forces behind the *encuentro*. Chapter 2 analyzes the various tensions that arose at VIII ELFLAC, with a focus on gender and its role at the center of the most heated debates at VIII ELFLAC.

By analyzing the history and organization of VIII ELFLAC, the tensions and debates that occurred throughout VIII ELFLAC, and the politics and beliefs behind such debates and tensions, I document my own insights on the lesbian feminist movement in Guatemala and Latin America, and share these insights to promote a greater understanding of lesbian feminism today.

Introduction:

In October 2010 I attended a conference for lesbian feminists. There were over 250 participants, who met every day for almost a week to debate identity politics, political action, and the boundaries and future direction of the lesbian feminist movement. The intensity of the daily debates was matched by equally intense nightly parties. With the tensions from debates feeding the sexual tension between participants, the frequent sexual encounters that resulted often spilled out of the bar and into the street. The conference concluded with a march to take back the streets, in which over 200 women chanted, danced, and kissed in the streets, visibly and audibly announcing the presence and force of lesbian feminists.

Most people are shocked when I mention that the conference took place in Guatemala, and that is was the eighth such conference of its kind. Prior to my year in Central America, when I thought of Guatemala I assumed its conservatism and sexual repression, and I stopped my questions there. Such assumptions silence the efforts of resistance that are actively occurring and further strengthen beliefs in an incorrect assumed knowledge. To paraphrase Sidney Mintz and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, the collective assurance that certain realities are already known makes it even more difficult to gain and share accurate information (1995:123). Infrequently-challenged stereotypes surrounding the “Third World” (and its relation in comparison to the First World) further complicates an enquiry into female sexual minorities in Guatemala, whom, as both female sexual being and as sexual minorities, can be considered a double-taboo.

My introduction to gender and sexuality studies began in Guatemala. Growing up in the United States, I had always considered myself to be fluid in my own sexuality (and preferred to remain label-less), and I had always been interested in human rights issues - particularly those involving sexual minorities – yet my actual studies of gender theory, theories on sexuality, and how such theories could be understood in the context of the world I was living in did not begin until I studied abroad. The same could be said for my relation to feminism – I always considered myself a feminist in that I supported women’s rights, but I had no deeper understanding of the term or the movement behind it.

I moved to Antigua, Guatemala, a small city heavily influenced (and in some ways, controlled) by tourists and ex-Patriots, in January 2010. I was beginning a study abroad program at the Center of Mesoamerican Research (CIRMA), an incredible archive and research center with ties to the University of Arizona. I was delighted with my acceptance to the program, but I had not applied to CIRMA based on a previous knowledge or interest in Guatemala itself. As a transfer student to the U of A, I had very specific requirements that I needed to accomplish, and CIRMA was the only program that met all my needs. However, I had spent my senior year of high school in Brazil, and was greatly looking forward to be returning to Latin America. Excited to be abroad and looking forward to learning, I arrived in Guatemala with minimal knowledge of the history and culture, and with very few assumptions or expectations.

It was within this context that I began what I thought was to be a one-semester research project under the expertise of scholar and historian Dr. John Thomas Way. I was assigned to explore an issue in contemporary Guatemala that interested me. As a queer

student interested in sex and sexuality, I chose to study sexual minorities in Guatemalan society.

The topic might seem incredibly broad, and in fact, it was. This was my first attempt at conducting research based on primary sources and while living within the context. I wasn't certain how to structure my research, or even what I should be looking for. Further, I was warned by Dr. Way that as Guatemala is a religious and conservative country with a strong patriarchal foundation, I would most likely find very little on the subject. Following his advice, I began my research by casting my net wide and seeing what came up. I had two initial research questions were: What is sexuality in Guatemala like? What information is currently available?

Online searches for GLBTQ organizations in Guatemala led me to one woman who would become one of my most valuable resources and a great inspiration, Claudia Acevedo. Acevedo is one of the founders of Lesbiradas, an organization created as a space for lesbian and bisexual women to develop their political and feminist identities. Openly lesbian to her family, friends, and coworkers, Acevedo works unceasingly to secure a political voice and a commanding presence for Guatemalan lesbians.

During my initial research, I read and was greatly impacted by David Harvey's *Space of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*, in which he develops Lefebvre's concepts of material space, the representation of space, and spaces of representation to analyze "the historical geography of global capitalism" and the impact of neoliberal policies on uneven global development (1996:22). Expanding on his theories, I began constructing my understanding of sexuality in Guatemala based around themes of space, globalization/development, and gender. I was also largely

influenced by one of the few academic studies regarding Guatemalan sexuality then available¹, Heather McClure's 1999 dissertation titled *Sexuality, Power and Performance in Guatemala and in United States Asylum Law*. In her analysis of the "efficacy of current asylum law frameworks for the just adjudication of Guatemalan sexual minorities' claims," McClure provides a basic history of gay and lesbian organization in Guatemala from a political, social, and legal perspective (1999:iii). Perhaps most influential for my work, however, is her discussion of performance and resistance theories, Guatemalan sexual minorities' identity concepts, and structures of power as effected by class and gender hierarchies (1999:iii&iv).

I am particularly interested in McClure's analyses of the diverse conceptions of sexual identities and agency in Guatemala, and the politics and realities that influence their performance and utilization (1999:286). This was one of my first introductions to questions regarding identity politics. McClure's work is exceptionally important when analyzing female sexual minorities in Guatemala. McClure explains that in addition to job and familial-based fears some United States lesbians and gays might face when considering coming out, the strict gender conventions, religious doctrines, and conservative social mores that impact daily life in Guatemala means that "Guatemalan lesbians face the interrelated binds of gender and sexual-orientation based violence" (1999:297).

As will be discussed later, violence against women in Guatemala has reached the point of being labeled an epidemic. The rape of women as a method of social control is just one aspect of the "culture of threat and fear" that "serves to effectively police women

¹ During this phase of my research, my Spanish literacy level was still relatively poor, so I was not able to use many Spanish texts.

who are resistant to dominant norms” (McClure 1999:297). As McClure describes, Guatemala is a country where “...members of military, paramilitary squads, and/or police persistently carry out death threats, intimidation, and illegal searches that form part of daily life for many Guatemalans, and ‘social cleansing’ of ‘undesirables’ including common criminals, street children, sex workers and gay, lesbian and transgendered persons,” (1999: 131). Though McClure published her dissertation in 1999, such violence still continues today: since 1999, over 4,000 women and girls have been killed, while no more than 2% of these cases are successfully prosecuted (Musalo et. all 2010: 163). Understanding this is paramount: for Guatemalan sexual minorities, the fight for identity, agency, and space is extremely dangerous.

However, this fight does not exist exclusively between the patriarchal heteronormative hegemony and the sexual minorities. McClure discusses the gender-based tension between male-centered homosexual organizations and women-centered lesbian organizations, a tension I myself noted in a discussion with Claudia Acevedo. My discussions and my readings on this topic led me to challenge a huge assumption I had never before questioned: that the umbrella of a united LGBTQ movement I had been used to imagining in the United States did not apply universally². In Guatemala, not only did the concept of LGBTQ not exist, but lesbians often worked *against* gay male movements, or bisexual movements, or trans movements.

² Again, it’s important to note that my experience in Guatemala was the first time I began to learn about queer theory, think critically about sexual politics, and begin questioning my assumptions about the “alphabet soup” as a whole (Stryker 2008:21). It is equally important for me to analyze my assumption of a united LGBTQ movement in the US, but I will save that analysis for a different paper.

My work during the first semester was based largely on a series of three extensive conversations³, relevant news articles, and the works of Harvey (2006) and McClure (1999). From my research I began to form an understanding of how Guatemala's history, class, race, and gender constructs, political structures, and hierarchies of power⁴ interact to create the complex context in which Guatemalan sexual minorities live their lives. My final project left me feeling as though I had barely scratched the surface of something both larger than I could imagine and also important to me in a way that I couldn't quite understand. I knew that rather than feeling satisfied with what I had learned, I was filled with more and more burning questions. The desire to increase my understanding led me to extend my stay in Guatemala a second semester and to continue my research.

Rather than continuing on such a broad path, I decided to narrow my second semester of research to the topic of lesbianism in Guatemala. During our first discussion, Acevedo had mentioned that the eighth Encuentro Lésbico Feminista Latino Americano y Caribeño (henceforth to be referred to as VIII ELFLAC) was taking place that year in Guatemala, and with her help I arranged to volunteer prior to the conference with Portuguese-Spanish translations and to attend the conference, assisting with translations and other organizational aspects when needed. It is VIII ELFLAC that will be the subject of my analyses in this paper.

³ The first was with Sergio Vasqu ez, the executive director of the homosexual-oriented organization OMBRES. The second was with Claudia Acevedo. The third was with Josu e, the manager of a popular bar and the only heterosexual with whom I spoke. Josu e's name has been changed per request.

⁴ It is important to consider that Guatemala's history, class, race, and gender constructs, political structures, and hierarchies of power themselves developed within and were greatly impacted by the context of colonialism and Western imperialism.

In her chapter titled “Gringa Positioning, Vulnerable Bodies, and Fluidarity: A Partial Relation,” Diane Nelson explains how her personal identity and role in Guatemala influenced her research, how “being a gringa anthropologist is both power-filled and a wounded body politic, and how that identity is formed in relation to multiple others” (1999:41). It is an identity that is based on articulations and borders, “articulations across different borders and about the constitution of such borders” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; reprinted in Nelson 1999:50). She continues to argue that all identity is formed through articulation, and develops the concept of *fluidarity* “as a practice of necessarily partial knowledge – in both the sense of taking the side of, and of being incomplete, vulnerable, and never completely fixed” (Nelson 1999:42).

To restate this from my own understanding, the identity of the gringa anthropologist is based on, and is constantly evolving in relation to, her relationship with others. Her relationship is based on the expression and communication of borders – the concept of border extending to include geography, nationalistic boundaries, cultural divides, racial and ethnic stereotypes, and, specifically as a gringa, gender (Nelson 1999:41). As the relationship changes, the articulation and the understanding of the borders also change, which keeps the identity in constant flux. In this sense, gringa identification can be seen as “...the detour through the other that defines the self” (Fuss 1995:2-3; reprinted in Nelson 1999:42).

I mention this because my background and the assumptions I carried with me, my personal understanding of my own identity and sexuality, and my perceived identity (which floated between anthropologist, participant, student, lesbian, NOT-lesbian – but *always* connected to my perceived identity as a gringa), greatly impacted the shape of my

research and the ways in which it evolved. To begin, I am a female, Caucasian, United States American. I was raised Jewish by still-married upper-middle-class parents, who provided me with every opportunity to ensure my economic and academic success, including a university degree. Growing up I was superficially involved with several LGBTQ organizations, but as previously mentioned, I never took any classes on gender or sexuality, and I never challenged the unity or the universality of “LGBTQ” as a movement.

My background - particularly my lack of prior study regarding queer theory, gender theory, and LGBTQ history – is important to consider when looking at the directions I took my enquiries and my overall analyses. Perhaps I can best explain why by providing an example: when I attended VIII ELFLAC, the lesbian movement was so unfamiliar to me that I didn’t even realize that lesbian feminism was its own movement – I thought ELFLAC was a conference for lesbians who were also feminists. Further, it wasn’t until I returned to the US and began a class on LGBTQ history some four months later that I actually understood lesbian feminism as its own unique movement with its own history.

It must also be noted that prior to my experience in Guatemala, I had also never academically studied theories regarding globalization and development. I knew little about the history of Latin America, and had a very marginal understanding of the impact of colonialism and Western imperialism on world systems and, in particular, on developing countries.

There is one additional factor I’d like to note. Because of summer traveling, a crazy return to Guatemala (involving a last-minute apartment hunt) in August, and the

organization of and adaptation to a new school semester, I did not reestablish contact with Claudia Acevedo until late September of 2010. As a result, I did not know the dates of the *encuentro* or the certainty of my participation at VIII ELFLAC until some three weeks before it occurred. While this last-minute arrangement was typical to the way my plans in Guatemala generally came together, it did not leave me much time to prepare for the *encuentro*, specifically considering I was also a full-time student. I had just enough time to prepare a brief research protocol and organize my travel plans, but I arrived at VIII ELFLAC with almost no idea of what the *encuentro* would be like or what we would be discussing⁵, other than the fact that it would be related to lesbian feminism – a concept I did not completely understand.

On one hand, my lack of historical and theoretical knowledge and my lack of information and preparation before VIII ELFLAC could be seen as a benefit: I had a fresh perspective and as everything was so new to me, I perhaps was able to catch certain events or themes that others with a background in such studies might have overlooked. On the other hand, my lack of knowledge caused me to miss certain understandings and concepts. This was also true of my identity as a white, upper-class, and US American, which impacted – and in certain ways impeded upon – *what* I saw and how I interpreted it. To quote Alan Berube, I must consider “the ways that whiteness numbs me, makes me not see what is right in front of me, takes away my intelligence, divides me from the people I care about” (2001:317). My background strongly shaped the way I viewed

⁵ It should be recognized that all Ekipa announcements and position statements that I analyze in this paper I read and translated only after attending VIII ELFLAC.

occurrences at VIII ELFLAC, the way I *didn't* view occurrences at VIII ELFLAC, the questions I asked and the conversations I had, and those I did not⁶.

Further, my research in Guatemala exposed many preconceptions and assumptions that I didn't realize I was carrying. It forced my realization of how truly difficult it is to overcome one's personal assumptions about life and reality in order to actually gain an understanding of different lives and different realities. One of my greatest challenges has been and continues to be attempting to steer my research away from both ethnocentric and imperialist perspectives. I am continuously learning that rather than being an achievable goal with a fixed endpoint, this effort should be seen as a continuous process.

This has been particularly difficult in analyzing the discourse and events that occurred at VIII ELFLAC. In my work I attempt to avoid juxtaposition of the politics of the Lesbian Feminist movement in the US with the politics I experienced at VIII ELFLAC. Rather, I aim to utilize the US-based theories and concepts in this paper to add

⁶ In addition to a lack of knowledge regarding gender and queer theories and histories, I also lacked any proper training in how to *do* the research I wanted. While I gleaned as much as I could from the available pages on Google Books of Dr. Russell Bernard's *Research Methods in Anthropology* (2006), I had no intensive guidance or concept of how to build rapport, conduct interviews, take and code field notes, or any other research techniques. For better or for worse, the tactics I wound up using – mainly my own extensions of tools mentioned in Dr. Russell Bernard's guide – greatly shaped the outcome of my research.

Perhaps even more impacting was my lack of knowledge regarding Institutional Review Board (IRB) processes for conducting human research. My failure to file for IRB approval has meant that only certain parts of my research can be used in my analysis. While I can discuss the parts of my research that relate to what I consider my case study of VIII ELFLAC, I cannot use the research that deals with generalized information. This has forced me to change the direction and shape I had originally planned for my research, from an analysis of lesbianism in Guatemala *in general* to an analysis of a *specific* experience of lesbian feminism at VIII ELFLAC, a specific event.

further perspectives and to enhance the understanding of the issues, while keeping them in the context of my experience in Guatemala.

Equally important to how my background has affected my research, it is essential to note that the shape and evolution of my research greatly impacted *myself*. As I learned I began to ask questions about myself, challenge my assumptions, and examine my very reality as I thought I knew it. I had never previously considered my sexuality as tied to my political identity – now I questioned where I stood. The fractures I experienced amongst a group where I expected unity made me question the validity of my assumptions regarding other groups, such as the GLBTQ community in the United States. As I began to reevaluate my notions of community and of my own identity, I also began to examine and question the structure of my relationships, particularly those with men, and to ask myself if those were structures I could still support. VIII ELFLAC proved to be an extremely powerful and even frightening experience for me.

With no real sense of what VIII ELFLAC would be like, I attended the *encuentro* with an unfounded expectation that we would discuss what it meant to be a lesbian feminist in the context of Latin America and the Caribbean. I assumed that different perspectives, experiences, and responses as they were encountered in different countries would be shared. From my experience living in Guatemala and in 2005-2006, in Brazil, I had some sense of how dramatically different the cultures and experiences of Latin American society and life are, and I assumed this would take a key role in the discussions.

I was shocked when such contexts rarely came up at all. The Ekipa's organization of discussions at VIII ELFLAC was not centered on regionally-different perspectives.

Rather, they were based on an assumed politic that centered the overthrow of patriarchy and a critique of the neocolonial world-system at its core. This was apparent beginning with their first position statement, which announced:

“En esta historia reconocemos también los espacios de encuentro entre lesbianas feministas, espacios en los que desobedecemos al orden establecido, irrumpiendo en la cotidianidad neocolonizada, basada en la heterosexualidad obligatoria, la privación de la libertad sexual y política, el racismo, la xenofobia, la injusticia económica, la discriminación y la violencia sexual sistemática, que nos asfixia y nos consume. ...recuperamos la necesidad de tener un “cuarto propio” como lesbianas feministas, para pensarnos, sentirnos, expresarnos, recuperar la memoria de nuestras luchas, recuperar la palabra propia, el horizonte propio, el vínculo entre nosotras, la noción de nuestros cuerpos y del deseo lésbico como constituyente de un desacato al patriarcado.” [In this history (of lesbian feminism) we also recognize the meeting places of lesbian feminists, spaces in which we disobey the established order, break through the neocolonial quotidian [which is] based in obligatory heterosexuality, deprivation of sexual and political liberty, racism, xenophobia, economic injustice, discrimination and systematic sexual violence, (a neocolonial quotidian) that chokes us and consumes us... we revive the necessity to have a “space of our own” as lesbian feminists; for us to think, feel, express ourselves; for us to restore the memory of our battles; for us to revive our own words (the right and ability to have our own words); to recover our own horizon; to rebuild the bond between us; to regain the notion of our bodies and of lesbian desire as elements of a defiance against the patriarchy] (Ekipa Guatemala[A], 2010)

Yet perhaps most ignorant was my assumption regarding the unified community I expected to encounter. Based on my experiences in Latin America and my research the previous semester, I attended VIII ELFLAC with an understanding that as women and as lesbians, the participants at the *encuentro* were doubly oppressed and discriminated against. I did not consider the possibility that a group already so marginalized would express hostility, discrimination, and exclusion amongst each other. This assumption was not founded in any experience or ideology, or even in my lack of preparation before attending the *encuentro*. On the contrary, it was based on two things: my lack of critical

thinking regarding the formation, continuation, and evolution of community; and my lack of understanding regarding the passion of politics. I assumed that when a group was faced with such extreme external oppression, they would overcome their differences and work together.

My assumptions proved incorrect. The *encuentro* was a highly divided assortment of women heatedly arguing over what being a lesbian feminist - even what being a woman actually entailed. The controversy over the eventual admittance of Chilean transman Michel to the conference led to hostile and angry debates over what kind of a space was being created, by whom, and for whom. While the debate in essence was about the membership, direction, and boundaries of a social movement, throughout the *encuentro* it was often referred to as written above, in terms of space. The discourse regarding space was present from the very first announcement put forth by the organizers of VIII ELFLAC, the Ekipa Guatemala, in which they stated “*la necesidad de tener un ‘cuarto propio’ como lesbianas feministas*” [The need to have ‘a space of our own’ as lesbian feminists] (Ekipa Guatemala[A], 2010).

Yet it was also a debate about identity. As Shane Phelan has discussed, fundamental to the construction of a lesbian identity and of lesbian feminism is the construction of a community that supports that identity (1989:59). That community must both withdraw from the values, beliefs, and definitions of previous communities and construct new values, beliefs, and definitions (Phelan 1989:59). Yet the embracing of each new identity and new definition both shades and discredits another possible identity and definition, and this is a choice with political consequences (Phelan1989:78).

While Phelan is writing about lesbian feminism within the United States, her analysis is relevant and beneficial in understanding the debates that occurred within VIII ELFLAC. Michel's presence at VIII ELFLAC sparked the debate over what it meant to be a (real) woman. This in turn led to debates regarding the definition of a (real) lesbian. The question was not just one of 'true' definitions regarding identity, also in consideration was who had the power to define, declare, and validate identity. Considering that embracing a new identity and definition discredits another possible identity and definition, we can follow the debate's evolution into the question of what type of woman and what type of lesbian were to be included within – and excluded from - this movement.

Yet as earlier discussed, these controversial debates were all centered on an assumed universal politic that aimed to overthrow patriarchy and combat the neo-colonial world-system (Ekipa Guatemala[A], 2010). While I did not encounter any critiques of this politic at VIII ELFLAC, I believe that many of the tensions that arose were connected to the different concepts held for how to place such a politic into action. Such differences in concepts – though never discussed in relation to the universal politic - surfaced during the debates over identity, boundaries, and the direction of the movement.

Additional tensions quickly became visible: younger members felt disrespected by older attendees, Brazilians felt excluded by the lack of preparation regarding the language barrier – as the most visible occurrence, a self-declared group of *mujeres negras* held a demonstration during the last day of the conference to protest the racism they encountered at VIII ELFLAC for being women of color.

Having arrived at VIII ELFLAC so unprepared and so unaware, encountering these tensions was particularly difficult for me. In my initial reflections on my experience at VIII ELFLAC, I focused solely on the fractures I encountered. I viewed these in relation to the hostility and anger that often arose during debates, and as a result, my initial reflections were cast in a negative light.

As I continued reflecting, I tried to look past my negativity to understand the roots of the anger, the reasons for the fractures. From this viewpoint, I was able to recognize that even with all the tensions and conflicts, I did not encounter any women who left the conference early, or any who decided against participating in the debates. Throughout the conference the enthusiasm of attendees to discuss the issues they cared about shone through time and time again, as did their willingness to bear with the tension for the sake of continuing the important arguments and discussions.

By turning my focus away from the fractures, I was able to begin thinking critically about my concept of community, and to challenge an important assumption I realized I was carrying: that overcoming differences and working together is always the best solution. Once I departed from my perception of VIII ELFLAC as a space solely of divisions and tensions, I was able to appreciate the participants' commitment to following through with the *encuentro*, their dedication to their debates, and the diversity of their beliefs and goals.

When the *encuentro* ended and I returned to daily life, I began to question the very structure of my relationships, particularly those I had been building with men. Though I had felt very distant from the debates at the conference, upon my reentry to my previous world I realized how deeply the arguments and the women making them had

impacted me. I had been exposed to new concepts and debates that about which I had never before thought. I had spent a week surrounded by powerful, political, argumentative, self-advocating, and truly incredible women. Though at the time I didn't fully understand it, at the *encuentro* I had begun to recognize and internalize the battle to overthrow patriarchy and the fight against the neocolonial world-system, both (but perhaps particularly the latter) of which I was beginning to analyze my role in reproducing. I was no longer certain of who I was, who I wanted to be, and how I wanted to interact with world around me.

Perhaps most challenging, I had no idea how to live with my evolving self and world-view without completely changing the structure of all the relationships I had been constructing up until the conference. My first night returning to my work as a bartender, a male coworker joked that I could fix a mistake I made on a customer's bill by performing a sexual act. Whereas before I might have ignored such a joke or given a sarcastic response, I realized that I was genuinely bothered by its deep-seeded patriarchal roots and gendered discrimination.

Yet while I wanted to harshly scold my coworker, I did not. I didn't want him to associate my attendance at a lesbian feminist event and a negative, angry, humor-devoid change in my behavior. I did not know how to resolve the disconnect between my past lifestyle and behavior and my new awareness. As a result, I spent my first week back from VIII ELFLAC camped out in my apartment, avoiding contact with men as much as possible.

Thankfully, the intensity of the initial shock did not last long, nor did all my research experiences leave such a strong impact. My questions of self, community, and

world-systems, however, have strongly continued to evolve. My experience at VIII ELFLAC opened my eyes to many assumptions I had not recognized I carried. Though it has been a difficult and at times, painful awakening, my time at VIII ELFLAC was my entrance to a new way of thinking critically about myself and the world around me.

I have chosen VIII ELFLAC as the topic of my thesis in part to document this awakening for myself; to further analyze my experience and understand the complexities of its impact on my life. I am writing this in part because I assume that as the concepts and events of VIII ELFLAC were new and fascinating to me, perhaps there are others who can learn from and take interest in my account. Further, I hope to add to the literature on lesbian feminism and to increase knowledge on a different global perspective. Finally, I use this as an attempt to demonstrate my respect and admiration for the women who attended VIII ELFLAC.

In no way are my intentions to speak for these women, or to ‘tell their story.’ As the numerous blog posts and articles can attest, they are doing a perfectly good job of that themselves. Rather, I consider this my small contribution to assist them in their efforts of sharing their stories, their beliefs, their mission, and their actions.

It is with this as a background that I will begin my analyses of VIII ELFLAC. In this paper I will analyze the events and experiences that most greatly impacted me throughout VIII ELFLAC, and I will examine some of the questions raised that left me the most perplexed. In this essay I will analyze lesbian feminism in Guatemala using VIII ELFLAC as a case study and as the subject on which my analyses are based.

In Chapter 1 I examine the historical context of VIII ELFLAC by tracing the history of the Latin American lesbian movement and of ELFLAC *encuentros*. I introduce

the concept of lesbian feminism in Latin America, the politics held by the Ekipa, and some of the driving forces behind VIII ELFLAC. Chapter 2 analyzes the tensions that arose at VIII ELFLAC while centering the tensions within the context of the *encuentro*, and discusses gender and its role at the center of the main debates at VIII ELFLAC.

By analyzing the history and organization of VIII ELFLAC, the tensions and debates that occurred throughout VIII ELFLAC, and the politics and beliefs behind such debates and tensions, I hope to provide new insight into the lesbian feminist movement in Guatemala and Latin America, and to explain how the different politics and ideas embraced have and continue to impact the evolution of the movement.

Chapter One

From Homosexual Liberation to Feminist Lesbianism: The History of the Latin American Lesbian Movement and of ELFLAC

To provide a more complete understanding of the background upon which VIII ELFLAC took place, this chapter deals with the history of the lesbian movement in Latin America, and most specifically, in Guatemala. In the discussion of the lesbian movement, I will follow the creation and evolution of ELFLAC *encuentros* from their beginning in 1987. This chapter also begins to describe Guatemala as the context for the *encuentro*, with consideration of Guatemala's history and present situation, and with an analysis of lesbianism and lesbian feminism within the country.

The lesbian movement evolved in different manners in different parts of Latin America. In her book *El Amore es BxH/2*, Norma Mogrovejo identifies three main forms of political regimes, formal democracy, military dictatorship, and revolutionary processes, as the key factors in how and when lesbian movements were shaped in Latin America (1996:34). Mexico's formal democracy, for example, allowed for homosexual organizations to grow and express themselves politically as social and opposition movements, and a wave of Lesbian Feminism began to surge around 1977, quite early compared to the rest of Latin America (Mogrovejo 1996:35). The military dictatorships that occurred in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, however, made mobilization of the movements more difficult (Mogrovejo 1996:35). Although in different countries this led to different results, in all cases "the lesbian/homosexual movement managed to maintain a continuity, although marginal and sometimes under the facade of feminism" (Mogrovejo 1996:36). In countries with revolutionary processes such as Nicaragua,

Mogrovejo notes that the organizing processes began “following the triumph of the revolution” (1996:36).

A common thread across Latin America was the increase of homosexual organizations fighting for civil rights during the 1970’s, which has been noted as being intricately linked to Latin America’s struggle against capitalism and imperialism, “for the transformation of the social system and for the formation of the socialist state” (Mogrovejo 1996:42). The rise of the feminist movement also had a great influence not just on the lesbian movement but on the homosexual movement as well: the discourse it created regarding sexuality and reproduction enabled transformations in political thought for all parties involved (Mogrovejo 1996:39).

Feminist movements and homosexual movements provided lesbians with a space to fight for civil rights, but the homosexual movement’s ‘phallocentrism’ and the feminist movement’s heterosexual frame of relations disabled lesbians abilities to fight for their own demands based on their own priorities (Mogrovejo 1996:43&45). Increasing frustration with the lesbophobic nature of both movements led lesbians throughout Latin America to adopt a more separatist perspective and to form of autonomous lesbian groups (Mogrovejo 1996:47).

It is within these contexts that we see the first conferences, or *encuentros*, take place. Still holding its place within the feminist movement, the first Encuentro Feminista took place in Colombia in 1981. In addition to discussing sexuality and the lesbian quotidian, this first *encuentro* brought up issues regarding the social roles and visibility of lesbians as a part of the feminist fight against the patriarchy (ELFLAC:A). The second feminist *encuentro* in Peru (1983) and the third in Brazil (1985) continued to discuss the

role of lesbianism in the feminist movement, with Brazil's *encuentro* strongly criticizing the heterosexual model within the feminist movement. During this third Encuentro Feminista, the decision was made to begin *encuentros* that were specifically for lesbians. The first ELFLAC took place in Mexico in 1987.

When considering foreign influences on Latin America's lesbian feminist movement, it is interesting and important to note that while the decision to create lesbian *encuentros* was made during the third Encuentro Feminista in Brazil, the venue and the location were decided during the VIII Conference of International Lesbian Information Services (ILIS) in Ginebra, Switzerland (Mogrovejo n.d.:1). Further, funds from Holland became the greatest source of financial support for the conference (ELFLAC:A). This is just one example of the direct and indirect influence of international organizations on the development of lesbian movements within Latin America.

As I was told by attendees throughout the *encuentro*, since their beginning ELFLAC *encuentros* have been recognized as being more politically charged and tension-filled than any other lesbian or feminist *encuentros*⁷ (Clara 2010: personal communication). The summaries of past ELFLACs clearly demonstrate the challenging and controversial issues that attendees have debated: I ELFLAC's debates on separatism, the relation to the left, and the involvement with the gay movement; the IV ELFLAC's arguments regarding speeches and decisions made in the name of Latin American lesbian feminists at the IV World Conference of Women in Beijing; the V ELFLAC's

⁷ Other *encuentros* include the Encuentro Feminista Latinoamericano y del Caribe, now in its twelfth year (<http://12encuentrofeminista.blogspot.com/>), the Encuentro Feminista Autónoma (<http://feministasautonomasenlucha.blogspot.com/>), and the Encontro Nacional da Liga Brasileira de Lésbicas (<http://lbnacional.wordpress.com/sobre/>), to name a few.

discussions over the participation of non-Latinos and/or Caribbeans and over the participation of heterosexuals in the *encuentros*; and the VI ELFLAC's clashes regarding the participation of transgendered individuals in the *encuentros* highlight just a few of the more heated disputes (ELFLAC:A)

After the VII ELFLAC took place in Chile in 2007, it was decided that the next *encuentro* would be held in Guatemala. To fully understand VIII ELFLAC it is important to have a sense of the context in which it took place. Guatemala's homosexual and lesbian movements evolved under Mogrovejo's category of a military dictatorship. Aside from "Ten Years of Spring" from 1944 till 1954 when the military dictatorship was overthrown and social-democratic reforms were introduced, Guatemala's history up until 1985 is one of repressive dictatorships and horrific violence (BBC News 2011). With regimes largely backed by the United States, Guatemalan dictators reversed the attempts at land reforms, marginalized the indigenous, the rural-dwellers, and the poor, and engineered a mass genocide: from 1980 to 1994 between 50,000 and 100,000 Guatemalans were murdered and at least 38,000 were disappeared - the majority members of indigenous populations (Lykes 1994:543).

Knowing this, one recognizes homosexual and lesbian movements as developing not out of a student left-wing or a feminist perspective, but rather evolving at the end of a civil war in a country marked by a "national preoccupation with human rights and citizenship inclusion" (Berger 2006:65). The country, still stricken with violence (particularly gang violence), continues to remain in the human rights spotlight thanks to an "epidemic" of violence targeted at women, which has led to reports of Guatemala's femicide crisis (Cheers 2011). In addition, Guatemala's indigenous populations – which

make up somewhere between 40 – 60% of the population - continue to fight uphill battles against their unrelenting oppression and marginalization (Georgetown University).

To quote scholar Susan A. Berger, “an understanding of the Guatemalan gay ambiente must therefore incorporate traditional concepts of sexuality, the impact of the civil war and democratization, and the rise and development of local and global gender – and human rights-focused discourses and organizations” (2006:63). Guatemala’s history is essential in understanding the context in which VIII ELFLAC occurred and upon which it was organized.

It is also important to understand by whom VIII ELFLAC was organized. VIII ELFLAC was run by the Ekipa Guatemala, a group of eight core Guatemalan lesbian feminists. The majority of the Ekipa members were also a part of Lesbiradas, a “collective of Guatemalan lesbians attempting to build a sisterhood through love and rebellion, from a radical change in the intimate, private, and public” (Lesbiradas).

Lesbiradas initially began as Mujeres Somos, a ‘group of reflection’ linked to OASIS⁸, the first and primary – though officially closeted – homosexual organization in Guatemala. Stating conflicts in gay politics, goals and philosophies as the reason, Claudia Acevedo left Mujeres Somos with a few other women in 1999 to form Lesbiradas, a place where they could focus more on political action and on putting their reflections into public space (personal communication, 2010). Acevedo describes the break from OASIS as a complicated divorce, with fighting up until “who would stay with the furniture, the computers, even the plates” (personal communication, 2010). Yet such a split was necessary in order for the Lesbiradas to be autonomous and politically distinct.

⁸ Organización de Apoyo a una Sexualidad Integral frente al SIDA

In a 2000 interview with the multinational online magazine The Gully, Acevedo discussed the challenges of creating a united lesbian identity both in Guatemala and within Lesbiradas. When asked if Guatemalan lesbians viewed lesbianism as an identity or as a set of behaviors, Acevedo responded:

“At Lesbiradas we are working to build a collective lesbian identity. This is a really tough process in a society and a country that, aside from living in a culture of violence and terror, lacks a national identity. Our Guatemala is a country caught in an endless transition process, and therefore, our identity is almost zero. Some of us at Lesbiradas, like me, see lesbianism as a construction of identity; others, who have not had access to information, see it as behavior and practices. Then comes the great debate about role-playing, butch-femme, and replicating the hetero-patriarchal system, and those of us who don't want that are considered weird by the others. So, we're undergoing a complex process at Lesbiradas, with really deep discussions about our identity as Guatemalan lesbians”

(Calderon 2000).

From Acevedo's comment we can begin to see the organizational challenges and difficulties that the women of Lesbiradas faced. From my experience, however, it appeared that the most vocal women involved with Lesbiradas were aligned with Acevedo's perspectives and took active roles in creating a politicized and empowered lesbian identity.

This leads me to two important points. Considering the context of Guatemala, it is essential to recognize the magnitude and the significance that the organization of, involvement in, and even association with Lesbiradas holds. To quote McClure:

“Within a country polarized (and terrorized) by war and genocidal government policies, the advocacy of any political ideology based on the notion of fundamental rights was, and continues to be, perilous in Guatemala...Guatemalan female sexual minorities' sexual identities and consciousness have been formed in large part...as their second-class status within a society whose 'State is characterized as homogeneous, centralist, classist, militarist, repressive, patriarchal and whose fundamental element is violence””

(McClure 1999:323-324; Inés reprinted in McClure 1999:325).

According to the *Hastings Women's Law Journal*, between the year 2000 and 2010 over 4,000 Guatemalan women and girls had been killed, with “successful prosecution in no more than 2% of these cases, meaning that 98 out of 100 killers of women literally get away with murder” (Musalo et al. 2010:163). Female sexual minorities are at an even higher risk, as “performances of self that depart from hegemonic codes...can make the “deviant” performer subject to physical, sexual, and psychic violence” (McClure 1999:298). Association with such ‘deviant’ others is enough to render a person vulnerable to such violence (McClure 1999:298).

For the women involved and associated with Lesbiradas, the battles for visibility, identity, and the transformation of the patriarchal hegemony were not without serious and very real potential risks. While critiques have been made (as will be discussed shortly) of the incongruity between Lesbiradas’ political stances and actions and the beliefs of the majority of Guatemalan lesbians, one cannot ignore that those involved with Lesbiradas were risking their safety, wellbeing, and lives every single day in their fight for recognition.

This is not to say that *only* those involved in Lesbiradas were taking such risks, nor that differing forms of resistance were less valuable or effective. In keeping with the focus of my paper, however, the main argument I make here is that regardless of the generalizability of their politics for all female Guatemalan sexual minorities, the dangerous and brave actions of women involved with Lesbiradas created spaces and discourses through which further politics and identities could be debated and explored.

Such a space gained official recognition in 2002, when Lesbiradas became the first officially “out” organization in Guatemala to receive legal status as a not-for-profit (Berger 2006:62). On their website, Lesbiradas describes themselves as

“...una colectiva de lesbianas guatemaltecas, que queremos construir una comunidad lésbica llena de sororidad entre nosotras, a través del amor y la rebeldía, desde un cambio radical en lo íntimo, privado y público. Para vivir en un ambiente de respeto, en autonomía y libertad. Transformando la violencia cotidiana que vivimos y el orden simbólico patriarcal, a través de la autodeterminación de nuestro cuerpo y nuestra sexualidad, resignificando lo erótico como poder de las lesbianas.” [...a collective of Guatemalan lesbians, who want to construct a lesbian community full of sisterhood, through love and rebellion, from (a place of) radical change in the intimate, private, and public. Transforming the quotidian violence and the symbolic patriarchal order (with which and in which) we live, through the self-determination of our bodies and our sexuality, redeclaring the erotic-as-power for lesbians]

(Lesbiradas).

This statement demonstrates the Ekipa’s assumed contra-patriarchy politic, which they placed as the base of VIII ELFLAC’s planned discussions.

Lesbiradas organize their work based on six general ‘needs’: coexistence activities and strengthening social networks; action formation and training; thought development; political action; visibility of lesbian feminist transformation proposals; and continuing alliances with other organizations for women and for lesbians (Lesbiradas).

Since 2002, Lesbiradas has steadily become an important, powerful, visible, and distinguishing feature of Guatemala’s lesbian movement. Their prominent visibility has created an interesting dynamic: in 2010 when I was doing my research, a Google search for ‘lesbiana guatemala’ brought up a few links to dating sites (of which some were targeted to find sexual partners rather than relationships), a blog on lesbian poetry, and information about a gay bar. However, the second, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh links

took me to interviews with Claudia Acevedo⁹. The second link's interview¹⁰ can be found on gayguatemala.com, under a section titled 'Chicas.' In this section, three of the six links are promoting past ELFLACs.

Assuming one is trying to learn about sexuality and Guatemalan lesbianism (and is not just looking for online dating or gay bars), Acevedo is the only person accessible online who actually talks about what it means to be a lesbian in Guatemala. While Acevedo openly states that she is not a typical example of what it means to be a lesbian in Guatemala, her interview titled "How To Be A Lesbian In Guatemala" describes Acevedo's experience of lesbianism in Guatemala from a political, activist, and feminist point of view (Calderon 2000). Coupled with the ELFLAC ads, the politicized stance of the lesbian feminist appears to be the only context in which Guatemalan lesbianism exists.

This is *not* to say that politicized lesbian feminism was in fact the only context that existed. During my year in Guatemala I met Patricia¹¹, a woman who identified as gay (rather than as *lesbiana*, a term she considered to signify a sickness) but not as a feminist. Patricia viewed the lesbian feminists in Guatemala as reproducing much of the machismo she believed them to be fighting against. Further, she thought there was too little compromise amongst the lesbian feminists. Patricia compared it to bargaining at an open-air market, where most Guatemalans do the majority of their shopping: "*Ellos piden*

⁹ Writing this in April of 2011, it should be noted the same Google search now lists the Spanish version of the gayguatemala.com interview as the first link, a profile of Claudia Acevedo by Amnesty International as the third link, another interview with Acevedo as the eighth link, and an article about Lesbiradas as the tenth link.

¹⁰ The interview was originally conducted by Rene Calderon for [The Gully Online Magazine](#) and can also be found on their website.

¹¹ Name has been changed

Q100, tu ofereces Q25, llegan por fin a Q50. El feminismo necesita hacerlo tambien”

[They ask for Q100 (quetzales, the Guatemalan currency), you offer Q25, at the end you both settle for Q50. Feminism has to do that as well] (personal communication, 2010).

In response to a question regarding the available spaces for lesbians in Guatemala, Patricia informed me that she and her women-loving friends often gather at small house parties (bars with lots of women make her nervous). The Ekipa members on occasion also congregated in non-political contexts and spaces such as at house parties and restaurants. However, Patricia highlighted the fact that unless you have an in with a group, it’s difficult to find house parties, and it’s very rare to have new people welcome at such parties. I experienced this myself – aside from Patricia, I was unable to connect with non-political or non-feminist lesbians in Guatemala because I did not know where or how to find them. While I recognized that there were other ways to experience female-female love in Guatemala, my contact with lesbianism was almost entirely with those who adopted a lesbian feminist perspective.

This is important to note as, when discussing her surprise and delight that Guatemala had been chosen as the VIII location, Acevedo explained that “*Hace tres años no habia lesbianismo feminista en Guatemala,*” – up until three years ago, there was not lesbian feminism in Guatemala (personal communication, 2010). Her statement is confusing, as the split with Mujeres Somos and the foundation of the more politically charged Lesbiradas occurred in 1999 (Acevedo: personal communication, 2010). However, considering that not all members of Lesbiradas necessarily viewed their lesbianism as an identity, and that according to their website Lesbiradas is not specifically limited to only self-identifying lesbian feminists, my assumption is that as

Lesbiradas stabilized and began to develop more concrete actions and programs, their consciousness as lesbian feminists also began to grow and expand (Calderon 2000; Lesbiradas).

While this might have been the case, lesbian feminism still was not a framework with which most female Guatemalan sexual minorities identified. Berger claims that many lesbians in Guatemala define lesbianism as behavior and sexual practices but *not* as an identity (Berger 2006:66&73). McClure expands on this, stating that many of her interviewees who defined themselves as lesbians “qualified this term in relation to their own and other women’s conduct...assumptions that lesbians will consistently engage in same-sex relationships over their lives do not recognize the cultural and political-economic reasons a lesbian might engage in heterosexual relationships (including sexual ones)” (1999:329&330).

This signifies a profound difference in the politicized identities and in the linkage of feminism with lesbianism as embraced by the Ekipa. Lu Robles, a member of both La Ekipa Guatemala and Lesbiradas, touched on this in an oral history I conducted:

“Ser Lesbiana Feminista esta ligada mas por una postura política de que había en el encuentro. Nos en Guatemala uso lo diferente. Feminista, radical – es distinto – marco mas grande. Consideramos en diferentes formas. Otras nos vimos como las políticas, las abiertas” [To be a lesbian feminist is to be charged with more of a political posture than there was at the *encuentro* (VIII ELFLAC). We in Guatemala use the term differently. Feminist, radical – it’s distinct, it marks something greater. We consider it in different forms. Others see us as the political ones, the open ones].

Robles could be referring to their politicized conception of identity, the heightened degree of which I did not consider as the norm amongst the other participants at VIII ELFLAC. She could also be referencing the distinction of adopting a political and contra-hegemonic identity in a country where such an identity can be extremely perilous

(McClure 1999:323-324). That withstanding, lesbian feminism was at the core of Robles' and Acevedo's identities, as was further accentuated in a later part of our discussion, here transcribed:

Lederman: *Para ustedes, ¿que significa ser lesbiana?* [For you, what does it mean to be a lesbian]?

Acevedo: *Feminista*. [(It means to be a) feminist].

Robles: *Yo no los separo*. [I don't separate them].

Mi sexualidad y practica sexual tiene que ver con mis reflexiones feministas. [My sexuality and my sexual practice have to deal with my feminist reflections].

Yo mi nombre 'feminista' primera. [I name myself first as a feminist].

Tambien mi nombre feminista cuando mi nombre lesbiana. [I also name myself a feminist when I name myself a lesbian].

Para mi significa – provocar, irritar, NO ser políticamente correcto. [To me it signifies – to provoke, to irritate, to NOT be politically correct].
(personal communication, 2010)

It is interesting to note that while Robles discusses the centrality of her lesbian feminist identity and the uniqueness of Lesbirada's politicized identity, she does not appear to mark it as unique within a specifically Guatemalan context. I note this for two reasons: first, as I have already discussed, with the very present dangers of the context in which these women are claiming identities, we must acknowledge that their efforts – and all other acts of resistance – are not being made without great risks.

Second, the hostility and exclusion from the Guatemalan women's movement – a movement most lesbians connect to feminism - has led some lesbians to adopt a stance of resistance towards feminism (McClure 1999:320). Further, not all Guatemalan lesbians share the same understanding of feminism. McClure discusses a not-uncommon conflation amongst Guatemalan lesbians of the concept of *feminism* with that of

femininity, “the ongoing misunderstandings reveal[ing] the various political stakes of conceptions relating to lesbian identities and regional ideologies” (McClure 1999:321). Berger uses these variants in the relationship to and understanding of lesbian identity and feminism to suggest a greater incongruity between Lesbirada’s objectives and strategies and the ways in which the majority of Guatemalan lesbians experience and feel about their sexuality (Berger 2006:74).

VIII ELFLAC was scheduled to take place from the 9th till the 13th of October, 2010. The subtitle and focus given to the *encuentro* was *Hilando Rebeldías Lésbicas Feministas desde la Raiz*, or ‘Joining together¹² Lesbian Feminist Rebels from the Roots.’

Having established a sense of the history and context in which VIII ELFLAC took place, it is also important to discuss the driving forces that led the *encuentro* to occur. As described above, one can see that previous ELFLAC *encuentros* often housed passionate arguments. As I mentioned in the introduction, VIII ELFLAC was a space of incredible tension; one with many heated debates that exposed the fractures and divisions within the Latin American and Caribbean lesbian feminist movement. Why, then, did the Ekipa Guatemala put so much time and energy into organizing such an *encuentro*? What was so important that over 200 people would find the time and the means to attend – with over 100 of them traveling from different countries? Why were they there, and what were they working towards?

In all my experiences, conversations, and readings, my understanding is that they were there to examine the worlds they lived in, and to come up with strategies to make those worlds better and more accepting places. In a discussion of what we wanted

¹² *Hilando* literally translates into ‘spinning,’ as in spinning thread. It can also be translated into ‘stringing together’ or ‘linking.’

from the *encuentros*, one woman stated:

“Yo quiero escuchar las voces de los actores y las actoras para que yo puedo entenderlos. ¿Que quiero en el proximo encuentro? ¡Quiero eso! Sentar en una mesa y preguntar - ¿Que es? Las questiones de ser humanos” [I want to hear the voices of the actors and actresses so that I can understand them. What do I want from the next *encuentro*? I want that! To sit at a table and ask – what is this? The questions of being human] (October 12, 2010).

Though many of the women with whom I talked weren't surprised at the amount of conflict and tension that arose, I met no one who stated that they had attended the *encuentro* with the intention of creating discord and hostile divisions.

They came to learn from one another. Many attendees I spoke with were attending VIII ELFLAC as their first ever *encuentro*. Some were just beginning to analyze their self-understandings as lesbians, feminists, and/or lesbian feminists, and wanted to hear the thoughts and experiences of those who had been studying their roles for longer. Some had strongly formulated opinions and identities, but wanted to hear new thoughts during the planned discussion groups (which were divided into the themes of identity, bodies and sexuality, and political actions).

They came to discuss issues they might not have had the opportunity or the place to talk about elsewhere. Given the patriarchal world-system that exists, as a whole there are not many spaces for concepts of lesbian feminism to be openly discussed. Given the geographical context thus described, for those who embraced a lesbian feminist identity in Guatemala, such spaces were extremely limited and most often dangerous. In this we can see how some attendees came in search of a space where they could listen and speak freely and openly as lesbian feminists, things that factors in quotidian lives might not allow them to do.

The desire for a space for this kind of expression and dialogue also meant that some participants attended even though they didn't identify as lesbian feminists. For example, Elisa¹³, a mid-twenties attendee from Mexico, stated that she assumed a lesbian identity because in Mexico, there was no other political identity for her. Elisa never stated an identity she wished she could assume, and my understanding was that she would have preferred to remain uncategorized. A similar sentiment was expressed by Juliana¹⁴, who told me she takes an identity because in the world we live in, if she tries to express herself as she is *without* an assumed identity, no one understands her.

They came to share – be it stories, tactics, and practices or t-shirts, chocolates, and music. Attendees came to VIII ELFLAC prepared with flyers from their organizations, videos to be watched during lunch breaks on laptops, lesbian and feminist-themed books for sale, and womyn-inspired art. The lesbian-feminist-Cuban-hip hop duo Las Krudas attended VIII ELFLAC and every day, set up a table selling their homemade shirts and cds. Every evening participants were encouraged to attend one of the multiple *talleres*, or workshops, that attendees had been invited to prepare for the *encuentro*. In workshops on everything from stencil graffiti to polyamory to lesbian maternity to erotic art therapy, participants created opportunities to share bits of their lives and their knowledge – knowledge that was centered in very differing beliefs and goals regarding identity, action, and the direction of the lesbian feminist movement.

Yet in spite of these differences, I found at the core of this knowledge a universal politic of female-agency, overthrowing patriarchy, and rebellion against the hegemonic, neo-liberal, heteronormative world-system. I experienced it in the Wen-Do feminist self-

¹³ Name has been changed

¹⁴ Name has been changed

defense workshop, a physical form of resistance against male oppression. I saw it in the art for sale and in the stencils being created, which both challenged heteronormative assumptions using lesbian images and encouraged female power with political messages and phrases. I heard it in the lyrics of Las Krudas when they sang their call-and-response declaration of resistance: “*Las mujeres - ¡Resistiendo!...Latino America – ¡Resistiendo! Revolucionaria – ¡Resistiendo! Krudas Cubensi – ¡Resistiendo! ¡Aqui siempre resistiendo!*” [Women – Resisting!...Latin America – Resisting! Revolutionaries – Resisting! Krudas Cubensi – Resisting! Here forever resisting] (Riveron and Rosseau 2003)! While strongly differing beliefs regarding *how* to keep ‘*resistiendo*’ existed, I understood the underlying politic to be the same.

And at the most basic level, they came to make new relationships and reinforce old ones. The majority of the women I spoke with said they found out about the conference via contacts they’d met at previous *encuentros*, and I witnessed many felicitous reunions between participants who lived in different countries but had began their friendship at a past *encuentro*. I myself met many fascinating people¹⁵, several of whom visited and stayed in my home after the conference and many more with whom I still communicate via email or Facebook.

In addition to building friendships, I noted at VIII ELFLAC and was told that in general the *encuentros* served as excellent locations to start romances and/or engage in sexual activities with other women. Some participants told me of their frustration with ELFLAC’s schedule and the ability of attendees to go from the intense group

¹⁵ Though I was unaware of her academic brilliance or success, I spent a good amount of time with Norma Mogrovejo, who was exceptionally sweet to me.

discussions¹⁶ during the day to crazy drinking and partying a short hour late. The majority, however, seemed to fully embrace drinking and partying as a necessary relief from the long, tension-filled day. Regardless, general intimacy of the conference led many romantic connections develop, and the evening parties led for even more strictly sexual connections to occur.

These same desires to learn, to discuss, to share, and to meet were expressed by the *encuentro*'s organizers. In the first announcement put out regarding VIII ELFLAC, the Ekipa wrote:

... este encuentro es una nueva oportunidad para reflexionar sobre este sistema-mundo y su impacto en nosotras lesbianas feministas, y para definir nuestras propias apuestas sobre el mundo que deseamos. [This *encuentro* is a new opportunity to reflect on the world-system and its impact on us lesbian feminists, and to define our¹⁷ own stakes in the world we desire].

... para transformar este mundo en un mundo verdaderamente diferente para nosotras, esperamos que este encuentro así como toda su preparación, pueda ser un proceso de construcción de pactos políticos, desde la ética, respeto y reconocimiento entre nosotras. [... to transform this world into a world that is truly different for us, we hope that this *encuentro* as it is with all of its preparation, can be a process of the construction of political pacts, coming from a place of ethics, respect, and appreciation between us].

Desde allí, retomamos la propuesta de Audre Lorde sobre el poder de lo erótico capaz de articular, desde el goce, sea físico, emocional, espiritual, o intelectual, todos los momentos de vida, de debate, de discusión, de reflexión política, y de expresión artística en este encuentro; pues, “nos puede dar la energía para procurar obtener cambios genuinos en nuestro mundo. Nos comprometemos a no establecernos en lo conveniente, en lo falso, lo esperado convencionalmente.” [From here, we take Audre Lorde's proposal of the power of the erotic's possibility to articulate, from the enjoyment, be it physical, emotional, spiritual, or intellectual, all the moments of life, of debate, of discussion, of political reflection, and of artistic expression in this *entuentro*; then, “Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama”].

(Ekipa Guatemala[A], 2010)

¹⁶ I am referring to the planned and led group discussions identity, bodies and sexuality, and political actions.

¹⁷ It should be noted that every use of the word “our” or “us” is written in the feminine grammatical form.

Again we can read the same assumed politic based on female agency, the overthrow of patriarchy and a critique of the neocolonial world-system as central to the goal of “transform[ing] this world into a world that is truly different” (Ekipa Guatemala[A], 2010). In this powerful announcement, we can read the desire that drove the Ekipa to organize VIII ELFLAC as a space of reflection, recognition, creation, and change. Though different beliefs of how to carry out these desires led to conflict and tension, I believe it was a mutual desire of these general concepts that drove the organization and the attendance of VIII ELFLAC.

Chapter Two

Tensions at VIII ELFLAC

Shortly after VIII ELFLAC's end, an essay describing the *encuentro* was posted on multiple websites. Titled "*EL VIII ELFLAC: Un Espacio de Tensiones/VIII ELFLAC: A Space of Tensions,*" the essay opens with the following statement:

"El VIII Encuentro se caracterizó por ser un espacio cruzado por múltiples violencias simbólicas, donde se impuso la descalificación como estrategia hegemónica de debate. En las plenarias se vivió un ambiente agresivo, que incluyó acusaciones e insultos a compañeras, etiquetándolas como el enemigo... Es por todas estas razones que en el VIII ELFLAC vivimos profundos dolores, no encontrando espacios en los que nos sintiéramos efectivamente pertenecientes." [The eighth *Encuentro* was characterized as being a space crossed with multiple symbolic violences, where disqualification was imposed as a hegemonic strategy of debate. An aggressive environment was alive in the discussion sessions, which included accusations and insults of companions, labeling them as the enemy...It's for all of these reasons that in VIII ELFLAC we experienced profound pains, we did not encounter spaces in which we felt we actually belonged].

(Disidencia Sexual)

The discussions I had throughout and after the *encuentro* and the responses published about the event after VIII ELFLAC make it clear that for many, VIII ELFLAC was indeed a 'space of tensions.' In this chapter I analyze first the goals of the *encuentro* and then the tensions that I experienced, in an effort to understand both the reasons for such tensions and the significance of their presence.

The Objectives of the Ekipa Guatemala

In the introduction section of the packet given to all VIII ELFLAC attendees upon arrival, the Ekipa wrote:

A partir de las reflexiones colectivas que hemos dado en la Ekipa, sobre lo que significa "Hilar Rebeldías Lésbicas Feministas desde la Raíz" y los debates existentes entre las distintas miradas, posturas, corrientes de pensamiento, actuar político de los movimientos lésbicos feministas en la región, creemos que se hace necesario hacer un

alto en el proceso y generar una reflexión sobre nosotras como movimientos políticos ante los contextos políticos, sociales, económicos y culturales. [From the collective reflections that we have given in the Ekipa, about what signifies “Joining together Lesbian Feminist Rebels from the Roots” and the existing debates between different views, positions, schools of thought, and political acts of the lesbian feminist movements in the region, we believe that we must pause in this process and generate a reflection about ourselves as political movements in the presence of political, social, economic, and cultural contexts].

Existen actualmente muchas reflexiones y discusiones en el movimiento, y desde este reconocimiento queremos proponer que este VIII ELFLAC sea un encuentro que posibilite realmente vernos, debatir, revisar nuestras posturas y nuestro actuar político. Creemos importante enfocarnos en hacer una “radiografía” de cómo estamos, de por qué estamos como estamos, para pensar y discutir para dónde vamos. [There are many reflections and discussions that exist within the movement, and from this acknowledgement we would like to propose that this VIII ELFLAC should be an *encuentro* that makes it truly possible to view ourselves, debate, revise our postures and our political action. We believe it is important to focus on creating an “x-ray” of how we are, of why we are the way we are, to think and to discuss about where we are going].

Proponemos que hagamos un análisis del sistema mundo a través de los contextos de colonización, racismo, feminicidio, neoliberalismo, empobrecimiento y militarización donde estamos insertas y cómo nuestra propuesta política de transformación puede actuar frente a ello. [We propose to create an analysis of the world system across the contexts of the colonization, racism, femicide, neoliberalism, poverty, and militarization where we are inserted and how our political proposal of transformation can stand up to these]

(Ekipa Guatemala[B]).

The Ekipa had a specific methodological plan for how to create such an analysis.

They began by asking six sections of questions to begin a reflection from various angles.

I have included the main questions from each section – keeping them grouped as the

Ekipa organized them – as follows:

1. *¿Quiénes somos las lesbianas feministas? ¿Cuáles es el vínculo entre nuestras experiencias corporales y sexuales con nuestras propuestas políticas, y el sistema-mundo en el que estamos?* [Who are lesbian feminists? What is the connection between our bodily and sexual experiences with our political proposals, and with the world-system in which we live]?

2. *¿Quiénes somos las distintas corrientes de pensamiento de los movimientos políticos lésbicos feministas en LAC? ¿Por qué dentro del lesbianismo feminista hay por hoy varias corrientes de pensamiento y acción política lésbicas feministas?* [What are the different schools of thought of the political lesbian feminists in Latin America and the

Caribbean? Why are there various schools of thought and (various methods of) political action within feminist lesbianism]?

3. *¿Qué significa cada corriente de pensamiento? Es decir: ¿de dónde estamos partiendo, cuáles son nuestras luchas, nuestro contexto...?* [What does each school of thought mean? By this we mean to ask: Where is our starting point, what are our battles, our context...]?

4. *¿Desde qué movimiento político accionamos? ¿Para qué nos organizamos?/¿por qué necesitamos movimiento político?...¿cómo tomamos decisiones para nuestras prácticas políticas?* [From what political movement do we act? Why do we organize?/Why do we need political movement? How do we make decisions for our political practices]?

5. *¿Con nuestros discursos y nuestras prácticas estamos transformando y trasgrediendo algo de sistema-mundo? ¿Como visibilizamos las herramientas del amo?* [With our discourses and our practices are we transforming and transgressing some part of the world-system? How do we visualize these master tools]?

6. *¿Qué significa para nosotras lo personal es político? Y ¿cómo esto nos da herramientas para derribar la casa del amo?* [What does “the personal is political” mean to us? And how does it give us tools to overthrow the ‘master’s house’]?

(Ekipa Guatemala[B]).

Consider the last stanza in the introductory statement and in particular, Question 6 of the Ekipa’s methodological plan. In their discussion of how their “political proposal of transformation” could stand up to the world systems of “colonization, racism, femicide, neoliberalism, poverty, and militarization” and in their question of how their politic gives them “the tools to overthrow the master’s house¹⁸,” the underlying politic of overthrowing patriarchy and of transforming the neoliberal world system is strongly reinforced.

¹⁸ The images of the “master’s house” and the question of which tools can be used to overthrow it is strong reference to Audre Lorde’s essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1983). After asking Lu Robles for recommendations of some of the texts that most influenced her development as a lesbian feminist, Robles emailed me with essays by Judith Butler and Kate Millett (USA), Carla Lonzi and Paola Tabet (Italy), Teresa Meana Suárez (Spain), and Colette Guillaumin and Nicole Claude Mathieu (France) (emailed to author, April 25, 2011). Essays by Tabet, Guillaumin and Mathieu included in *El Patriarcado al Desnudo*, a book of essays compiled by Ochy Curiel (Dominican Republic) and Jules Faquet (France) (2005).

After restating their politic through their introduction and initial questions, the Ekipa then arranged three discussion groups – Identities, Bodies and Sexualities, and Political Actions – to discuss these questions in relation to their group themes. The first two days of debate were scheduled to answer questions regarding the proposals of the distinct schools of thought, the transformation of the world-system, and the analysis of different strategies within the lesbian feminist movement (Ekipa Guatemala[B]). The third day was scheduled as a discussion for the future of the movement; to determine how we want to continue constructing the lesbian feminist movement, using which strategies, which alliances, and based in which contexts (Ekipa Guatemala[B]).

The Ekipa had strong opinions and goals regarding what the *encuentro* would be and what they hoped to accomplish. The goals centered in their conceptions of lesbian feminism as a political and rebellious identity, the Ekipa hoped that VIII ELFLAC would be a space to “*promover el debate entre las diferentes propuestas politicas sobre un análisis fundamentado del sistema mundo, del lugar de enunciación de cada una, y la propuesta de transformación*” [promote discussion between different political proposals based on a fundamental analysis of the world system, of the foundation of each persons’ statement, and of the proposal of transformation] (Ekipa Guatemala[B]).

Yet for many who attended, VIII ELFLAC was not the “*Lugar...para crear otras formas de pensar, actuar, amar y vivir*” [Place...to create other forms of thinking, acting, loving, and living” that it was intended to be] (Ekipa Guatemala[A]). Rather than a site of discussion and creation, the debates at the *encuentro* were of such intensity and, as many

who attended the *encuentro* said, hostility that VIII ELFLAC has since frequently been referred to as “*un espacio de tensiones*,” a space of tensions¹⁹.

Based on all my experiences, conversations, and studies, I don’t believe VIII ELFLAC was intended to be a space of tension. Rather, it appeared to me that the conflict arose based on the differences in priorities regarding what was important to discuss, how discussions were organized, and who could (and would) participate. These differences and the resulting tensions will be discussed in this section.

¹⁹ As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, a specific article titled “El VIII ELFLAC, Un Espacio de Tensiones” has appeared on numerous websites (such as <http://www.disidenciassexual.cl/>, <http://www.rompiendoelsilencio.cl/>, <http://www.officialgays.com/>, and <http://ferschtecktgalera.wordpress.com/>) but none list an author.

This article describes the *encuentro* as solely a place of tension and exclusion, as “...[una] cárcel elitista donde la proliferancia de palabras “correctas” e “incorrectas” y la demarcación de voces autorizadas sobre otras que no lo eran, daban cuenta de la poca capacidad de este espacio para albergar compañeras procedentes de distintos estratos socio-económicos y culturales. El consenso, a su vez, hermosa práctica colectivista, se volvió herramienta de opresión y de exclusión, desvalorizándolo, y en nombre de su defensa y protección se censuró y violentó al diferente” [...an elite prison where the proliferation of “correct” and “incorrect” words and the demarcation of authorized voices with those that were not, led to the realization of the small capacity in this space to accommodate companions from distinct socio-economic stratum and cultures. The consensus, in turn, a beautiful collective experience, became a tool of oppression and of exclusion, devaluing (the *encuentro*), and in the name of [the *encuentro*’s] defense and protection, it censured and violated all that was different] (<http://www.disidenciassexual.cl/>).

My analyses differ from this perspective. While I recognize the exclusion and oppression experienced as a result of the tensions, I also consider such tensions to have been catalysts for new evolutions within the lesbian feminist movement and for more effective and meaningful organization. Yet rather than view the tensions and divisions as being positive or as being negative, I view both dimensions in constant tension with each other. It is my hope that by viewing both sides of the tensions in this manner, I can provide more complex understanding of them, and can offer a more thorough evaluation of the lesbian feminist politics I experienced.

An Analysis of Tensions:

With an understanding of the Ekipa's intended goals as a background, I can begin to analyze the tensions that rose during my experience at VIII ELFLAC. In the remainder of this chapter I consider the tensions surrounding socio-economic status, space, age, education, race, and nationality that I encountered. I try to analyze each tension both individually and as connected with other tensions and factors. In my analyses I describe the ways in which the tensions manifested themselves using both my own prose and as much as possible, the prose of participants as collected during debates, informal conversations, and oral histories. I analyze the tensions' contexts and backgrounds, and include related academic theories and perspectives when beneficial. I attempt to conclude my discussion of each tension with a summary of its significance and impact within the *encuentro*, for the lesbian feminist movement, and on my own understanding of the movement and on world-systems.

Regarding this last point, my own understanding and interpretation of my experiences at VIII ELFLAC have continuously developed and evolved since the *encuentro* and throughout my experience writing this thesis. Experiencing the hostility, the anger, and the emotions during the debates with no sense of the background and with no theoretical framework through which to understand, my initial response to VIII ELFLAC was one of negativity and disappointment. I struggled greatly with looking past the ferocity of the debates to understand the reasons behind them and their importance within an evolving movement. Only since beginning my thesis work have I been able to push past my initial feelings and critically analyze the events that took place.

I now view VIII ELFLAC not solely as a ‘space of tensions,’ but additionally as a catalyst for change and growth within the lesbian feminist movement. This thesis, the catalyst of my own change and growth, reflects the evolution of my perspective and interpretation. Yet I am certain that this is in no way a stopping point, and that continued thought and experience will further shape and change my understanding. That being said, I can begin my analyses with the recognition that this thesis marks a point in my understanding – an understanding that, like the lesbian feminist movement, will always continue evolving.

The Tensions within VIII ELFLAC

In her dissertation on sexuality and political asylum, McClure argues that location is central to the formation of identity (1999:158). “In Guatemala,” McClure writes, “sexual minorities have available to them different types of spaces depending upon factors such as the gender and class status of the individual, and local geography” (1999:158). She begins her argument on space, identity, and resistance with the following statement: “Location has more to do with the active construction of the grounds on which political struggles are to be fought and the identities through which people come to adopt political stances, than with the latitude and longitude of experiences of circumscription, marginalization, and exclusion” (1999: 158).

While I agree with McClure’s assessment of the centrality of location in the formation of identity, I find fault in this statement. The active construction of political battlegrounds and of identities is indeed a key element in the creation, shape, and boundaries of space, however it is essential to realize that each construction set and each

boundary created marginalizes and excludes other possibilities of battlegrounds and identities. To quote Shane Phelan, this “leaves little room for the development of diverse, individual patterns of relationship within the larger society. The legitimate drive of community degenerates into unmediated unity, a unity that carries as its twin an excessive fear of difference” (1989:57).

One of the main tensions I noted at VIII ELFLAC derived from exactly this. The “grounds on which political struggles are to be fought” were indeed being actively constructed, but many who attended VIII ELFLAC felt excluded from the construction process. By denying and ignoring certain discourses and by enforcing others, by blatantly or subtly restricting the admittance of certain individuals to certain events and/or conversations – in short, by regulating discourse and spatial boundaries, participants at VIII ELFLAC were allowed or denied access to different aspects of the *encuentro*. To quote Anne Enke, it is essential to look at “the ways in which women intervened in public landscapes and social geographies already structured around gender, race, class, and sexual exclusions, and on the ways that these processes in turn shaped feminism. A focus on contested space, as opposed to a focus on feminist identity, helps explain how feminism replicated exclusions even as feminists developed powerful critiques of hierarchy” (2007:4).

While Enke is writing about the social geography of spaces in the United States, such a focus on contested space is equally beneficial in analyzing the events of VIII ELFLAC. As will be discussed in this section, questions surrounding socioeconomic status, race, nationality, age, and gender were extensively debated at VIII ELFLAC. While such debates led to certain exclusions, they inspired important critiques of the

internal hierarchies within the lesbian feminist movement. Further, such debates created the opportunity for new spaces and movements to develop.

Tensions led to exclusionary practices and to fractions and divisions amongst those in attendance. However, I do not view these tensions and divisions as flaws of VIII ELFLAC or as setbacks for the lesbian feminist movement within Latin America and the Caribbean. In her dissertation McClure writes: “Pile suggests that a multiplicity of movements within a movement does not necessarily ‘disable resistance... (instead) this enables it to move strategically, tactfully, resourcefully from place to place” (Pile in McClure 1999:197). While recognizing the negative and exclusionary components of the tensions, I also consider such tensions to have been motives for change and growth in new directions and for the creation of more individualized communities and movements.

Socioeconomic Status:

The Ekipa took great efforts to make sure the *encuentro* was as affordable as possible and that the greatest number of participants could attend. Leading up to the conference, after already arranging 55 complete scholarships, 145 partial scholarships, and contributing \$2,000 USD to assist with caravan-transportation, the Ekipa still were actively searching for ways to reduce the costs and provide more scholarships for additional individuals trying to attend (ELFLAC[B]).

Yet even with such impressive efforts, it must still be noted that VIII ELFLAC from the start was class distinctive. Regardless of the extensive scholarship provisions, the majority of attendees still had to finance part if not all of their travel and event fees. The total cost to attend the *encuentro* was \$135 USD. While the \$135 covered food and lodging throughout the entire conference, it was still a very substantial fee considering

that in Guatemala, over 75% of the country lives in poverty and many families only earn around \$100 USD per month (IHF). Additionally, according to a 2009 report by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the region of Latin America has over 180 million poor people, with over 70 million who qualify as 'extremely poor' (LBC 2009).

Even if one could find a way to finance the travel and participation fees, one also needed to consider the matter of time. VIII ELFLAC took place over five days, which meant that attendees would need the ability to take that much time off of work, and potentially more if traveling from other countries. This means that to attend VIII ELFLAC, at the very minimum one would need the job flexibility to take time off, job security to make sure that one would still be employed upon return, and enough financial security that one could survive with the loss of at least five days of wages. According to ECLAC's report, the majority people in Latin America and the Caribbean would not have been able to meet these requirements. While to my knowledge there was no open discussion of the exclusion resulting from financial boundaries, I understood the unfortunate but very real poverty situation in Latin America as a guarantee that VIII ELFLAC would to an extent be organized around class.

Costs, financial support, and the use of funds have all been issues that have risen at past ELFLACs. In particular, concerns regarding the influence of financial sponsors and conflicts between autonomy and institutionalization were some of the biggest debates at IV ELFLAC in Argentina (1995), V ELFLAC in Brazil (1999), and VII ELFLAC in Chile (2007) (ELFLAC[A]). Such concerns have led to the organization of specifically 'autonomous' groups and *encuentros*, which as I understood from informal

conversations, did not function using outside funding. It should be noted that on the last day of VIII ELFLAC after the march, the Ekipa Guatemala opened up their office space at Lesbiradas to allow for a meeting of the *feministas autónomas*, the autonomous feminists²⁰. The Ekipa offered their space for as long as was needed, and the meeting lasted from around 4:00 pm until close to 10:00 pm.

This offer of space is important to consider. The concept of space – access to space, use of space, power over space, mobility within space - is intricately tied with the question of socioeconomic status. In this situation, the Ekipa had the power over their space and the power to grant access to others. In this sense, the Ekipa's ability to pay rent and afford a building demonstrates a tie between socioeconomic status and access to space. Yet we can also see the women who attended the meeting of the *feministas autónomas* (and VIII ELFLAC in general) – women who had the funds and the resources to take part in such events - as having mobility within space. Women who traveled internationally to participate to some extent demonstrated mobility within a global space. These concepts will be analyzed further in the following section.

Space: The Locations of VIII ELFLAC

VIII ELFLAC took place from October 8 till October 13, 2010. As listed on the detailed schedule, the first two days were scheduled to welcome attendees, transport any travelers from the airports to their hotels, and make sure all attendees were registered. The total number of attendees at VIII ELFLAC topped at over 300, making it one of the

²⁰ The autonomist feminists were the organizers and participants of feminist *encuentros* that involved no outside funding.

highest attended *encuentros* with the greatest amount of Latin American and Caribbean attendance (only around 70 participants were Guatemalan).

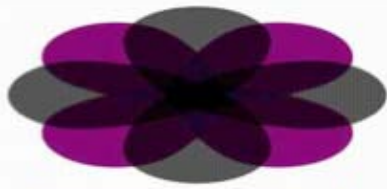
VIII ELFLAC took place within five main spaces. Early mornings and late, after-party evenings were spent at two reserved hotels, the Royal Palace and the Hotel Pan America. The Paraninfo Universitario, the University of San Carlos' cultural center, was the home to all discussions, debates, and workshops. La Bodeguita, an art-focused Guatemalan bar and nightclub, was reserved for us throughout the week and hosted our evening parties. The last important space was 6th Avenue, where on October 13th, declared by ELFLAC participants to be the *Día de la Rebelión Lesbiana Feminista*²¹ [Day of the Lesbian Feminist Rebel], close to 200 of the VIII ELFLAC attendees “took back the streets” by marching, chanting, graffiti-tagging, and posterizing all the way to the Plaza Mayor.

All of the events of VIII ELFLAC were centered within Zona 1 of Guatemala City. Home to the *Palacio Nacional*, the *Plaza Mayor* and the *Mercado Central*, Zona 1 is considered to be the *Centro Histórico* of Guatemala City. The location was no coincidence: in addition to being the most economical for lodging and holding events, Zona 1 has long served as a center for organization and political action. Explained Robles:

“El Centro si tiene una vida social, mas alternativa. Permite ciertas grupos que no se aceitan en otros lugares. Otros dicen – es peligroso, es malo... Muchos que tienen vidas alternativas hacen nuestros vidas aquí.”

[The Center has a social life, it's more alternative. It allows certain groups that aren't welcome in other places. Others say [of Zona 1] it's dangerous, it's bad. But many of us who live alternative lifestyles make our lives here].

²¹ October 13th was declared *Día de la Rebelión Lesbiana Feminista* during VII ELFLAC in 2007 in Chile (ELFLAC[A]).



VIII ENCUENTRO LÉSBICO FEMINISTA LATINOAMERICANO Y CARIBEÑO

Hilando rebeldías lésbicas feministas desde la raíz Guatemala, octubre 2010

Royal Palace (6a. avenida
12-66 zona 1)

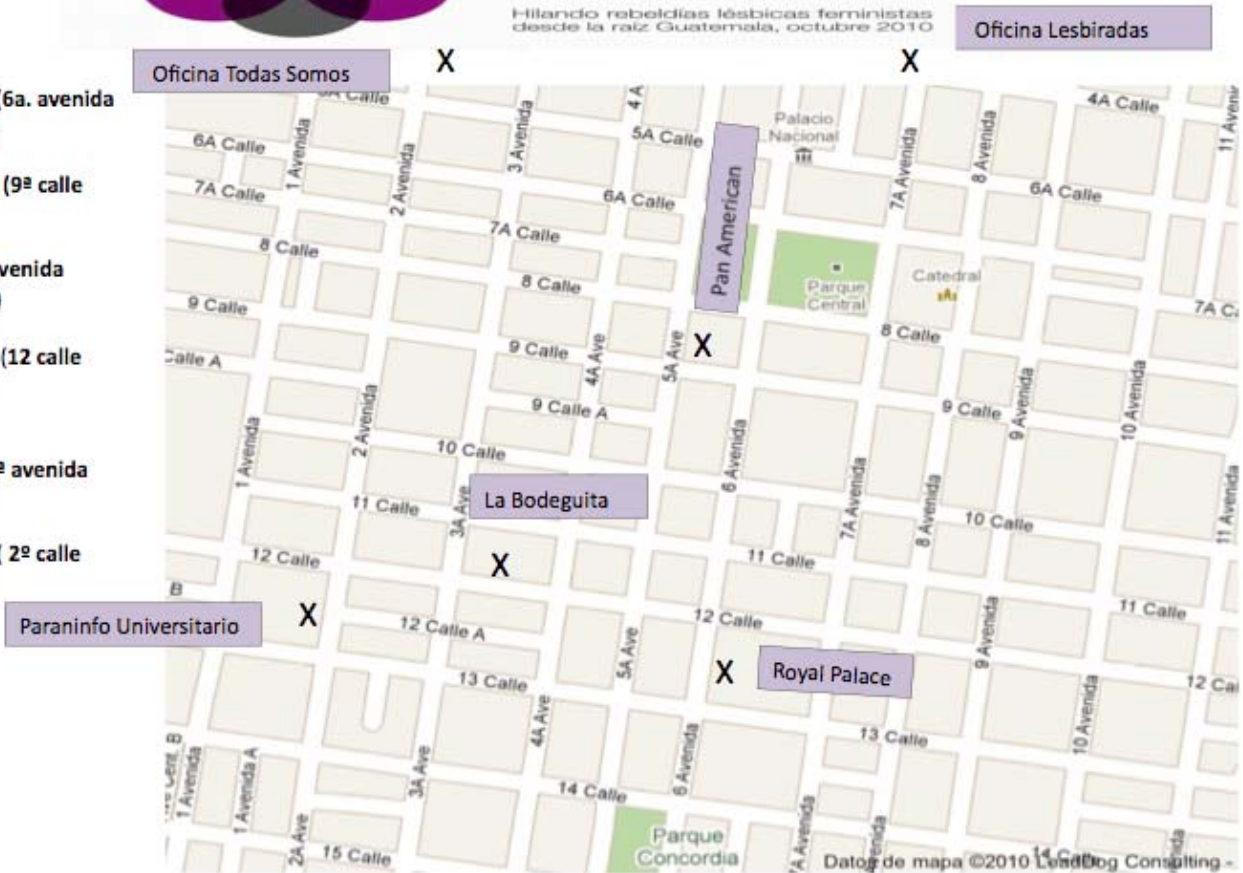
Pan American (9ª calle
5-63 zona 1)

Parainfo (2 avenida
12-40 zona 1)

La Bodeguita (12 calle
3-55 zona 1)

Oficinas:
Lesbiradas (7ª avenida
2-62 zona 1)

Todos Somos (2ª calle
3-08 zona 1)



(personal communication, 2010)

Zona 1 seems to be a center of congregation for all sexual minorities, not just lesbians. OASIS, the first and most well-known organization working for “*comunidades de la diversidad sexual*” [communities of sexual diversity], is housed in Zona 1, as are the majority of Guatemala City’s gay and gay-friendly bars (Merino 2008). The very first gay bar to open in Guatemala, Pandora’s Box, opened in 1976 in Zona 1 (McClure 1999:160).

The Ekipa Guatemala tried to arrange the lodgings, conference areas, and *fiesta* locations of VIII ELFLAC to be as economically feasible as possible, while ensuring that attendees were in places that were comfortable, clean, and safe. Safety was a major

concern throughout the conference. Guatemala has one of the highest crime ratings in Latin America (US Department of State). Further, as mentioned in Chapter 1, Guatemala is in the midst of an epidemic of violence against women (Cheers 2011). A country largely structured around firm conceptions of gender roles (as will be discussed later), the marginalization of women is often executed in extreme ways.

In her essay on racism and machismo, Amanda Pop Bol describes both subtle and acute forms of machismo executed in psychological and verbal abuse, economic restrictions, sexual violations and assaults, death threats, and violent physical abuse – at times resulting in death (2000:114). Pop Bol lists restrictions on mobility and locomotion as having some of the most powerful effects on the marginalization of women (2000:115). She states:

“Si estas mujeres andan solas por las calles, ante todo si son solteras o casadas, no tienen control sobre sí mismas, es como andan “sueeltas y disponibles,” o sea que representa peligro para sí mismas y para los demas por cualquier “tentacion” que pueden encontrar en la calle...” [If these women walk alone in the streets, above all if they are alone or married, they don’t have control over themselves, it’s as if they are walking ‘single and available,’ or whether they represent danger to themselves and others for any ‘temptation’ that could be encountered in the street...] (Pop Bol 2000:116).

In addition to the dangers of simply being in Guatemala, ELFLAC events have been specifically targeted for violence in the past. In 1990, II ELFLAC was interrupted on its last evening by a group of drunken men who “screamed obscenities, threw rocks, and banged on the gates” (Mogrovejo n.d.:2). The incident, since referred to as *la noche negra* [the black night], was extremely traumatizing for many of the attendees. Needless to say, it has not been forgotten.

With safety concerns in everyone's consciousness, I was surprised to learn that there would be no police notification regarding the event or requests for outside protection or support. This did not seem to shock any other participants. Rather, I learned that the attendees of VIII ELFLAC had prepared in advance to organize and create their own security force.

“*No estamos de acuerdo de la policia,*” [We are not in agreement with the police (policies and politics)], explained Robles. Neither are the police in agreement with them – throughout VII ELFLAC there were warnings not to call the police in case of trouble and to stay away from police vehicles if out walking at night. Police violence against homosexuals, lesbians, and trans-people is not uncommon in Latin America (Stern 2006). The police could not be trusted to protect and defend a group of lesbians.

As conscious, sensitive, and accommodating as the Ekipa Guatemala tried to be in providing functional and pleasant event locations as economically as possible, many attendees took issue with the luxuriousness of the event and with the use of paid hotels in place of home-stays. Mia, a Spanish woman in her early 20's, had caravanned with a large group from Mexico, where she was currently living. In a conversation at the hotel on the second evening, she expressed her discomfort with the lack of community she experienced. Though this was her first lesbian feminist event, at other *encuentros* she'd heard of attendees were housed in the homes of local participants. For Mia, the hotel lodging signified a lack of community organization and created a sterile, less welcoming atmosphere.

As VIII ELFLAC was my first lesbian feminist *encuentro* and my first real conference of any manner, Mia's perspective led me to realize that such meetings could

be and often were spatially arranged in different manners. Further, it led me to think critically about the spatial organization of the *encuentro* and the ways in which the use of one space over another (for example, a bedroom in a house versus a hotel room) could influence and reflect the politics of an event.

However, thinking about space also let me to further consider access to space, which I view as intricately tied to socio-economic status. As I wrote in my first research paper on sexual minorities in Guatemala:

“Traditionally in Guatemala, there have not been and are not many public ‘material’ spaces for sexual minorities to meet. This in turn has limited the potential for network and community building, an important ‘space of representation.’ Raymond Williams explains it well when stating that boundaries simultaneously “produce and limit forms of counter-culture” (Williams reprinted in McClure 1999: 161). It is important to consider the great impact the lack of such spaces has on sexual minorities. What does a lesbian teenager living in Todos Santos do when there is no place to go to meet other women who feel the same way she does, when she can’t talk to her family, friends, or even medical professional for fear of being verbally or physically castigated, isolated, or otherwise abused by everyone surround her? Or what does a gay man living in Guatemala City do when the only places for him to go to socialize with other openly gay men is at a gay bar, and he can’t afford the Q40 cover charge?²²”

Considering the political, financial, and societal influences that determine one’s access to space, I was impressed by the Ekipa’s management and organization of space and considered them to have handled the complicated situation as best they could. While participants such as Mia might have desired a more communally organized and supported *encuentro*, I understood the majority of participants to recognize VIII ELFLAC’s position as financially non-autonomous, and to be generally satisfied in this regard.

²² Taken from an unpublished essay I wrote in 2010 titled “Sexual Diversity in Guatemala: A Closet Study”

Age:

Of the attendees I spoke with, the age range of participants at VIII ELFLAC fell between 20 years old as the youngest and 70 years old as the oldest. The majority of participants fell between 25 years old to 45 years old²³. The second largest group, however, fell between 20 years old and around 30 years old²⁴. Of the 20 exhibitors and the facilitators who presented during and led the round table discussions, perhaps only 1/5 of them fell into this second, younger age bracket²⁵. Neither were any of the three introductory speakers who kicked off VII ELFLAC in this bracket.

Throughout the conference, during informal conversations younger participants expressed their frustration with the lack of consideration given to younger participants. These participants in general identified with more fluid sexual and gender identities. Throughout the trans debate (as will be discussed later), the younger participants were most often in support of trans inclusion. Many were interested in or were involved in polyamorous relationships. Perhaps the best way I can describe the majority of the younger participants is by highlighting their general resistance to any specific constraints or boundaries regarding what they were or how they should be.

On numerous occasions, Penelope²⁶, a Mexican participant in her mid-twenties, expressed her frustration regarding the age-exclusion to me. During one she asked me to note how many of the younger participants were given the microphone to participate in the open debates and discussions. I responded that while I had noticed that far fewer younger participants spoke freely during discussions, surely this could also be because

²³ Ages are estimated

²⁴ Ages are estimated

²⁵ This is an estimation, as I was not able find out all their exact ages.

²⁶ Name changed

the younger members were choosing not to participate. Penelope responded by questioning *why* younger members were choosing to not participate. In her opinion, it was because when younger members did participate, their opinions were brushed off as being immature, unfounded, or unimportant. Penelope felt that VIII ELFLAC was not an environment that welcomed the thoughts and beliefs of younger participants.

Penelope was not the only one with those feelings. Enough of the younger participants felt so frustrated that on the last day of the conference, they attempted to organize a meeting of *jovenes* (young people) with the plans of creating a petition to be presented during the last meeting, protesting the discrediting of their ideas based on their age and demanding changes in the proximate *encuentro*.

While the meeting of the *jovenes* did not occur at VIII ELFLAC, it will be interesting to see if *jovenes* at future *encuentros* decide to organize to create a more prominent voice. Notes on past *encuentros* did not mention dissatisfaction of younger participants, so it could be that VIII ELFLAC marked the first tangible expression of this tension. Even so, tensions regarding ageism did not hold great prominence at the *encuentro*. If such tensions continue at future ELFLACs and result in changes, then placing a greater value on the opinions of the younger participants could lead to more complex debates and to different developments within the movement.

Education:

Another cause of exclusion at VIII ELFLAC was based on education. While the conference was meant to discuss complex issues and questions, some participants were frustrated by the large amounts of theoretical analyses and terminologies that filled a

large part of the discussions. Of the women I talked to, many were particularly put off by the presentation for the group discussing identities by Yuderkys Espinoza, a doctor in philosophy and the founder of the organization *Grupo Latinoamericano de Estudios y Acción en Sexualidades, Género y Cultura* (GALE). From my personal perspective as a student with some higher education – albeit one who had not completely mastered the Spanish language – I was unable to follow Espinoza’s presentation.

Exclusion based on education was a difficult issue to confront. While women recognized and discussed such exclusion during personal conversations, no one wanted to admit over a microphone that they could not follow what was being discussed, nor did they want to single out others’ difficulties in an attempt to give the issue light. Only once do I remember hearing education brought up during the group discussions, and at that time it was used in a different heated argument to insult someone’s haughtiness and did not receive attention as a problem to be resolved.

It should be noted, however, that the majority of women I spoke to at VIII ELFLAC had attended or were attending universities. This again ties into questions of socioeconomics: in Guatemala higher education is only an option for those with resources – not just the resources to afford fees and supplies, but also the resources to afford not working for that time. During my year in Guatemala several of my friends – friends who I considered to be in the upper-middle class - had to drop out of their university programs for lack of funds.

This does not apply only to higher education – according to a USAID study, only three out of ten children finish the sixth grade (USAID). Towards the time of my departure, my Guatemalan host-mother confessed her fears regarding her sons’ education

to me. Her oldest son Julio, recognizing his family's precarious financial situation, had offered to drop out of school and start working. Though my host-mother didn't want Julio to quit school, with rent, electricity, and food prices rising in Guatemala she did not know how she could support her family without his help. Julio was 13 years old at the time.

Though I did not take oral histories of all Ekipa Guatemala members, I assume that the majority of them received higher education²⁷. A comparison of the education levels of ELFLAC organizers with the methodology and structure of the debates within the *encuentros* would be interesting to pursue for future studies.

While the tensions surrounding education were not central during VIII ELFLAC, I note them because access to education formed one of the boundaries that shaped and influenced politics at VIII ELFLAC. What was being said, how it was being said, and who was saying it were all impacted in some way by one's educational background: Espinoza's higher education allowed her to analyze lesbian feminist politics in a highly theoretical manner, whereas someone who had not received higher education – or like me, who was just beginning to learn about such politics - was disabled in her ability to critically analyze and respond to Espinoza's statements. Similarly, the person without a PhD would view the world differently, and therefore could have different opinions and perspectives to bring to the discussion.

²⁷ My assumption is based on conversations I had during VIII ELFLAC and at a post-ELFLAC Ekipa party.

Race:

The final day of discussions at VIII ELFLAC was filled with tension, conflict, and high emotions. During the final whole-group *plenaria* (discussion session), a group of self-identified *mujeres negras*, whom had organized during the morning's group discussion time, held an unscheduled demonstration. Throughout the conference they had felt extremely ignored, disrespected, and discriminated against because of their skin color and countries of origin. Though they had tried to bring up their frustrations of several occasions, their protests were never fully discussed or acknowledged.

During this last *plenaria*, the *mujeres negras* marched into the conference hall. Beating on drums, and many topless, they carried posters asking “*Donde escondes tus racismos?*” [Where do you hide your racism]? and with other similar messages written on their chests and arms. The demonstration opened with the following poem by Ana Carlos Lemos, performed by a Brazilian attendee:

*Minha negritude te afeta em que?
Na cor da minha pele?
No formato do meu cabelo?
Na minha forma de dançar?
Na minha forma de me construir politicamente, de me reconhecer como negra na pele e politicamente? Em que minha negritude te afeta?
Nas diferenças das nossas cores?
No racismo que não sentes na pele?
Em que minha negritude te afeta?
Nas diferenças de classe social, na educação, na arte, no falar, na boca? Onde te afeta a minha negritude?
Na falta de acessibilidade?
No academicismo que existe aqui?
No que minha negritude te afeta?
Na minha identidade política?
Na minha forma de amar?
Onde te afeta?
Onde você guarda o seu racismo?
Wherein does my blackness affect you?
In the color of my skin?*

In the shape of my hair?
In my form of dancing?
In my form of constructing myself politically, of recognizing myself as black in skin and politically? Wherein does my blackness affect you?
In the differences of our colors?
In the racism you don't feel in your skin?
Wherein does my blackness affect you?
In the differences in social class, in education, in art, in speech, in mouth? Where does my blackness affect you?
In the lack of accessibility?
In the scholarship that exists here?
In what does my blackness affect you?
In my political identity?
In my form of loving?
Where does it affect you?
Where do you guard your racism?
(2010)

The poem was performed in Portuguese and was not translated. This was significant – throughout the conference the lack of preparation and resources to provide adequate translation for Brazilian participants was a continuous frustration. Aside from the final whole-group discussion, there was not an official or professional translator at any point in time. Attendees who spoke both languages (or, like myself, who *tried* to speak both languages) filled in on the spot and attempted to translate to the best of their abilities.

On numerous occasions, Brazilian participants first asked and then begged their Spanish-speaking *companheiras* (companions) to slow down, so that they could at least attempt to understand what was being said. In the midst of heated debates, such requests were often forgotten after a short while and even completely ignored – after one such plea, the targeted Spanish-speaker responded that she was sorry, but she just had one last quick point to make. She then proceeded to make that point in rapid Spanish.

Language conflicts posed further difficulties when Brazilian participants wanted to share their thoughts. When Brazilian participants spoke Portuguese during discussions, many Spanish-speaking participants quickly and loudly interrupted them with shouts of complaint about not understanding²⁸. The lack of organization surrounding translation left the Brazilian participants in every respect without a voice.

To make sure their concerns were understood, during the rest of the demonstration participants spoke in first Portuguese and then translated into Spanish. In this way the *mujeres negras* forced attention to finally be given to their objections and concerns regarding VIII ELFLAC. Following the poem they read a list of their demands for the proximate ELFLAC. These demands, if not fulfilled, would result in their nonattendance. The most prominent demands were the promise that the next ELFLAC take place in a Caribbean country, that black women be members of the organizing team, and that racism within and surrounding the lesbian movement be included as part of the topic discussions. Regarding this last demand, the *mujeres negras* made very clear that racism did not need to be the main theme of the next *encuentro*, nor did they think it *should* be. Rather, they wanted to ensure that racism within and surrounding lesbian feminist movement be discussed in a comprehensive manner.

The demonstration was powerful – after, many attendees appeared shell-shocked and numerous were crying. It was so powerful that the Ekipa announced a 15-minute break so that everyone could recollect themselves. The demonstration also succeeded in

²⁸ . Having lived in Brazil, it is interesting to note that when Brazilians attempted to speak during the conference, they consistently spoke far more slowly and clearly than I ever heard Portuguese spoken, which I interpret as their attempt to be considerate and encourage the understanding of their Spanish-speaking *companheiras*.

making the impact it intended – in the final meeting it was agreed that all of the demands put forth by the *mujeres negras* would be met.

It should be noted that not all of the women who participated in the demonstration were, in fact, *negra*. Carolina, a light-skinned Brazilian woman, was one of the demonstration's drummers and assisted in Portuguese-to-Spanish translation. Leah, one of the few other American at the *encuentro*, also joined the *mujeres negras* in demonstration. In this sense, the racial tension present at VIII ELFLAC can be viewed as a catalyst for the mobilization of a marginalized group and for joining women of different racial identities together. Additionally, that the demands will be met signifies the tension as a catalyst for positive changes within the movement.

Race Continued: Other Opinions

It is important to note that, while everyone with whom I spoke felt impacted by the demonstration of the *mujeres negras*, many also felt confused and hurt. The examples of racist discourse²⁹ provided by the *mujeres negras* proved that racism was indeed an important issue that needed to be examined, yet some women felt as though they personally were being attacked without reason, and that the *mujeres negras* were grouping all who were not “*negra*” together without distinction.

Earlier in the day before the demonstration I had discussed the presence of racism within the conference with Melissa³⁰, a Mexican in her early twenties. During our conversation, Melissa raised an important question: what qualifies a person as being

²⁹ The main speaker repeated discriminatory and objectifying quotes she and other women had heard throughout the *encuentro*, such as “I wanted to attend the workshop on afro-lesbians, but I couldn’t find my wig!” and “Hey! Brazil! Samba!”

³⁰ Name has been changed

negra? Melissa is dark-skinned and has a diverse family background. As we spoke she expressed her confusion and discomfort with being grouped and labeled “white.”

This is a further example of Phelan’s commentary on the creation of identities and communities: Every new definition shades another, and this is a choice with a political consequence (1989:78). Incidents of racism at VIII ELFLAC stretched farther and in more complex manners than were examined at the *encuentro*. Tensions at VIII ELFLAC exposed further divisions and prejudices that, if attempting to wholly tackle issues of racism, must be examined further.

Nationality: The ‘Gringa’ Experience

While there were a decent number of additional participants who were neither Latin American nor Caribbean, I met only three other women who identified as United States American at the *encuentro*³¹. This ensured a very interesting position and experience at VIII ELFLAC.

First, that I was a *Norte-Americana* (North American) gave me an unusual permission to float amongst all groups and enter all discussions. I mingled with Ekipa members. I hung out on the steps with the group that had come from Venezuela, five women who were close friends - to the point of excluding others. I was invited to breakfast with a group of the older academics. I was invited to draw pictures of vulvas

³¹ One was a woman who lived in Texas, but had been adopted from Puerto Rico and strongly identified with her Latina roots. There was also Iris, a Mexican-American who will be discussed later. The third was Leah, an Asian-American from California who participated in the *mujeres negras* demonstration and who was living in Peru at the time of the *encuentro*.

with younger art-hipsters³². Smoking cigarettes on the patio overlooking Zona Uno, I was included in private, late night conversations by the extremely exclusive members of Wen-Do, a feminist self-defense group (they will be discussed later in this paper). I even ate a memorable lunch with the sensational hip-hop duo Las Krudas.

I don't know what awarded me the allowed entrance within so many different (and often very exclusive) groups and situations. Perhaps attendees assumed that because I was a *gringa*, I felt entitled to be anywhere and do anything I please. Perhaps my 'novelty' as one of the only *gringas* – and a very feminine *gringa*, at that - led to my acceptance. Perhaps it was simply assumed that I didn't understand anything that was being said. In any case, I found myself welcome amongst groups and within conversations from which others were excluded.

My inclusion within such groups – and my *gringa* presence at VIII ELFLAC as a whole – both exposed and challenged assumptions that were made based solely off my nationality. In line with the last of my above hypotheses, I was amused to discover that many of the *encuentro* attendees assumed that as a US American, I spoke only English. Technically, I attended VIII ELFLAC as a volunteer translator between Spanish and Portuguese (had there been Israelis in attendance, I also could have translated discussions into Hebrew). However, at the start of the *encuentro* several unaware attendees generously attempted to find translators for *me*. Even after the first two days during which I had demonstrated both my Spanish and Portuguese proficiency, quite a few attendees refused to speak with me in any language but English.

³² These pictures were later included in a slideshow art exhibit they titled “*Mujer Fuente – La Mujer que Goza*” [Fountain Woman – The Woman who Enjoys (sexually)].

Regardless of the attendees' intentions, I interpreted their insistence on using English as a continuous reinforcement of my *gringa* status. This created an interesting paradox – even though I was granted uncommon access to numerous groups, events, and conversations, such access was never granted because I was considered 'one of them.' Among every group I always felt myself to be the binary other. In my eyes, the use of English reinforced my 'otherness.'

In general, I think many attendees were surprised by my interest in the conference. I am very obviously not Latina or Caribbean, and my feminine appearance³³ – particularly in the context of Guatemala – does not quickly lead one to prescribe me with an alternative sexuality. Additionally, many of the women that I spoke to seemed impressed that I came to the conference not knowing anyone, and that I had a genuine desire to learn.

Another more unexpected location where stereotypes were exposed was the dance floor. During the evening *fiestas* (parties), the Brazilians were surprised and delighted by my ability to samba and everyone seemed shocked by my knowledge of leading and following in salsa³⁴. Perhaps the most poignant example was the exclamation a woman made one of the evenings when she declared that I didn't dance "like an American" but rather, like a Latina.

I don't believe that any such reactions and comments were made with negative intentions (on the contrary, I found them all to be extremely flattering), yet even 'positive' stereotypes are important to recognize and examine. By speaking more than

³³ This was even more so the case during VIII ELFLAC, when my hair was long.

³⁴ This was particularly interesting, as the same woman who protested the objectification of Brazilians as exotic samba dancers was one of my greatest admirers on the dance floor.

one language, by making an effort to learn new things, and by knowing how to dance, I may have been able to challenge certain preconceptions regarding US Americans. But to what extent did perceptions change? Was I viewed as an example of a nationality or as an exception to the norm? Where did such assumptions come from to begin with?

While such questions did not and should not hold priority for examination at VIII ELFLAC, for my own understanding of my role as a '*gringa* anthropologist' they are important in my analysis of transnational research and interactions (Nelson 1999).

Gender:

Questions surrounding the concept of gender inspired the most heated and impassioned debates at VIII ELFLAC. Scholars such as Ana Alonso, Maria Teresa Koreck, Gloria González-Lopéz, and Heather McClure have all discussed the importance of recognizing the different concepts of gender identities and sexual identities that influence Latin American thoughts, societies, and relations. They highlight the importance of recognizing that sexual practices and their roles in shaping sexual and gendered identity are different than we might consider today in the United States.

McClure argues that in many ways, Guatemalan sexuality is tied more closely to constructions of gender than it is to sex or sexual acts. She describes persecution against sexual minorities in Guatemala as not primarily targeted towards those "who practice same-sex love...as much as against those whose gender performance deviate from heterosexual norms..." (McClure:298). This is exemplified by Alonso and Koreck's analysis of the importance in distinguishing between the roles of penetrator versus penetrated for Latino men; a *macho* male can participate in male-male sexual acts and

still maintain his masculinity and heterosexual identity, so long as he is the one penetrating, thus remaining “active and impenetrable,” (Alonso and Koreck 1993:109).

This Latin American focus on gender performance in determining sexual identity differs from current, commonly-accepted understandings of sexual identity in the United States. As I write today in 2011, the factor that most commonly determines sexual identity in the United States rests on the sex of the partners, not their gender performance. However, it is important to remember that this was not always so. George Chauncey argues that in New York prior to World War II, rather than sexual identity being based on sexual acts, such identities in the United States were based on sexuality *within the context of gender roles* (1995). Chauncey writes: “The centrality of effeminacy to the definition of the fairy in the dominant culture enabled trade to have sex with both the queers and fairies without risking being labeled queer themselves, so long as they maintained a masculine demeanor and sexual role.” (1995:16). I refer to Chauncey as a way to recognize two things: that modern-day conceptions of United States sexuality and sexual identity are tied to sex (versus gender) and sexual acts; and that this conception has become the dominant belief relatively recently, within the last century.

The complicated relationship between sexual identity and sexual behavior, the “I am or I do,” leads Susan A. Berger to raise a critical question: “What does this [the instability of sexual categories] say about the relationship between performance and identity; that is, does performance determine identity or vice versa?” (Berger 2006:66). Nan Alamilla Boyd raises a similar question: What is the material substance that determines the truth of one’s gendered or sexual identity – one’s vocalized statement, daily practice, or genitalia (Boyd 1997:142)?

It is beneficial to take this question a step further. Consider Berger's claim that in Latin America, performed gender – while never completely isolated from sexual acts - is more central in defining a sexual identity than sex. What then happens when a person performs his/her gender identity in a way that contradicts the hegemonic norms for that gender's behavior and presentation? What happens when one experiences their gender or their sexuality in ways other than the norm? How does this impact one's perceived identity, and one's role in relation to others?

By asking these questions I do not mean to suggest that how one experiences and performs their gender identity or sexual identity is a conscious choice or a decision that can be made. Rather, I wish to acknowledge the questions and responses that arise when one experiences their gender and/or their sexuality in a non-hegemonic manner. As gender was a primary theme the majority of the *encuentro*'s debates, I find these questions and responses important to examine further in the context of VIII ELFLAC.

Gender Debates at VIII ELFLAC:

In her essay “Bodies in Motion: Lesbian and Transsexual Histories,” Boyd discusses the relationship between bodies and nations, and specifically, transsexual bodies and lesbian nations (1997:134). Boyd writes:

“Bodies that inhabit or enact naturalized states of being remain culturally intelligible, socially valuable, and as a result, gain and retain the privilege of citizenship and its associated rights and protections...Some bodies, however, are less intelligible or unintelligible and are not instrumental or valuable to the state; in fact, these bodies undermine in many different ways the recognition or comradeship central to nationalism's purpose...abject bodies – bodies transgressive of borders and boundaries – do not matter” (1997:135-136).

Though Boyd discusses relationships between and concepts of bodies and nations in the United States, her analysis is extremely useful when applied to VIII ELFLAC.

Arguably the most explosive debate that raged throughout VIII ELFLAC concerned the inclusion of *trans*³⁵ individuals within the *encuentros*. The explosion was centered on the participation of Michel Riquelme. In 2007, Michel attended VII ELFLAC in Chile as a woman (Alvarado 2010). In 2010 Michel registered to attend VIII ELFLAC. However, after undergoing hormone therapy, Michel arrived at VIII ELFLAC physically appearing and self-identifying as a transman³⁶.

The decision to keep VIII ELFLAC closed to trans participants was clearly stated in at least three announcements prior to the *encuentro*'s commencement (Ekipa Guatemala [A], [C], and [D]). Such policy announcements were public and made available to both registered and considering participants alike. Regardless, Michel took extensive efforts to attend VIII ELFLAC, and many attendees responded with shock and outrage when the issue was raised at the *encuentro*.

The response of shock appeared to greatly irritate members of the Ekipa, who interpreted it to mean that participants had not cared enough to take the time to read the announcements they had worked hard to send out. From a different angle, some

³⁵ It is important to note that the discourse surrounding and within VIII ELFLAC utilized only the term *trans* and not *transgenero* (transgender) or *transsexual* (transsexual). With that in mind, I will build my analysis using the terminology employed at the *encuentro*.

³⁶ I am uncertain if Michel had been in the process of hormone therapy prior to or during VII ELFLAC or if he identified as trans during VII ELFLAC. I have also not confirmed whether or not Michel registered for VIII ELFLAC as a transman.

questioned if the participants had in fact read the announcements, and had come to VIII ELFLAC with the specific intent of bringing this issue to debate.

After a controversial meeting with the security committee³⁷, it was decided that starting on the second day of the *encuentro*, Michel would be allowed to attend VIII ELFLAC providing that: 1) *debía definirse sólo como lesbiana feminista y autonombrarse en femenino siempre* [he define himself only as a lesbian feminist and refer to himself always in feminine pronouns]; 2) *que evitara debatir el “tema trans”* [he would avoid and avert debating the “trans theme”], and 3) *que se atuviera a la violencia que “su presencia” haría emerger desde otras “compañeras”* [he would comply with the violence that “his presence” would cause to emerge from other “companions”] (Disidencia Sexual). News of Michel’s meeting and allowed attendance at the *encuentro* spread like wildfire, igniting flames amongst all participants – those in support of Michel’s attendance and those who opposed.

Those opposed to Michel’s inclusion at VIII ELFLAC argued for the necessity of having “a room of one’s own.” Paraphrasing Virginia Woolf’s 1929 essay, the argument centered on the concept that “...*en un mundo invasivo para las mujeres... Las mujeres lesbianas feministas necesitamos esos espacios de complicidad y de respiro, para deconstruirnos, y, para de allí determinar cómo nos relacionamos con el mundo* [...in a world invasive to women... Lesbian feminist women need these spaces of abatement and of respite, to deconstruct ourselves, and, from there to determine how we relate to the world] (Artigas 2010). This opinion was stated in the first policy announcement put forth by the Ekipa Guatemala five months before the *encuentro*:

³⁷ Michel was informed he would be meeting with a counsel from La Ekipa, only to be taken to speak with security.

“...De esta autonomía, recuperamos la necesidad de tener un “cuarto propio” como lesbianas feministas, para pensarnos, sentirnos, expresarnos, recuperar la memoria de nuestras luchas, recuperar la palabra propia, el horizonte propio, el vínculo entre nosotras, la noción de nuestros cuerpos y del deseo lésbico como constituyente de un desacato al patriarcado. Desde ya explicitamos que la propuesta de este encuentro surge de la radicalidad. Nos inspiramos para desobedecer cualquier mandato y nos atrevemos a poner en el centro del debate nuestro cuerpo, nuestra sexualidad, y construir una propuesta política y de vida dirigida a erradicar los poderes que se ejercen sobre ellos. Esta necesidad y voluntad de existencia nos llevan a explicitar que nuestro esfuerzo no se articulará alrededor de la noción ambigua de la diversidad sexual, que entre otras cosas, invisibiliza nuestro accionar como lesbianas feministas. Por lo tanto, no debatiremos en torno a la participación de trans en el mismo.” [...From this autonomy, we revive the necessity to have a “space of our own” as lesbian feminists; for us to think, feel, express ourselves; for us to restore the memory of our battles; for us to revive our own words (the right and ability to have our own words); to recover our own horizon; to rebuild the bond between us; to regain the notion of our bodies and of lesbian desire as elements of a defiance against the patriarchy. From this position (of autonomy) we explicitly state that the proposal of this *encuentro* rises from (a place of) radicalism. We are inspired to disobey any order and we dare to place at the center of this debate our bodies and our sexuality; we dare to construct a political proposal of a life driven by eradicating the powers exercised over them (our bodies and our sexuality). This necessity and this will to exist lead us to explicitly state that our force is not articulated based on the ambiguous notion of sexual diversity – (a notion) that among other things, makes our action as lesbian feminists invisible. Therefore, we will not discuss the participation of trans therein] (Ekipa Guatemala[A]).

If this argument is about women needing a space to be women with other women, then it leads me to ask: what determines one’s identity as a woman? Were the answer chromosomes, then Michel should have been welcomed in the *encuentro* with no questions asked: though taking hormones, his genetic makeup was still XX, and his genitalia still female. Were the answer appearance, then Michel’s exclusion was justifiable – but the numerous butch lesbians in attendance who presented themselves in very masculine manners should have been excluded as well. This suggests that the answer was self-determination, in which case Michel’s exclusion was justifiable.

Yet while the argument for ‘a room of one’s own’ is based on the concept of ‘a world invasive to women,’ it should be noted that the Ekipa never explicitly stated their argument to be about *women* and *women’s* space. In all of the policy announcements put forth by the Ekipa Guatemala, the argument was never phrased in terms of ‘a space of our own as *women*, but rather, as ‘a space of our own as *lesbian feminists*.’ In their first announcement, the Ekipa wrote:

“*De esta autonomía, recuperamos la necesidad de tener un “cuarto propio” como lesbianas feministas... Por lo tanto, no debatiremos en torno a la participación de trans en el mismo*” [From this autonomy, we revive the need to have “a room of our own” **as lesbian feminists**... Therefore, we will not debate the participation of trans therein] (Ekipa Guatemala[A], emphasis added).

The second announcement repeats this need using the exact same phrasing (“a room of our own” as lesbian feminists) to “*reafirmamos en la no participación de trans en este encuentro*” [reaffirm the non-participation of trans in this *encuentro*] (Ekipa Guatemala[C]).

Boyd questions what we often consider to be an “intuitively clear relationship between gender and sexual identity” and suggests the existence of “a paradigm in which sexual identity has social meaning beyond or outside gender, so that men might, at times, be lesbians – and women, gay men” (Boyd 1997:146). Such a paradigm existed at VIII ELFLAC. Michel self-identified as a man. However, regardless of his gender he *also* self-identified strongly as a lesbian, and as a lesbian feminist.

This created a complicated situation. The participants at VIII ELFLAC accepted Michel’s self-identification as a transman, but many did not accept his self-identification as a lesbian feminist, or did not consider it to be the factor that mattered. This connects to the argument that “male-identified individuals, despite their chromosomes, socialization,

or genital status, cannot be lesbians. FTMs must place themselves on a continuum that realistically and by choice pulls them into the category ‘man’ – and out of ‘women only’ spaces” (Boyd 1997:144).

How, then, do we determine identity? The debate surrounding Michel’s participation suggests that not only must we question *what* determines identity, but also *who* determines identity, what’s *important* in determining one’s identity, and who determines what’s important in determining one’s identity. If his own concept of self was the determining factor of Michel’s identity, then his identification as a lesbian feminist – which he seemed to consider as the important factor at this event - should have resulted in his acceptance at VIII ELFLAC. The debates over Michel’s participation highlighted an important problem in identity politics: different people have different opinions regarding who and what determines identity.

The juxtaposition of Michel’s trans identity with his lesbian feminist identity requires us to examine the multiplicity within identity. In her argument against Michel’s presence at the *encuentro*, Guatemalan participant Maria³⁸ said expressed that she was attending the *encuentro* as a lesbian feminist, there in that space to discuss lesbian feminist issues – but she was also many other things, and she went other places to discuss those other parts of herself and of her identity³⁹.

This raises several important questions. In her statement Maria recognizes that we are never just one thing or one identity, but is it possible to truly separate one’s identity out so that, for example, one could discuss issues solely as a feminist lesbian and

³⁸ Name has been changed

³⁹ Many participants were enraged at this comment, and walked out of the discussion room in protest.

not as a liberal, a mother, a Marxist philosopher, or a devout Catholic? If one can, as Maria seems to suggest, then again there should have been no problem with Michel's participation at the conference, as he would have been able to discuss issues from his perspective as a lesbian feminist. Yet Maria contradicts this in her desired exclusion of Michel – Maria did not see Michel's trans identity as separable.

Also, if the issue was having a space to discuss lesbian feminist issues, then why was gender the focus of all arguments? Nan Boyd has made the claim that “the ability to articulate oneself intelligibly as one gender or another remains central to the function of community, social identity, political formation, and ultimately the forging of a relationship to the state in the name of separatism or civil rights protection.” (Printed in Duberman 1997: 145). In his discussion of identity politics, Daniel Hurewitz explains this further when he states: “...the very notion of minority rights and minority protections rooted in the valorization of the inner self is not securely and universally embraced...Sexuality, race, and gender, even as they have been framed and to a large degree accepted as vital features of personal identity, have just as steadily and jointly been challenged as identities without political significance or relevance” (2007: 279).

Though Hurewitz specifically discusses identity politics in the US, it is helpful to look at the general concept of this statement. While on the one hand, sexuality, race, and gender are accepted as central to personal identity, on the other they are simultaneously denied [political] significance and importance. Such denial can encourage minorities to take on separatist-based positions – to quote Phelan, before a group can advance as a political force, they “must have a coherent, comprehensive ideology – a body of ideas that analyze [their] oppression in all its ramifications, economic, political, social, etc. A

body of ideas that construct the way to end oppression... What is at stake...is the power to control access to one's space and to define oneself and the world" (1989:46&53).

The most fiery debates at VIII ELFLAC were indeed about controlling access to space and to defining oneself and the world. The problems arose when it became clear that, though all identified as lesbian feminists, the participants at VIII ELFLAC were not a homogenous community. They had neither uniform desires of spatial control nor identical understandings when defining themselves and their worlds. Further, they did not all have equal power in determining the space and definitions of the 'world' that they were trying to create together.

This lack of uniformity was demonstrated in further debates over gender within VIII ELFLAC discussions. Many women didn't see gender as relevant to the conference at all. As Mexican participant Elisa⁴⁰ exclaimed, this was an *Encuentro FEMINISTO*" – not an *encuentro* of women. In anger, she continued by suggesting that perhaps she should pull down her pants and whip out the penis she had hidden away (October 11, 2010).

Other participants also felt frustrated by the focus on trans in place of other issues. One particularly interesting comment was made by a participant - though the battle against Western imperialism was planned in the discussion guidelines and was a strong theme throughout the conference, this woman cited the US as a better example of upon what the conference should have been focusing. She declared that in the US it's *not* a lesbian movement - it's the GLBTQQ, so it's against gender. She continued by demanding: "*No me llama el, no me llama ella – yo tengo un nombre!*" [Don't call me

⁴⁰ Name has been changed

him, don't call me her, I have a **name**]! (October 11, 2010). An El Salvadorian participant argued in the same line of thought: “*Yo no soy mujer, quiero destruir este concepto! Yo soy lesbiana!*” [I'm not a woman, I want to destroy that concept! I'm a lesbian]! (October 10, 2010).

From a different perspective, Brazilian participant Maria⁴¹ stated that she was more concerned why there wasn't a debate about if there was a non-feminist at VIII ELFLAC then she was about if there was a trans-person in attendance. Expressing her resistance to the separatist positions being assumed, she continued: “*Vivimos en una sociedad prehistorica – nadie va apoyarnos, y somos pocos...*” [We live in a prehistoric society – no one will support us, and we are few...] (October 10, 2010).

It is interesting to note that in her comment Maria specifically said “*somos pocos*,” using the masculine form of the word *poco* (small, little, or few) to include both men and women, rather than *pocas*, which would just have referred to women. Yet regardless of participants' stances on the issue or the prominence the issue deserved (or did not deserve), the ‘trans issue’ took over – both emotionally and at the expense of other discussions - as the central debate of VIII ELFLAC.

This is not to say that there were no discussions about anything aside from the ‘trans issue.’ During the afternoon of second day of debates, the discussion group on Identity – the group in which I participated – created a chart analyzing the *Hitos, Estrategias, y Alianzas*, the Milestones, Strategies, and Alliances of the lesbian feminist movement. In it, we listed the tools we already had, the tools we needed to build, the

⁴¹ Name has been changed

challenges we needed to work against, and the factors that kept us together. In many ways this activity was a realization of Question 5 of the Ekipa's original six questions:

Con nuestros discursos y nuestras prácticas estamos transformando y trasgrediendo algo de sistema-mundo? ¿Como visibilizamos las herramientas del amo? [With our discourses and our practices are we transforming and transgressing some part of the world-system? How do we visualize these master tools]?

Additionally, the last day of the *encuentro* debates I participated in a discussion regarding the future movement and actions of the Latin American and Caribbean lesbian feminist movement. In it, we discussed our disappointments with the *encuentro*, and our hopes for the future of the movement. We discussed the creation of a conference “*no solo de dolor, de que ES deseo, que es lo que amo, que es que mandar placer*” [not only of pain, (but) of what IS desire, what it is that we love, what it is that gives us pleasure] (October 12, 2010).

One of the most memorable comments of that discussion was made by a woman who stated that “*el enemigo sí estas allí - dentro de todas nosotras*” [the enemy is indeed here – inside of all of us] (October 12, 2010). She described how our practices as they were served to discriminate against women, non-lesbian feminists, trans lesbians, men who didn't want to be men, and male-identified feminist men who were trying to construct new forms of masculinity. Then she questioned – “[Y] *si no poderemos exigir un feminismo ELFFLAC - ¿el Encuentro Lesbiana Feminista FELIZ del Latino America y el Caribe?* [And could we not demand a feminist ELFFLAC – the HAPPY Lesbian Feminist *Encuentro* of Latin America and the Caribbean]?” (October 12, 2010).

This discussion was the first time throughout the conference that I truly experienced the *encuentro* as “[Un] *Lugar...para crear otras formas de pensar, actuar,*

amar y vivir [A place...to create other forms of thinking, acting, loving, and living] (Ekipa Guatemala[A]). For the first time I was able to recognize that the very desires and dreams of change that we were discussing were in fact the forces behind the heated debates. The tensions surrounding gender, identity, and the organization of boundaries led to debates that were passionate, hostile, angry, and painful. However, it is also important to recognize the strong emotions that surfaced as demonstrations of the importance and necessity of having such debates.

A Reflection on Tensions at VIII ELFLAC:

At the beginning of this chapter, I discuss Shane Phelan's argument that the construction of political battlegrounds and of identities, while empowering and strengthening on the one hand, simultaneously marginalizes and excludes other possibilities of battlegrounds and identities, which "leaves little room for the development of diverse, individual patterns of relationship within the larger society. The legitimate drive of community degenerates into unmediated unity, a unity that carries as its twin an excessive fear of difference" (1989:57).

As we battle over meanings and understandings, Phelan argues that "the problems come when the new understandings are legitimated just as the old ones were; either scientifically, negatively, showing old stories and fears to be ungrounded, or out of the immediate subjectivity, which ignores its own construction. Both stances make truly political action and interaction amongst ourselves impossible by removing the ground for negotiations about judgments" (1989:151). Phelan finishes with a powerful statement: "In

a world where we are not yet safe from those who would have us tattooed or sterilized or incarcerated, we must find such a ground if we are to be free” (1989:151).

While Phelan is discussing lesbian feminism in North America, I view such an analysis as highly relevant. In the tensions at VIII ELFLAC I experienced the drive of community inspired by the passion of politics. Devoted to their politic of overthrowing patriarchy and transforming the neocolonial world system, the ELFLAC community’s struggles for unity led to a fear of differences – a fear of new legitimacies, a fear of becoming ungrounded (Phelan 1989:151). To fully understand VIII ELFLAC it is important to recognize these fears within the tensions, and to recognize the hostility, oppression, and exclusion that often resulted.

It is also important to recognize the changes inspired by these tensions, and the spaces created for new voices to be heard. Tensions inspired the *jovenes* to begin organizing and voicing their opinions. Tensions led the *mujeres negras* to state their demands, and thus created the opportunity for their demands to be met. The tensions at VIII ELFLAC have even resulted in the creation of an entirely new *encuentro*, the *Encuentro LesBiTrans Feminista de Latinoamérica y el Caribe* [Encuentro LesBiTrans Feminist of Latin America and the Caribbean], which will be held in 2012 and will work towards “*construyendo feminismos sin paredes*” [constructing feminisms without borders] (Luchx 2010).

In the summary of her discussion of lesbian feminist politics, Phelan writes:

“The final ground of the question of lesbian feminism, we have seen, is the question of self – how it is constituted and how it is to be treated... The way to a decent life seems to be almost the opposite of the communitarian ideal. Rather than find or develop the community within which security and dignity are to be found, we need to focus our imagination again on our differences, actual and potential. Recognition of the commonality leads to compassion and care,

qualities sorely needed today; however, without a humble recognition of the fundamental otherness of others, we cannot do them justice as human agents” (1989:158&159).

In my time at VIII ELFLAC, I experienced both the pain and exclusion and the empowerment and validation that resulted from the tensions that arose. In this thesis it has been my goal to neither exaggerate nor valorize these tensions, but rather to analyze the complexity of their layers and dimensions so that I might gain a more comprehensive understanding of my experience. In this manner I hope to have provided both a “recognition of the commonality” and of the “fundamental otherness of others” (Phelan 1989:159). Further, I hope that through my insights I have been able to do justice by the participants of VIII ELFLAC – and all those who influenced and added to my understandings - in promoting a greater understanding of numerous dimensions of lesbian feminism today.

Epilogue

October 13, 2010 - 1:30 pm. The conference is technically over. We've had the last of the official meetings. All of the microphones, speakers, computers, and other technology have been packed up from our meeting space at the Paraninfo, and all participants have already had to check out of their rooms at the Royal Palace. The only things that's left is a last lunch at the Bodeguita and then, for those who are interested, a march to *recoger las calles*, or take back the streets, throughout Zona 1. After the heated debates, the tension, the anger, and the tears I experienced this week, I was not sure that the march would happen. I didn't think the participants would have the desire to unite again, to join together for any common cause. And yet.

The final lunch started out small. Gradually, more and more women showed up. Someone started spreading out the signs and posters women had made during the workshop on the stage. Small groups formed to organize street 'tagging' teams – participants who would run ahead of the march plastering posters and spray-painting messages on the city's surfaces. Bandanas and hats – to disguise and protect the taggers - were brought out by those who had them and shared with those who did not.

Someone took out a drum. Someone took out a tambourine. Suddenly I realized that the Bodeguita was filled – filled with the art we'd created, filled with people working together, filled with music, and filled with almost every participant who attended VIII ELFLAC.

The drumming got louder and we began to dance. The tension was building, but this was a tension free of hostility and anger. We danced and we drummed harder and louder until we could not contain ourselves any longer, and then we burst open the doors and spilled into the streets.

I had never attended a march like this before. Police had not been informed. No streets had been blocked off. We were quite literally ‘taking back the streets.’ By halting traffic with our bodies, tagging the walls and the sidewalks with our messages, and overpowering the city’s din with our chants, we physically, audibly, and visibly demanded that Zona 1 recognize *lesbianas feministas* as a present and real force within Guatemala.

Considering the danger of the context - the grave threat posed by the police and by unsupportive citizens alike - it was absolutely remarkable that the march occurred. That VIII ELFLAC could take place at all was in itself remarkable. And for myself, considering the intense hostilities and divisions VIII ELFLAC participants had been experiencing throughout the week, the way in which participants united together in the face of danger to publicly take a stand as lesbian feminists was equally remarkable.

The march opened my eyes, or rather, allowed me to focus my eyes in a way that led to a new understanding. As we postered, chanted, danced, marched, and sang our way through Zona 1, I finally understood the *passion* that had driven VIII ELFLAC. These women (and man) had worked incredibly hard to make the time and gain the resources to attend the *encuentro*. By attending VIII ELFLAC, many were risking their jobs, relations with their families and friends, and their overall safety. The participants of VIII ELFLAC hadn’t made these sacrifices so that they could spend a week arguing. They hadn’t been

driven to make these sacrifices by anger, hostility, or fear – motives that at times, I had misunderstood to be the main forces behind the debates.

They had come because however they interpreted it and whatever it meant to them, they were passionate about lesbian feminism. They were passionate about overthrowing patriarchy, and about transforming the neocolonial world-system. They had come because they were dedicated to sharing and debating the issues that they considered important. They had come because they were committed to creating new realities and new world-systems in which to live out their political, gendered, sexual, racial, and desire-based identities.

When I attended VIII ELFLAC, I participated with an assumption that a community overcoming differences and working together was the ideal goal. What I did not consider was the importance of such differences, and that ‘overcoming’ differences often means silencing them. Though difficult and challenging to experience, the debates at VIII ELFLAC gave these differences a voice, and created a venue in which such differences could be heard. Reflecting on this, I began to reconsider my initial assumption about community and working together. I understand with greater clarity and increasingly support the suggestion that “a multiplicity of movements within a movement does not necessarily ‘disable resistance... (instead) this enables it to move strategically, tactfully, resourcefully from place to place” (Pile in McClure 1999:197).

The debates at VIII ELFLAC brought up many fractures and tensions within the lesbian feminist movement of Latin America and the Caribbean, and many of these tensions were hostile, hurtful, and at the very least, uncomfortable. Yet marching with these women, I was able to understand that even the most challenging moments at VIII

ELFLAC had been born from passionate beliefs and desires for change. Rather than seeing the tensions of VIII ELFLAC as a step backwards, I now see them see also as an opportunity for the evolution of new movement – a movement that is potentially more divided, but that through division, becomes both more effective and more meaningful. Further, I now see that both pains and the pleasures that grew from the tensions must be viewed intricately conjoined and in constant relation to each other. Only in that manner can a comprehensive understanding of the passions, tensions, beliefs, and dreams that inspired VIII ELFLAC be reached.

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