Negotiating Political Identity in Community-Based Film Festivals: Reflexive Perspectives from Curator-Scholar-Activists

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Negotiating Political Identity in Community-Based Film Festivals

Reflexive Perspectives from Curator-Scholar-Activists

ABSTRACT This article is a cross-generational exchange of ideas and experiences that explores the intersections of film curating and activism. Its authors set forth accounts of their own experiences as scholars who have worked as film festival curators “on the side” from the 1990s to the present within the context of the new yet rapidly growing field of film festival studies, which provides a useful set of perspectives and methods for understanding how film festivals function and what significance and impact they can have on the multiple stakeholders involved, including but not limited to the filmmakers, festival organizers and staff, and audiences. Their experiences shed light on the ways that identity-based film festivals have evolved through engagement with economic and political forces of globalization and neoliberalism even as they function as important, fluid sites of community building where identities are negotiated, contested, and articulated. KEYWORDS Asian Pacific Islander, Chicanx, curating, film festivals, queer

This essay mines the curatorial experiences of two academics who have worked as film and video curators “on the side” for a combination of almost thirty years. We met as professor and graduate student at Claremont Graduate University, and we quickly realized that our shared scholarly interests in independent experimental media by marginalized communities complemented our shared commitment to creating spaces for this work to be shown outside of the classroom. As a result, we have both served as curators for community-based film festivals, albeit during different historical, political, and cultural moments. The differences in context afford us a unique perspective on the possibilities and challenges for this work, as the institution of the identity- or community-based film festival has itself evolved.

In many ways our story is not uncommon. We became part of a mostly unpaid or nominally remunerated group of curators for identity-based film
festivals—queer, Asian Pacific Islander, and Chicana/Latina—in the United States while doing graduate work on independent film and video by and about minoritarian communities. Eve’s first curated program at a film festival was in 1995, and Marisa’s was in 2014. That work—usually in the form of “guest curator” for larger festivals but sometimes as a staff member or administrator for smaller festivals—fed our research and university teaching on film and video. As Chris Straayer and Thomas Waugh wrote in a critics’ forum on queer film and video festivals, “Queer festivals encourage multitasking, and the existence of the pure critic/scholar who has not tried curating or film/video making is as rare as the curator who has not directed a film or written film criticism (though both animals do exist, of course).”

This article is a cross-generational exchange of ideas and experiences that explores the intersections of film curating and activism. After an initial overview and analysis of the scholarship and history of identity-based film festivals, we take turns presenting selected aspects of our curatorial experience. We set our accounts from the 1990s to the present within the context of the new yet rapidly growing field of film festival studies, which provides a useful set of perspectives and methods for understanding how film festivals function and what significance and impact they can have on the multiple stakeholders involved, including but not limited to the filmmakers, festival organizers and staff, and audiences. While we have worked with Chicana/Latina, Asian and Asian American, and LGBTQ film festivals, the scholarly literature is most robust in the area of queer festivals, and we draw most heavily on that writing, extrapolating where appropriate to address other festivals we have experienced.

Because of the space- and time-specific nature of film festivals, their “liveness” and communal nature, their growing transnational or diasporic focus, the intersections they elicit between the global and the local, and their frequent focus on identity, community, and representation, scholars have productively theorized film festivals through the lenses of “imagined community” and “public sphere.” They have employed a range of historical, ethnographic, and organizational approaches, which considered together offer a nuanced perspective on the complexities and paradoxes of film festivals.

In relation to identity-based festivals, we can trace two seemingly antithetical sets of arguments within film festival scholarship. The first argument is that film festivals from the 1990s forward have served a function within larger trends of globalization in which artistic sophistication and multicultural identity are mobilized as components of neoliberalism. The second argument is that film festivals are unique, often radical places where politicized identities are negotiated...
and communities are forged. Our experiences have allowed us a perspective that validates the truth in both of these statements, which often operate in simultaneous and paradoxical ways. An example of this reality is summarized thusly by Stuart James Richards, writing on queer film festivals: “While indeed some elements of the programming are homonormative, the very essence of attending a queer film festival is a communally empowering act.”4 It is through our perspective on the ground as staff members and curators (who also simultaneously identify with the community being represented, informed by academic perspectives on identity formation and cinema studies) that we have been able to observe firsthand the complex and ambivalent processes by which identity is negotiated, policed, challenged, and formed within film festivals that are themselves negotiating an evolving cultural and political global landscape.

Following the lead of Joshua Gamson’s influential early study on two gay film festivals, we recognize the importance of organizational bodies to the ways in which festivals frame identity, and we have mined our own memories and experiences, thinking specifically about our curatorial decisions and processes within a larger organizational framework.5 We use our own experiences to help tell the larger story of identity-based film festivals from the mid-1990s to the 2010s, as actors within what Jenni Olson calls the “film eco-system.” Although Olson is specifically talking about a queer film ecosystem, her definition can be applied to many different identity-based film contexts: “The film and video makers create the movies, the festival organizers show the movies, the distributors circulate the movies, the publicists draw attention to them so that the gay movie lover will plunk down a few dollars to see the movies, so that the whole process can happen again.”6

Our experiences help shed light on the ways that identity-based film festivals have evolved through an engagement with economic and political forces of globalization and neoliberalism even as they function as important, fluid sites of community building where identities are negotiated, contested, and articulated. If we see curating as a form of activism (which we emphatically do), it also allows us to see how that work, like all activism, must be understood within a larger context of political and organizational possibilities and constraints.

If identity-based festivals are important sites of community definition and formation, curators play a significant role in those processes. As scholars, our auto-ethnographic accounts allow us to contribute to what Daniel Dayan, writing about the Sundance Film Festival, calls “the written festival”—a critical framing of the significance of a festival both during and after the event.7 Karyn Sandlos writes that curating, like pedagogy, is a process that requires one
to act “without fully knowing or being able to articulate what one is doing in advance. . . . The work of the film and video curator begins at a time that is too soon and proceeds by giving provisional shape and form to conversations that have no guarantees.” In this essay we work within two registers of time: as curators, we tried to shape a future conversation with “no guarantees,” and as scholars, we look back on how those conversations moved and changed through subsequent festivals. While we were not necessarily thinking about it when doing the work, we now understand the central role that curators play as “mediators” between artists and audiences and that every decision we make has broader implications for the (trans)formation, (re)construction, and negotiation of community and identity. Revisiting these experiences through a cross-generational exchange gave each of us a broader perception of the similar and different ways in which we have contributed to this larger process and discourse around identity. Comparing our experiences and insights allowed a better understanding of the complex points of tension within identity formation that often get overshadowed by overly simplistic claims that cast the formation of collective identity as a seamless and harmonious process.

In particular, our perspectives show how dissent functions as a key force within organizational processes and community discourse around identity. Articulations of community (at, for example, identity-based film festivals) often stress unity and coherence, downplaying the uncomfortable and messy work of disagreement, silencing, and conflict. Our perspective from inside the organizational process has allowed us to better understand the vital roles of dissent and uncertainty as forces through which identity and community come to be defined. These processes occur in staff and board meetings but also informally in hallway gossip, emails, or pláticas over coffee or cocktails. A plática (informal conversation) is a Chicana/Latina feminist research methodology theorized by Marisa that draws on the ways in which women of color share knowledge outside of traditional channels. Drawing on female networks of support such as community and family, Chicana/Latina and other women of color’s political organizing, critical theorizing, and information sharing often happens through these colloquial exchanges, a process referenced in the name of the historic Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. Auto-ethnographies like ours allow us to capture the ephemerality and serendipity of the process.

We hope to use our own experiences and recollections to contribute to the archive of information about organizational and personal curatorial practice that would otherwise be lost to historical memory. In documenting the process, in particular the dissent and conflict that precedes, impedes, or paves the way to
consensus, we also hope to shed light on how identity-based film festivals respond to and are shaped by larger political and historical forces within ethnic and sexual community politics, the rise of global cities, arts funding, and shifting dynamics around US borders.

IDENTITY-BASED FILM FESTIVALS: THE BEGINNING

Although representing distinct and heterogeneous histories and dynamics, identity-based film festivals in the United States and Europe emerged in the 1970s out of the intersection between political movements and increasingly accessible media production technologies. Yolanda Julia Broyles cites a few examples in the United States, including the Philadelphia Black Film Festival (early 1970s), the San Antonio Chicano Cinefestival (since 1975), and the Native American Film Festival in Seattle (since 1975). B. Ruby Rich charts a parallel history of women’s film festivals, which similarly merged artistic and political concerns: “For a younger generation just emerging from a sixties countercultural framework, women’s film festivals were experimental laboratories, producing a new feminist cinematic consciousness while simultaneously putting into practice the political commitment behind the activity. Every planning process was inevitably a political process as well.” The same factors that produced these new exhibition spaces also influenced new aesthetic forms that allowed filmmakers to explore questions of identity and experience in new ways. June Givanni, a programmer for the Third Eye: Festival of Third World Cinema in the UK and the Planet Africa section of the Toronto International Film Festival in the 1980s and 1990s, writes, “Cultural identification became, for the first time, a distinguishing factor and an expedient programming tool.”

The establishment of identity-based film festivals profoundly affected the role of the curator, who was now balancing the aesthetic and formal aspects of the films with the political identifications and expectations of the audience. In the words of filmmaker and curator Richard Fung: “When one programs a festival, one also programs the audience and the community.”

Early identity-based film festivals were important sites of aesthetic experimentation and political debate, as well as the important labor of connecting audiences and artists through the work. As such, many scholars have identified the importance of the festival space in the aesthetic, political, and affective experience of participants. Givanni describes how the Third Eye organizers struggled to bring minority ethnic audiences into traditional cinema venues that may have seemed previously unwelcoming or unfamiliar, in addition to bringing films out of those venues to community spaces to break down cultural
bars built into institutional spaces. This remains a common strategy for identity-based film festivals interested in reaching audiences who do not usually frequent art-house cinemas, galleries, or the highbrow venues of more mainstream film festivals. However, as many identity-based festivals became more established, their venues tended to become more stable and traditional.

COMMUNITY AND COMMODIFICATION: PROGRAMMING FOR LGBTQ PEOPLE OF COLOR IN THE 1990S AND 2000S

EVE OISHI: I was lucky that my first experience curating a shorts program for a film festival was for the 1995 MIX: New York Experimental Lesbian and Gay Film/Video Festival, which has, in the words of Liza Johnson, the festival’s 2004 artistic director, “resisted shorts programming that appeals to already existing ‘market groups.’ Instead of a night of ‘boys shorts’ or ‘new work from South Asia,’ we program diverse works thematically, bringing together films that cross these well-known boundaries of identity and interest.” Although they would not drop the “Lesbian and Gay” in their title in favor of “Queer” until 2007, codirectors Shari Frilot and Karim Aïnouz changed the name from the New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival to MIX: New York Lesbian and Gay Film/Video Festival in 1993 to reflect both the diversity of formats in which artists were working and the diversity and intersectionality of identities as experienced and expressed by festival participants. My 1995 program was titled “Close Encounters: Exiles, Aliens and Tourists,” a deliberately multiracial, multiethnic program that showcased international work exploring cross-cultural identities and desires in the age of global communication, transnational capitalism, and postcolonialism (fig. 1).

My program notes (fig. 2) described the work as asking such questions as: How do we fantasize our own and other cultures? What desires compel us to construct and cross borders (national, racial and sexual)? What new identities and new desires are formed out of these movements? These were questions that fascinated me personally and drew me to the work I was programming, but because the future focus of my curating work became largely limited to work by queer Asian Pacific Islanders, these broader questions as they applied to a comparative ethnic perspective remained on the sidelines of my intellectual work.

MIX represented, to my mind, the best example of how a festival could incorporate a truly intersectional perspective, organized around a shared identity but simultaneously exerting pressure on that identity and its imbrication in other identities, structures, and experiences. My guest program for MIX came just one year after Joshua Gamson had conducted his comparative ethnography
(published in 1996) of the 1994 MIX festival and its more traditional counterpart, the New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. Gamson noted that the categories of “lesbian and gay” were differently defined by each as a result of their organizational structures and goals. In one, the category was something constantly challenged and shaken up, while in the other it was used as a source of connection and community. MIX, he concluded, “sought to
build a consciousness in which the oppositional ‘we’ was always under ques-
tion, and the New Festival to build a consciousness that emphasized the
clarity and strength of a shared sexual status.16

But Gamson’s important study also made clear how these two very differ-
ent festivals were responding to the same cultural and political forces, most
significantly the drying up of government support for the arts. According to Gamson, MIX responded to resource scarcity by bringing in new directors—young artists of color with academic and art world credentials, fluent in “Whitneyspeak,” whose generational and academic experiences gave them a more postmodern and intersectional perspective even as it made them more comfortable within and attractive to what festival founder Sarah Schulman called “the ever-expanding and ever-commodified gay and lesbian art world.”

Gamson writes: “What made this move ‘up’ in terms of ‘art world currency’ especially urgent were changes in the wing of the institutional sector in which the festival had [been] located. Lesbian and gay art and film, which had until recently been operating at the margins of the art world, was becoming more central, recognized as a ‘genre’ both within art world institutions and academic institutions.”

My entry into film festival curating came smack in the middle of the paradoxical context of the 1990s. Multiculturalism was being embraced within the art world as a challenge to the exclusivity and elitism of art institutions, and the art world was responding with a commodification of these multicultural perspectives. It was the classic neoliberal turn: public funding for the arts, which had been a life source for queer artists and artists of color, allowing them to maintain a level of individuality and experimentation, was disappearing. Corporate sponsorship and the marketplace filled the gap, but this had an effect on the kinds of art and film being produced. In the case of MIX, I was fortunate to find an environment that prioritized a more postmodern and international perspective, and one that challenged gender and sexual categories at the very moment that they were being solidified in other festivals. At the same time, the view from more than twenty years later shows me how that perspective was also shaped by a larger historical context. Nizan Shaked writes that the 1990s “bridged liberalism and neoliberalism—the latter characterised by privatisation, deregulation, financialisation, globalisation, and militarization.” I was a PhD student at the time, and my curatorial proposal quoted Franz Fanon and Homi Bhabha. The poststructuralist academic “Whitneyspeak” that I was learning in graduate school was giving me a language to understand the political construction of the identity categories that had always seemed restrictive to me, even as it was facilitating my “move ‘up’ in terms of cultural capital.”

A similar paradox was occurring in relation to queer cultural politics. On the one hand, in the words of Roy Grundmann, the 1990s was “the moment when gay films turn[ed] into queer films.” After B. Ruby Rich coined the term “new queer cinema” in 1992, Grundmann noted, “Whether these films parody and
subvert mainstream discourses and modes of representation, or attack them up-front, they are in everyone’s face, refusing to let gay and lesbian filmmaking be compartmentalized, relegated to yet another category of minority cinemas.”

This trend intersected with my early experiences at MIX, where the focus was on experimental aesthetics and identity categories that highlighted intersectionality and mutability as opposed to visibility and power through stability.

However, the economic success of the new queer cinema led ironically to the curbing of experimental work in favor of more reliable mainstream fare. Rich writes: “The same pattern has stamped itself indelibly and chronologically on other communities—such as feminist viewers in the 1970s, African American viewers in the 1980s—that have entered the embrace of popular culture: each time, the audience that was open to experimentation and challenge when that was the sole route to representation turned its back on these alternative image strategies after commercialized versions were offered.” Jun Okada has written about a similar pattern with Asian American media, in which the narrowing of funding sources in the 1980s and the reliance on public television as a major funder and exhibition channel for Asian American artists affected the form and content of the work, privileging documentary and work that was, in the words of critic Daryl Chin, “noble and uplifting and boring as hell.”

The 1990s saw the drying up of government funding for the arts, necessitating a turn toward identifying audiences as market niches. The neoliberalization of film festivals was marked by a number of trends, including more conservative aesthetic choices. This period was also marked by a proliferation of international gay film festivals. Leanne Dawson and Skadi Loist counted 140 LGBTI*Q film festivals founded in the decade starting in 2000, more than doubling the number in existence across the world up to that point. The fact that sixty-eight of them were in Europe evidences another trend from this period: the dominance of a US and Western narrative of gay liberation.

Ragan Rhyne has written extensively on the ways in which international gay and lesbian film festivals were an integral node in patterns of globalization: “Gay and lesbian international film festivals are phenomena born of progressive international politics but financed as much by global capital as by philanthropic funding. If queer identity, culture, and communities are in fact being internationalized, then they are inexorably linked to globalization.” Scholars like Julian Stringer have pointed to the symbiotic relationship between international film festivals and the rise of global cities, with festivals providing a destination event and cosmopolitan identity for international tourists.
At the same time, we have to remember the identity-based film festival’s function as a vital source of artistic, social, and political community. Jenni Olson writes: “As a group, we are a diverse and complex people yearning for the experience of community—being together, sharing our different realities, exchanging ideas, cruising each other. Our glbtq film festivals, wherein our lives and aspirations are on display and command the center of attention, are one of the relatively few places where we get to experience community.”

This aspect of identity-based film festivals exists not in contradiction to but in concert with the larger neoliberal aspects. Increased visibility of LGBT people and issues enabled the growth of empowered and supportive communities and accelerated the commodification of LGBT identity, linking certain kinds of queer identity with forms of consumption, including art and film. The unique combination of queer art, conversation, and parties produced what Giampaolo Marzi, artistic and administrative director of the Festival Internazionale di Cinema Gaylesbico e Queer Culture di Milano, calls “an event of joyful, constructive visibility.”

It was within this dynamic and paradoxical environment that I began my curatorial work in earnest. From the late 1990s through the early 2000s I curated shorts programs for a number of US festivals, but the majority of my work could be characterized as providing the bridge between queer festivals, such as Outfest: Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Film Festival and Portland’s Homo a Gogo, and Asian American festivals such as VC Filmfest: Los Angeles Asian Pacific American Film Festival and the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival (NAATA). I produced queer programs for Asian Pacific Islander festivals, and API programs for the queer festivals.

My programming for these two types did the important work of facilitating an audience, namely a room full of queer Asian Americans who were minorities at both festivals. The need for guest curators for this content sprang directly from an acknowledged lack of representation within the core festival staff with expertise on these issues. The organizers understood that it was not enough to rely on the work that came in through the open call; they needed experts who could use their own networks to seek out and solicit quality work by minority artists, relying on and expanding the “film ecosystem” of which festivals were the center. The diversity of festival program committees, staff, and leadership plays a key role in the diversity of the program. My work with NAATA, for example, did not begin until 2003, when the composition of the festival staff had changed such that there were fewer queer people than in previous years. By contrast, Marie K. Morohoshi stated that in 1997 more than half of the staff, screening committee, and intern team for the NAATA festival was queer.
including one of the festival codirectors, and as a result they did not need to outsource the curating of queer content. Moving my curatorial work into the context of established film festivals provided a certain level of structure and safety. At a screening of lesbian film and video that I programmed in the 1990s for a New York art gallery, we had to deal with straight men coming into the gallery to leer at the explicit sexual content and the program attendees. Curating for film festivals mitigated these issues, as the audience was in some ways prescreened. At the same time, the scaffolding provided by the film festival structure closed down many of the ways that films and videos could be received, engaged with, and responded to. The identity-based festivals, in particular, as well as much of my programming, routed audience engagement with the work through a primary lens of identity that may have foreclosed other, more disorderly responses. Audience members coming to a queer program within an Asian American festival or an Asian American program within a queer festival are being channeled into a particular kind of reception that highlights the identity of the makers and the subjects of the work.

Despite the identity-based framework of the festivals and programs, my primary interest was always in artists who worked in a more experimental mode. This helped to highlight the aesthetic aspects of the work and make the program less about identity. In addition, the physical space of the festival and the sensory modes of film and video have their own effects on audience experience that cannot be predicted or controlled through programming. Navaneetha Mokkil writes of the Mumbai Queer Film Festival: “Rather than thinking of cinema as a stable medium that can transmit a message or function as a guidebook to consolidate sexual identities, the performative and world-making power of the medium is in the chemistry between the viewer and the screen.”

The tensions between the many paradoxical elements of identity-based film festivals in the late 1990s to early 2000s became vividly apparent to me in 2004 when I was invited to curate the inaugural Fusion: Los Angeles LGBT People of Color Film Festival, a new project of Outfest. The idea for the first queer people of color film festival came from the staff at Outfest, who were inspired by the festival’s community collaborators: organizations that provided outreach to people of color for a festival that was perceived to service a largely white, middle-class audience. The curatorial possibilities were overwhelming, so for the first festival I decided to take a historical approach and include some of my favorite work from the previous fifteen years, a period I considered the Renaissance of queer people of color filmmaking. I worked with an advisory committee, but as the sole curator, the selection was primarily
guided by my own aesthetic, which as I mentioned leans more toward the experimental. Because I saw this era of filmmaking, with all of its aesthetic innovation, as a deeply political movement, I wanted to stress the activist component of the work, and I included documentary work with less polished aesthetics as well as work that dealt with AIDS, homophobia, and anger.

I submitted my program to Stephen Gutwillig, Outfest’s executive director, and he expressed concern about the selections, in particular that many of them were too depressing and/or that their aesthetics were too rough. He asked me to substitute works with glossier production values and a happier, sexier tone. I was initially resistant to what I saw as an attenuation of the powerful activist tone of the work, but I listened to his explanation that the audience, particularly for the first Fusion festival, would be expecting a celebration of community, and that a Los Angeles audience would have expectations of Hollywood-style production values and narratives. We eventually reached a compromise: four programs of shorts that contained enough of all of the elements we each prioritized, organized around the themes of youth, bodies, and America. I also highlighted four filmmakers—Nguyen Tan Hoang, Lourdes Portillo, Augie Robles, and Marlon Riggs—who embodied the political and aesthetic qualities that I admired and wanted to showcase.

This negotiation illustrates the paradoxes inherent in an identity-based film festival in the early 2000s. Although it was funded by Outfest and by a community grant and was not expected to be financially self-sufficient, it was nevertheless being conceived in a similar model as its nonprofit parent organization, which stayed financially solvent through corporate sponsorship and by appealing to the majority of its audience through high-gloss, romantic images of normatively attractive people. The image circulated with the press release was a still from Paul Lee’s 1994 *Thick Lips Thin Lips*, which featured the nude chests and shoulders of two attractive (African American and Asian American) men embracing (fig. 3). Set in Los Angeles, home to many long-standing and active queer communities of color but also one of the major centers of global film production, the festival followed the logics of many other identity-based film festivals of its time, celebrating a newly empowered community while also understanding that empowerment in terms of its narrow representation within and professional access to mainstream Hollywood. The first Fusion festival, which took place at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center in Little Tokyo, contained these multiple ideals: radical, subcultural activism and a celebration of our arrival into the mainstream. It was sponsored by Absolut Vodka and Tylenol PM and included a gala opening-night party but
also featured several community panels, tables by community organizations, and a closing-night party at Jewel’s Catch One, a historic Black gay dance club on West Pico Boulevard. Like the work it screened from the 1990s to early 2000s, the festival was the embodiment and product of the contradictory historical and cultural forces that imagined and articulated the category “queer people of color” as a recognizable community.

In her 2009 article “The De-Fusion of Good Intentions: Outfest’s Fusion Film Festival,” Roya Rastegar noted that as the festival grew more established, there was a concerted effort to make Fusion into an industry site for networking and developing professional opportunities for queer filmmakers of color. She cited a host committee member who told her, “Fusion needs to develop itself aggressively into a relevant ‘brand’ that attracts industry so as to facilitate the crossover of potential ‘breakout superstars’ into mainstream channels.” This direction represented one of “several competing ideas about Fusion’s mission” that, she argued, continued to undercut one another and the greater potential of the festival: “Is Fusion an activist endeavor primarily engaged with building solidarity among communities and networks? Or is it a platform through which queer people of color filmmakers are introduced to the broader, commercial film industry?”

As is clear from my account and ethnographic research like Rastegar’s, the festival that audiences finally encounter comes into being through a complex and unpredictable set of negotiations by numerous individuals. As a festival that defined itself as community-based, the first Fusion was initially planned by an advisory committee, which consisted of Outfest executive director Gutwillig, myself, and members of Outfest’s community collaborator organizations. This committee was tasked with the core questions of the festival, including its name, its location, and its format. My memory of all of the details of these discussions is vague, but I do remember that most members of the committee supported having the festival centrally located, accessible via public transportation, and associated with an established community of color. Numerous proposals were put forward, and many of my ideas (including a festival that traveled to different sites) were nixed. I also hated the title Fusion, thinking that it sounded like an ethnic food trend (I preferred the more explosive-sounding “Fuse”), but the details of the festival were eventually negotiated through consensus that was not without its unequal power dynamics. One of the youth members of the committee wrote an email complaining that they were being silenced and ignored. This member had submitted a lengthy list of possible titles that we had initially rejected, although after the email Gutwillig and I revisited the list, which contained the title “Fusion.”

The initial festival required many decisions to be made, but even more established festivals are the products of intense and ongoing negotiation. If a festival defines itself in relation to a community or identity category, it is going to be a site of debate and dissent. Having access to accounts of the internal negotiations of identity-based festivals can be a useful way of tracing larger cultural trends, but my accounts of my early experiences with festivals, as well as the negotiations in which I participated, are limited by the fact that they were conducted in person and via phone and email. When the first Fusion festival took place in 2004, Facebook had just launched and Twitter would follow two years later. As we will see in Marisa’s experience with the Chicano International Film Festival (ChIFF), the advent of social media had a significant effect on the negotiations around community and festival identity.

Additionally, despite the newness and vagueness of the category “queer people of color,” the identity that Fusion represents was never contested in the negotiations and dissent surrounding its planning. The category of “Chicano,” however, has been undergoing significant revision in the new millennium—negotiations that intersect with and are deeply impacted by the theories and activism of intersectional feminism and by the new scale of activism in the age of social media.
COMMUNITY AND THE CHICANO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL: NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND DISSENT IN THE DIGITAL ERA

MARISA HICKS-ALCARAZ: I was introduced to film curating as a master’s student at New York University. In 2014 I co-curated a series of short amateur films by members of the Amateur Cinema League as part of a collaboration between the NYU Orphan Film Symposium and the Museum of Modern Art’s To Save and Project program, an annual festival of newly preserved films from different parts of the world. Following the completion of my degree in 2015, I returned to Los Angeles in hopes of pursuing a career curating Chicanx film and media. While I had by then lived a good portion of my life in Los Angeles, I had not anticipated the dearth of year-round Latinx film programming in a city where Latinxs nearly make up half of the population, more than 30 percent of whom are Mexican Americans. Instead, I began working as a film curating intern at The Markaz, an arts and cultural center that aims to bring greater understanding of the Middle East and North Africa, which like so many other cultural organizations following the 2008 recession struggled with chronic financial uncertainty. The Markaz was my first experience working within identity-based programming, and more specifically within the intersection of identity, activism, and film. Similar to Eve’s experiences with Fusion, the organization’s representation of the vast and complex spectrum of Middle Eastern and North African identities was not debated in the three months I spent there. By the time I completed the internship in early 2016, I began working as the program coordinator (today I serve as director of programming) for the Latin American Cinemateca of Los Angeles (LACLA). Shortly after, I was invited to organize and moderate a panel for the Chicano International Film Festival’s 20th edition, and in 2017 I became the festival’s managing director under the new (albeit short-lived) leadership of Lorena Salazar Zermeño. Unlike Fusion and The Markaz, the definition and use of the category “Chicano” was a site of contestation within these organizations, particularly in my experiences working with the Chicano International Film Festival (ChIFF).

Founded in 1995, ChIFF is the longest-running identity-based film festival in Los Angeles dedicated specifically to the Chicano experience. Originally named Cine Sin Fin, and shortly thereafter known as the East Los Angeles Chicano Film Festival, it began as a small program that provided an alternative exhibition space to local Chicano filmmakers who had been rejected by mainstream festivals. ChIFF has been praised for its perseverance and dedication in creating “a popular festival that supplies the perspective of Chicana/o culture and the diversity of Chicana/o film.” As my pláticas with (volunteer) festival
staff revealed, organizational decisions around programming and advertising had to negotiate changing and contradictory ideas about the definition of the identity “Chicano,” a sometimes contentious process that engaged questions of nationalism and geography as well as gender and sexuality.

In 2017 ChIFF found itself on the receiving end of criticism from artists, activists, film festival organizers, and community members when its cofounder and then—executive director, Jaime Gutiérrez, an attorney at law, attempted to silence dissenters who challenged the masculinist and heteropatriarchal underpinnings of the festival’s nationalist framework. As I will soon discuss in more detail, a boycott of the festival was organized through a Facebook group called the Chicano Silence is Violence Community Accountability and Healing Coalition, which called for Gutiérrez’s resignation as executive director for abuse of power, sexual and verbal harassment, and public shaming of dissenters and critics on social media, particularly women and individuals who identify as Latinx or Chicanx. The boycott was announced in the midst of ChIFF’s 21st edition in November 2017, a month following the tweet posted by actor Alyssa Milano urging women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted to reply with #MeToo, a hashtag that became an overnight global phenomenon. Pardis Mahdavi attributes the success of the movement to social media and the decades women’s movements spent laying the groundwork, including the work of civil rights activist Tarana Burke, who started the #MeToo movement more than a decade ago. By the time of the festival, the hashtag had been tweeted more than 2.3 million times across eighty-five countries.

The #MeToo movement and subsequent movements such as Chicano Silence is Violence have brought visibility to the ways that institutions meant to provide safe spaces for vulnerable communities can instead become sites of violence. The movement has also demonstrated the power of social media to disseminate dissenting views to a global audience. ChIFF serves as a unique case to understand the roles of dissent and social media within organizational processes and community negotiations around identity as part of a larger trend and struggle to dismantle heteropatriarchal categories and hierarchies in the twenty-first century.

My very first encounter with ChIFF exposed me to the complex and contradictory processes of mediating changing community definitions and expectations of cultural identity. I had just begun working as program coordinator for LACLA, and among my first tasks was to organize a small cross-promotional marketing campaign with ChIFF for our coinciding events—ChIFF’s 20th edition and LACLA’s 6th Cine Sin Fronteras program, featuring short
experimental films made in or about Mexico—which were taking place on the same weekend in September 2016. ChIFF agreed to cross-promote, but when LACLA proposed doing so under the title “A Chicano and Mexican Film Weekend,” they said no. Lorena Salazar Zermeño, ChIFF’s managing director at the time, explained to me in an email that “we [ChIFF] like International as noted by our name—we are trying to be inclusive, understanding that the Chicano identity can be adopted by someone in the US from Mexican, Central, South American descent, etc.” In a 2017 plática, Salazar Zermeño, who had by then been appointed ChIFF’s executive director, maintained that she and the other staff members disapproved of the cross-promotional title because they felt it associated the term “Chicano” exclusively with “Mexican.” The self-identifier “Chicano” was used prominently by Mexican American youth in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a source of cultural affirmation and empowerment. Demographic changes and internal debates on inclusivity in the 1970s and 1980s prompted activists to broaden it to include any individual of Latin American descent living in the United States. Yet in practice the term continues to be used predominantly by Mexican Americans, and thus remains largely viewed as a Mexican American identifier.

ChIFF’s evolution encompasses the complexity of this cultural definition. In the same plática Salazar Zermeño further discussed how ChIFF defines and mobilizes the term “Chicano” in its programming. In response to the usual claims that “Chicano” excludes Latino groups that are not Mexican in origin, she said, “We’re [ChIFF] not excluding anybody. Individuals exclude themselves.” She described ChIFF’s definition of “Chicano” as being “grounded in activism and their community and of broad Latino descent.” Pointing to even more encompassing definitions of chicanidad (Chicano identity), she noted how some define Chicano as an “ideology.” In this way someone from Palestine, she explained, might identify as Chicano.

Salazar Zermeño revealed that the festival’s focus and title had been debated internally, and that some members and interested community partners had raised concerns over the seemingly persistent exclusivity of the term “Chicano” and suggested that it be replaced with more expansive terms such as “Latino” or “Hispanic.” Indeed, Chicano film organizations had been reorienting themselves to encompass a broader definition of Chicano cinema since the late 1970s as Chicano filmmakers and film organizations became professionalized and established broader industry connections, and as public funding sources were cut back under the Ronald Reagan administration. For instance, the San Antonio Chicano Film Festival (founded 1977) became CineFestival in 1979, and Latino
film festivals like New York’s National Latino Film and Video Festival (1981) and the Chicago Latino Film Festival (1985) emerged soon thereafter. In a 1983 article Yolanda Julia Broyles argued that the move away from culturally specific terms like “Chicano” toward the aggregative term “Hispanic” was a strategy that “originated in administrative Washington-based circles as well as in marketing circles” that “has served as a basis for exploiting brown consumerism.” As festivals evolved from a Chicano framework to a pan-Latino one, they were also moving toward greater financial viability and mainstream aesthetics and politics.

The 1990s and 2000s witnessed a “transnational turn” in the fields of American studies, pushed by the work of social justice movements and the increasing presence of women and people of color in the academy. These new perspectives challenged “the national paradigm of the United States as a clearly bordered geographical and political space,” viewing it instead through its history of empire and its trans-hemispheric, trans-oceanic, and transnational roots and influences. The move by film festivals and other community organizations from a Chicano to a Latino focus can be understood as part of this trend, opening up the category of Chicano, which had been historically defined largely in nationalist terms, to a more hybrid and global framework. This move was influenced as much by the rise of poststructuralist and postcolonial theory in the academy as by the work of activists working on issues of immigration, higher education, and voting rights. Thus we can again see two paradoxical forces at play: the embrace of a pan-Latino identity as a challenge to narrow discourses of cultural nationalism and as a market segment to be targeted through capitalism. Like the audiences of queer film festivals in this same period, Latino festival audiences were identifying with a cultural identity that was both politically empowering and commodified.

In this sense, ChIFF’s commitment to a Chicano identity has worked in defiance of the commodification of cultural identity. Yet internal pressure to make the festival more inclusive, and perhaps more financially viable, led to its renaming as the Chicano International Film Festival (from the East Los Angeles Chicano Film Festival) when it returned from a brief hiatus in 2016. By broadening its geographical scope, the festival could address community concerns about exclusion and lack of diversity by including Latin American, US Latino, and international (non-Latino/Chicano) “partner” filmmakers without forfeiting its Chicano focus. When discussing the criteria for submissions, Salazar Zermeño maintained that the films chosen needed to include Chicano/Latino filmmakers and/or actors. She named Moritz Rechenberg’s debut I Am Gangster (2015), winner of the Narrative
Feature Film category at ChIFF’s 20th edition, as an example of the festival’s efforts to broaden its scope while remaining true to its communitarian vision of *chicanidad*. The film is a US/Germany coproduction about three Latino men navigating gang violence in East Los Angeles. Rechenberg, a non-Latino filmmaker, collaborated with community groups such as the Teen Club at Hazard Park in East Los Angeles to make it. Other films in the program that year included *¡Hola Kitty!* by the New York–based Brazilian filmmaker Daniel Burity about the challenges undocumented Latino immigrants face in the United States, and *23rd and Union*, directed by Mexican Lithuanian filmmaker Rafael Flores, about the 2008 murder of Ethiopian immigrant Degene Berecha, gentrification, and racial tensions in Seattle’s Central District.

ChIFF found a compromise in becoming an international film festival. By retaining a Chicano organizational identity it remained a site of resistance against mainstream economic and political imperatives to homogenize a heterogeneous population into a single Latino or Hispanic market; and its inclusivity of diverse cultural experiences was made possible by adopting a pan-ethnic definition of *chicanidad*. However, despite this expanded definition, the organization’s structure remains essentially unchanged and ChIFF’s focus still remains tethered to a national Chicano identity.

For example, ChIFF continues to use Mexican and Mexica (Aztec) iconography to reinforce its brand identity and relationship to the community. The ChIFF logo incorporates a Mexica scroll glyph that indicates speech when placed in front of someone’s mouth. The festival’s promotional poster for its 20th edition featured an amalgamation of Chicano, Mexica, and Mexican national symbolism: the logo was superimposed over a black-and-white graphic design made in the style of a Mexican woodcut depicting a Chicano filmmaker in suspenders and a white tank undershirt, adorned in Mexica jewelry and a headdress, surrounded by a field of nopales (fig. 4). Integral to Mexican geography, diet, and identity, the nopal cactus is a symbol of *mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness) used on both sides of the border. Further rooting the festival in Mexican cultural identity, ChIFF’s programming is predominantly focused on Mexican and Mexican American content and filmmakers. Moreover, the festival’s entire staff was (at least in 2016) of Mexican descent, or in one case, of mixed Arab and Mexican heritage. In all these ways, Salazar Zermeño’s description of a Chicano festival grounded in a more encompassing pan-Latino definition of *chicanidad* appears to be fundamentally at odds with the traditional nationalist narrative expressed in its organizational structure and programming practices.
One explanation for the persistent and dissonant influence of ChIFF’s Chicano nationalist framework is the outsized influence of its cofounder, Jaime Gutiérrez. When the festival returned from hiatus in 2016, Gutiérrez was executive director, Aurelia “Lia” Salgado was director, and Salazar Zermeño was managing director. However, Salgado resigned her position after the first year due to repeated efforts by Gutiérrez to quash dissent and criticism through verbal abuse, threats, intimidation, and even staff firings.49 Following ChIFF’s 20th anniversary, Salazar Zermeño replaced Salgado and was given the title of executive director by Gutiérrez, who maintained a position of leadership as cofounder and board member. Salazar Zermeño directed the festival for nearly a year, but she was abruptly fired by Gutiérrez in summer 2017 without consultation from the other board members over what she described to me as disagreements over operations. I had been appointed managing director by Salazar Zermeño, but without being consulted or notified, I was replaced, along with nearly the entire ChIFF staff, by Gutiérrez (who again assumed the title of executive director).

By the time of the 21st edition in 2017, Gutiérrez generated an explosive community controversy that made clear what he understood as the stakes of cultural identity, namely the defense of a patriarchal cultural nationalism under siege from feminist and intersectional activists.

In the last decade, a new politicized generation has adopted the framework of intersectionality to understand and confront—with unprecedented scale and effectiveness—their persistent experiences with racial, sexual, and gender disparities, using the internet and social media to introduce and develop new definitions of cultural identity. Take for instance the growing popularity of the nonbinary identifier “Latinx,” which has found offshoots in terms like “Chicanx” and “Filipinx” since its inception in the early 2000s within queer social media communities. Rooted in anticolonial language and challenging patriarchal gender norms, the “x” requires us to think of collectivity in more inclusive, nonbinary, feminist, and queer terms and at the intersections of gender, sexuality, and cultural identity. While recognizing that the term is not perfect and warning against utopian deployment, María DeGuzmán sees the “x” as a rallying cry for the “assertion of presence—of being here.” She argues that “Latinx” is the latest and most visible term in the struggle against multiple forms of marginalization.50 Puerto Rican filmmaker and scholar Frances Negrón-Muntaner noted the emphasis on intersectionality in “Latinx” in a 2015 interview with New York’s Columbia Daily Spectator: “Latinx is calling attention to issues of gender and LGBT exclusion and marginalization in a broad way.” In line with DeGuzmán’s assessment, Negrón-Muntaner further
emphasizes, “It seems that the ‘x’ is also standing in for a critique to larger structures of power.”

In asserting its presence, the “x” threatens the hegemonic and patriarchal social order that ChIFF has adopted as an organizational structure. Yvette Saavedra’s explanation of the threat Chicana *lesbianas* pose to traditional Chicano culture can be applied to “Chicanx” in the way that its self-assertion threatens patriarchal hierarchy by defying heteronormative expectations about sexuality and gender: “The verbal and physical objection to male dominance represents a threat to the structure of Chicano culture by usurping male control, and signifies the willingness of lesbians to confront and reclaim Chicana sexuality and, as a result, define themselves.”

In response to the increasing usage of “Chicanx” and “Latinx,” Gutiérrez turned to social media to attack the terms and their users while promoting a singular, fixed identity that posited race and class as the sole determinants informing Chicano experiences. A month prior to ChIFF’s 21st edition, he generated a debate on his public Facebook page by posing the ideologically loaded question: “Chicana/o V Chicanx/Latinx, who are you?” Although most commentators gave superficial responses, the post generated a lengthy Facebook debate between Gutiérrez and his sister, in which I briefly participated. In the course of this debate, Gutiérrez described a homogenous Chicano community “born from the campos [fields] and barrios [neighborhoods] of Aztlan” (fig. 5). He constructed Chicano identity as an “essence” rooted in the mythic Aztlan, which Chicana critic Angie Chabram-Dernersesian once described as the “imaginary geography claimed as the true site of Chicano subjectivity.”

Gutiérrez described “Chicanx” as a foreign imposition by the academic community whose objective is to “rebrand” Chicano identity as a gender identity; “Chicanx,” he asserted, is an individualistic search for identity, whereas “Chicano” addresses the collective, and is primarily concerned with liberating the Chicano community from colonial oppression. In other posts, such as the one shown in figure 6, he implied that gender and sexuality are “nominal issues” that distract “Chicanos” from the “real issue, the Liberation of Aztlan.” In many ways, Gutiérrez’s remarks throughout this thread reflected common sexist ideologies about feminism (and feminists) that emerged from the Chicano movement, including those historian and Chicana activist Cynthia Orozco identified as among the most common: "(1) ‘El problema es el gabacho no el macho.’ [The problem is the Anglo not the Macho]. (2) Feminism was Anglo, middle-class, and bourgeois. (3) Feminism was a diversion from the ‘real’ and ‘basic’ issues, that is racism and class exploitation.”

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Gutiérrez’s accusations and rhetorical devices reflect a historical trend among Chicano “loyalists” to discredit and silence early Chicana feminist and lesbian movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Chicana cultural critic Alma M. García writes, “Feminism was, above all, believed to be an individualistic search for identity that detracted from the Chicano movement’s ‘real’ issues, such as racism.”

Early Chicana feminist lesbians like Carla Trujillo, Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa, who argued for the intersectionality of not only race, class, and gender, as Chicana feminists had, but sexuality as well, were cast as malinchistas (cultural traitors) and the Chicana feminist movement as “anti-man” and therefore anti-Chicano.

For example, when Gutiérrez learned that I use the term “Chicanx,” he asked me if I was “fine working with Chicanos on Chicano projects” since “all the women I have come across that utilize the term tend to be hostile or resistant..."
towards Chicano identity.”59 The women he was referencing in his email were community activists like Sol Gata (Facebook username) and Mujeres de Maiz (Women of Corn), whom on at least one occasion he referred to as “men haters” and brujas (witches).60 His repeated efforts to violently police identity on social media and publicly shame women and individuals who identified as Chicanx or Latinx led some activists and others, like Lia Salgado and Sol Gata, to establish the Chicano Silence is Violence Community Accountability and Healing Coalition.

The coalition was created in an effort to create dialogue, share information, and heal from trauma caused by internal and external forms of oppression. Its first initiative was to boycott ChIFF’s 21st edition: on November 11, 2017, the group called for Gutiérrez’s resignation for abuse of power, harassment, and public shaming of critics and individuals who dissented from traditional nationalist Chicano politics. Figure 7 is an online flyer promoting the boycott. The coalition demanded that Gutiérrez attend a community accountability circle, seek mental health and/or rehabilitation efforts to heal, and step down as lead organizer of ChIFF, none of which he responded to. On the opening day of the festival, Sol Gata wrote a Facebook post likening Gutiérrez to Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, who used his power to suppress accusations of sexual violence and harassment.61 In this way, the dissent that confronted and challenged ChIFF’s patriarchal roots is part of a larger tide within global gender and sexual politics to speak out against oppression and embrace new ideas around gender and sexuality.

The omnipresence of social media as the public forum for these interactions has meant that the dissent that constitutes and characterizes all identity-based festivals will now attain a significantly larger scale. Both Gutiérrez and Chicano Silence is Violence used social media as an alternative platform to amplify their critiques and their reach. And yet Gutiérrez did not respond to any of the coalition’s requests, demonstrating some of the limits of social media to lead to face-to-face engagement. While the social media activism of #MeToo has made tremendous strides in bringing awareness to sexual harassment and abuse of power, with powerful men like Les Moonves and Al Franken being ousted from their positions, its effects have been uneven. The coalition’s boycott of ChIFF’s 21st festival shows both the power and the limitations of the #MeToo movement, which has mostly benefited privileged white women.

In an apparent effort to address local criticism of the festival’s perpetuation of patriarchal and gendered interpersonal violence, ChIFF rebranded itself once again for the 2018 edition, this time as a proponent of women’s rights and
gender equality. To promote this new image, ChIFF announced its 2018 theme, “Viva la Mujer,” through its Facebook and Instagram accounts and (now defunct) website (fig. 8). The ChIFF home page also announced the launching of a Chicana Director’s Initiative, founded by Chicana writer and director Kayden Phoenix, offering ChIFF-sponsored memberships to women’s film organizations like Film Fatales and Women in Film. But a closer look at ChIFF’s short description of the new initiative showed that the festival simply copied and pasted its mission statement from its old website and added “Chicana” to the title.

In a misguided attempt to locate the festival within the history of women’s leadership, and to perhaps reconcile relations with civil rights leader Dolores Huerta, who canceled her participation in a Q&A for the festival’s 2017
screening of the documentary *Dolores* when she was informed of the boycott, ChIFF added a page to its website that prominently featured an image of Huerta and Robert F. Kennedy under the title “The Chicana Story.”

Taking its lead from the documentary’s aim to solidify her legacy as one of the most important civil rights leaders of the twentieth century, the text identified Huerta, rather than César Chávez, whose role in the United Farm Workers union long overshadowed hers, as the leader of the California farm-worker strikes that helped create the impetus for the Chicano movement. And yet the remainder of the text was essentially devoid of Chicana subjectivities, swallowed up by the festival’s persistent default to the singular use of the masculine “o” (apart from the first sentence, which used the “a/o” gender binary). The website’s textual content thus revealed a continued reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity through an asymmetrical, gendered, male-female binary that eclipsed women, the very group that it purported to recognize and advocate for. The identifier “Chicanx” was absent from the website, pointing to the festival’s continued denial of an intersectional perspective.
As part of Gutiérrez’s campaign to rebrand ChIFF as the product of Chicana organizing and leadership, he replaced the organizing team with a new group consisting almost entirely of women. While it may be the case that the new members consider themselves part of the Chicana community, none were among the dissenters who prompted the festival’s identity overhaul efforts. Without these voices at the decision-making table, any changes made will remain token gestures that allow the festival to continue to disseminate a distorted and idiosyncratic set of values and representations that marginalize large segments of the community.

While the Chicano framework of ChIFF is a way to define and cohere an ethno-political category, it is also a place where identity is negotiated through dissent, as can be seen in the debates around issues of intersectionality and inclusion. ChIFF’s idiosyncratic responses reflect deeper tensions related to the organizational process of negotiating definitions of chicanidad that challenge the heteropatriarchal paradigm of nationalism that long framed the festival. Rather than develop collaborative partnerships with individuals and groups who voiced dissenting views, ChIFF used tokenism and half-hearted initiatives to give the appearance of inclusion while maintaining an unequal distribution of power, ensuring the continued marginalization of women and sexual subgroups. The 2018 “Viva la Mujer” festival never took place, suggesting that the initiative was indeed pure publicity, and Los Angeles filmgoers missed an opportunity to see dynamic films representative of a diverse set of experiences. To achieve transformative change that balances power relations, identity-based festivals must be coproduced and sustained by their diverse constituencies. Moreover, the organizational process needs to include a space for, and even encourage, dissent from both its organizational and its community members. Without room for dissent, we continue the colonial practice of privileging certain voices and knowledges over others. A framework of dissent, as opposed to one that requires conformance to the traditional terms of cultural membership, necessarily invites multiple and overlapping narratives, acknowledges and engages with different perspectives, and confronts multiple forms of internal and external oppression.

CONCLUSION

This cross-generational exchange of experiences spanning the past quarter of a century has taught us that, despite the many changes in economic, artistic, and political environments, most identity-based festivals still resemble B. Ruby Rich’s description of women’s film festivals in the 1970s: “The groups planning
the women’s film festivals were hardly party formations: they were broad coalitions mixing contradictory communities and constituencies in a volatile combination. There was lots of disagreement and a bit of consensus, along with inevitable coups, resignations, and takeovers. That was the tenor of the times.”

This is still the tenor of the times, although the particular issues continue to evolve and change, as does the scale on which the debates occur. If identity is a social and political construct, the object of territorial struggles by capitalism and community alike, then identity-based festivals will continue to be sites where the borders of those territories are contested.

In closing, we would like to return the discussion to our original reason for engaging with these questions and institutions: the challenging and transformative power of cinema and media arts. The larger political contexts and stakes of the sponsoring organizations involve continuous negotiation of whom they are representing and what their audiences want and need, but what makes identity-based film festivals unique is that these debates are held in relation to cinematic art, a uniquely immersive sensory experience that, as Navaneetha Mokkil puts it, “can be transformative not because it offers a singular node of identification—but because it triggers the pleasure of inhabiting multiple positionalities.”

One of the great appeals of working with identity-based film festivals is the opportunity to stage a dynamic engagement between an audience, artists, and our own curiosity and arguments as curators. In her 2004 essay “The Ethical Presenter: Or How to Have Good Arguments over Dinner,” Laura Marks argues that programming that maintains a sensitive balance between these elements, “as well as [among the] many films and videos themselves, can be a model of intellectual work in the audiovisual age.” And in the new millennium, we see how that work increasingly expands into the realm of social networks and online communities. The preceding exchange of personal accounts and auto-ethnographic reflections has demonstrated how interactive digital technologies facilitate new modes of engagement, representation, and activism, subsequently expanding and diversifying conversations around identity in ways that were not possible in previous decades. The work of curating—showcasing artists, inviting audiences, proffering our own perspectives and ideas, and doing this work with no particular guaranteed outcome—goes in our opinion to the heart of activism. As Marks writes, “The ethical relationships among artists, programmers, and audiences involve discourses of beauty, emotion, and love. Politics, broadly understood, is hollow without these.”
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NOTES

1. Skadi Loist writes that the nonprofit framework of these festivals requires dependence on unpaid and temporary staff, including programmers, all of whom perform what Loist calls “precarious cultural work.” Skadi Loist, “Precarious Cultural Work: About the Organization of (Queer) Film Festivals,” *Screen* 52, no. 2 (2011): 268–73.


24. Dean Otto, curator for the Minneapolis/St. Paul LGBT Film Festival, says, “Queer audiences that were once hungry for images of themselves on the big screen were open to experimental work and more forgiving of technical flaws.” Barrett et al., “Queer Film and Video Festival Forum, Take One,” 586.

Filmmaker, critic, and curator Yau Ching writes, “Many LGBTQ film/video festivals in Asia suffer from the triple burdens produced by the globalization of Euro-American white gay culture, the colonial histories of our own social contexts, and the chauvinism embedded in our queer communities, all of which unfortunately reinforce each other. Hong Kong’s film festivals and their audiences, including the HKLGFF, have been ‘programmed’ to take the white, mainly gay—with a little bit of lesbian recently—culture as ‘natural,’ ‘desirable,’ and ‘progressive,’ contributing to further suppression and marginalization of a localized and regional queer culture.” Straayer and Waugh, “Queer Film and Video Festival Forum, Take Two,” 606. Susy Capo, cofounder and director of MIX Brasil Festival of Sexual Diversity, São Paulo, writes, “Globalization means ‘Americanization’ of queer culture, right? It’s the same thing as saying the commodification of queer culture.” Barrett et al., “Queer Film and Video Festival Forum, Take One,” 596.

29. Olson, “Film Festivals,” 3.
30. Barrett et al., “Queer Film and Video Festival Forum, Take One,” 598. In 2005 this festival joined the global network of MIX festivals and changed its name to Festival MIX Milano di Cinema Gaylesbico e Queer Culture.
31. Reflecting the ongoing revision and negotiation of identity categories, most of these festivals have changed their names since I programmed for them. VC Filmfest: Los Angeles Asian Pacific American Film Festival is now Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival; the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival or NAATA is now CAAMFest (Center for Asian American Media); and Outfest Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Film Festival is now Outfest Los Angeles LGBTQ Film Festival.
35. In describing my own work in this essay, I use the “x” as a nonbinary alternative to the “universal” masculine “o” and the gender binary in “a/o” and “@”; this is to resist patriarchal structures inherent in language while acknowledging individuals who do not conform to male-female gender binaries and the intersectionality of gender, race, and ethnicity. My analysis of ChIFF, however, will use the terms as they were used in the communications I discuss so as to most accurately represent the festival’s deliberate use of language to demarcate its specific gender and sexual politics, which are firmly grounded in a nationalist “Chicano” narrative that has traditionally muted the voices of women and LGBTQIA+ individuals.
36. The other film festival in Los Angeles to focus on the Chicano experience is the Reel Rasquache Film Festival (founded 2010) at California State University, Los Angeles. The festival initially dedicated itself to the “Chicana(o)” experience, but like
other similar festivals across the southern and midwestern United States it broadened its scope to include the Latin American experience, and recently shifted once again to focus on the experience of migrant communities in Los Angeles. More on this shift toward a broader “Latino” focus will be discussed in the following pages.


38. The group’s Facebook page points to Gutiérrez’s history of leveraging his power as an attorney to silence and discredit women who made complaints of sexual harassment by sending them cease-and-desist letters. The page also refers to a case in which Gutiérrez defended his client, former Salinas City Councilman Jose Castañeda, against felony charges of stalking, kidnapping, and domestic violence. In 2017 Castañeda was found guilty and sentenced to eight years in state prison. See the Chicano Silence is Violence Community Accountability and Healing Coalition Facebook page, November 11, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/ChicanoSilenceIsViolence/posts/116698691676478?__tn__=K-R.


42. Lorena Salazar Zermeño, email message to author, September 6, 2017.

43. Lorena Salazar Zermeño in a recorded plática with the author, March 2, 2017.


46. Broyles, “Chicano Film Festivals: An Examination,” 118.


In Mexico, *malinchanista* refers to an individual with a preference for foreign cultures (European in particular) over their own national culture. *Malinchanistas* are often described as traitors, nationally disloyal, and unpatriotic. The term derives from La Malinche or Malintzin or Doña Marina), the name of the indigenous woman who served as Hernán Cortés’s lover, translator, and advisor while he led the Spanish conquest of the New World. Traditional patriarchal mythology has blamed her for the destruction of the Aztec empire rather than other factors such as the injustices that led the empire’s various subjected peoples to join together to make its downfall a reality.


60. A community activist who goes by the username Sol Gata stated in several Facebook posts that this occurred in a private Facebook Messenger exchange when she confronted and challenged Gutiérrez for maliciously trolling a University of California student in a thread he started with the deliberately inflammatory statement: “A young female (UC Berkeley) Chicano Studies Major said Aztlan is dead and she liked it. Thoughts?” In this thread Gutiérrez refers to the student as a “traitor” and a “reactionary idiot,” while other commentators call to “bring back the guillotine” and the “firing squad.” See the Chicano Silence is Violence Community Accountability and Healing Coalition Facebook page, November 11, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/ChicanoSilenceIsViolence/; Jaime Gutiérrez, Facebook post, August 7, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/Luchador.del.Pueblo/posts/10214008701270185.


64. Although this particular webpage is no longer operative or retrievable (due to a server error), a screenshot of the page (too low-resolution to print but readable on-screen) is available through an image file I uploaded to Google Drive, December 15, 2018, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1FOGuM7WqqXnXN8edXtBqu-rgpsNBC8x5/view?usp=sharing.


