

**Baseball/Softball in Shaping Female Identity  
in Southern California and the Midwest  
From the 1930s-1970s**

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## **Introduction**

In the next section, I will review the historical role of baseball/softball within the context of white, middle to upper class women of the Northeast and evaluate the similarities and differences between the Chicana's experiences with those of White women in the Midwest (Enke 2007). Anne Enke's research indicates softball was similarly used by women in this region as a means to gain social, economic, and political influence, as occurred in the case of the Chicana, while additionally creating a liminal public space that accommodated a safe environment for cultivation of a lesbian community. Adopting policies such as "play it, don't say it," a tacit understanding of lesbian participation in softball fostered the creation of a lesbian subculture within a socially acceptable public context. This extensive network of like-minded women of varying race and social status turned the sporting arena into a feminist political battleground in the 1960s and 1970s, making the softball field a forum of political activism. While thus far, little research exists alluding to baseball/softball as a "lesbian" space for the Chicana, Enke's research could be used as a potential model to direct future study within the field.

## **I. Baseball in Mexican American Communities of Southern California: 1930s-1960s**

### **Geographic Location and Demographics**

While Latinas were playing softball in some capacity across a good deal of the United States during the 1930s-1960s, Southern California seems to have been the major area of activity due mainly to the influx of migrant workers. Mexican migrants (primarily male) were streaming in to the state to work in urban areas, and from these hubs would find work with fruit companies such as the California Fruit Growers Exchange (better known by its trademark name, Sunkist) in places like Corona, California who had set up self-sufficient company towns that provided for the needs of their workers. These rural company towns housed, among others, Japanese, Italian, and Mexican migrants; however, the majority of the workers laboring in the citrus industry during the 1930s were of Mexican descent (Varzally 2008). As migrants often left their spouses behind to enter the United States to seek work, the demographic ratio of male to female for almost all ethnic minorities in the region averaged 129.9:100 in 1940, 117.2:100 in 1950, to 106.6:100 in 1960, (Varzally 2008). However, such was not the case with men working on citrus plantations who were especially encouraged, by a policy that provided private housing, extra pay, and job security to be married. Men with families had the reputation of being more stable and less likely to compromise their job security by participating in union organizing as they had families in need of financial support. In addition, family men ensured a new generation of employees for the citrus companies, (Alamillo 2006). These factors that distinguish the company town from other urban areas are important for our current investigation as it means that these plantation “company towns” included a

larger proportionately female demographic than other settlement locations. While the gender disparity was less severe, often translating to less male-to-female violence as a result of male competition and sexual frustration, the confines of the company town also increased the expectation of domesticity in which the male had direct control over his wife's participation within the social sphere.

### **Baseball as a Cultural Bridge**

In company towns as well as in urban areas, baseball served as the major leisure activity among Mexican American men, and later women. While baseball was chiefly an all-male domain, growing female interest and eventual participation in the sport began to carve out a credible leisure space for women, previously not permitted outside the home without a male chaperon. A sport that required few resources other than an empty lot and makeshift bats and balls, it was easily accessible to the working class. Unlike other immigrant populations who participated in baseball, Mexicans had adopted the sport before their migration to the United States (Regalado 1986). Mexican Americans viewed baseball as an attainable (and enjoyable) link between their cultural heritage and the Americanization process that was required of them to achieve social, economic and political stability in the United States. By playing the sport, Mexican-Americans were actively integrating into U.S. culture while preserving a part of Mexican tradition, thereby demonstrating the hybrid development of the Chicano identity. They used baseball clubs to promote ethnic consciousness, build community solidarity, display masculine behavior, and sharpen their organizing and leadership skills (Alamillo 2006).

Baseball came to Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century via Cuban émigrés, and its popularity spread throughout the country endorsed by Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910) as he recognized the sport to be a useful tool to endorse modern industrial values and skills into the working-class laborer, (Alamillo 2006). After immigrants began to enter the U.S. in greater numbers, companies offered baseball as a form of leisure to distract workers from participation in and formation of labor unions, keep them away from vices such as gambling and cock fighting, as well as a means of promoting “physical fitness and mental preparedness for arduous, backbreaking fieldwork,” (Alamillo 2006). Mexican Americans, however, enjoyed the Sunday ritual of playing baseball was an enjoyable activity that cut across class, race, gender and generational lines to preserve cultural pride. Historian Samuel Regalado states that, “baseball in the barrios did more than help to preserve a strong sense of Mexican heritage within these communities,” it also elevated “a sense of unity amongst the people—especially for those who had been in the United States only a few years,” (1986). Because female participation had not been allowed in Mexico, this new dimension of sport served a critical role in the construction of female Chicana identity allowing her a new sense of autonomy and freedom to explore a non-domestic space previously occupied exclusively by men, fulfilling a new role within the Mexican American community.

In Mexican culture a woman was considered inherently inferior – a passive creature whose “instincts [were] not her own,” making it impossible for them to have personal, private lives, (García 1997). Woman’s participation in sport marks an evolution of this mentality as she actively cultivates a social life of her own. She is participating in a sport with significant meaning to both Mexican and American culture, but her

involvement itself is a signifier of the hybrid space that has been created. The agency gained in her participation of sport gives her possession of what García Canclini refers to as “social capital” that allows her to consciously shape her identity by “cultural performance,” (Del Sarto 2004). At this seminal moment of arrival into a new country and culture, we see sport lending female agency in the formation of the Chicana identity, which is both Mexican and American with new and traditional ideas of gender roles being simultaneously amalgamated. Butler points out that when one is able to see identity as a producible, malleable construction, one “opens up possibilities of ‘agency’ that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed,” (Butler 1990). I argue that by her participation in baseball, the Chicana is able to carve out new social and physical freedoms otherwise not available to her within other traditional female public spaces. Seizing this opportunity shows a sense of recognition that “gender is not inevitable but may be challenged, transformed, and reconstructed distinct from one’s biological sex,” (Butler 1990).

### **Company Towns**

While urban areas offered women at least limited access to dance halls, nickelodeons, and amusement parks, the three conventional public spaces for women in company towns were the church (mostly Catholic but with a quickly growing Baptist contingent), movie houses (although women had to be accompanied by a male relative), and Cinco de Mayo festivals (their participation mainly limited to food preparation, decorations, and dance/beauty contests). These examples of limited and/or controlled female public access illustrates that even though these women had crossed national

borders with their families to seize economic opportunity, culturally constructed gender borders were still very much intact, and women were supposed to publicly present themselves in roles of traditional Mexican feminine virtue: virgin, mother/domestic keeper, and submissive wife.

These domestic ideas were right in line with the gender role ideology advocated by citrus companies. They provided houses (rather than general barracks lodging) and other financial incentives to men with wives and supplied gardens to promote female ties to the home. Other than rare instances of women working in citrus packing lines, company sponsored classes for American acculturation, and the three aforementioned exceptions, women rarely left the home. This restricting traditional ideology reluctant to change in rural California meant that actual female participation in baseball did not begin until Las Debs de Corona formed in 1949, (Alamillo 2006). Thus, as baseball became a leisure option, involvement in team sports was a radical step toward a formation of an autonomous female space. Although a good deal of female involvement still consisted in food preparation for the games or sewing bases for the field, for those willing to push the envelope of expected gender performance, playing baseball allowed women to enter the secular public arena, perform a physical activity formerly restricted to men, and create a new realm of feminine competitive achievement never appreciated before.

By the early 1950s, most company towns had formed a women's baseball team that played other teams throughout the region. Although team travel was more limited for company teams than in urban areas, as the town's dependence upon women's work was much heavier, Corona's "Las Debs" created social networks among other southern California teams through regional leagues and tournament play with local teams such as

Los Tomboys (Orange), La Jolla Kats (Placentia), and Mexico Libre and Four Star Eagles (Los Angeles), (Alamillo 2006). Women's games were often exhibition games, seen more as a form of male entertainment than real competition before the men's main event; however, for the women playing, baseball meant the creation of female friendships, adoption of leadership and organizational skills, and non-domestic public visibility, (Alamillo 2006). While men saw women's athletics as a spectacle, women increasingly began to take the game seriously and within the next decade would have legitimate leagues and tournaments throughout the Southwest.

### **Urban**

From the 1920s-1960s, Los Angeles and San Francisco were the two major ports of arrival for migrant workers entering California. I will be focusing specifically on the Los Angeles area because it housed the highest concentration of the Mexican American population in the United States at that time and had espoused strong ties to organized baseball/softball, (Regalado 1986). Specifically examining the area pre-WWII, I will examine first, the demographics of the region, second, the social prejudice against the Mexican worker, and finally the role that baseball played to foster gender autonomy and ethnic cooperation in the construction of a new cultural identity.

Because of scarce resources, ethnic minorities including, but not limited to, African American, Japanese, Jewish, Mexican American, and Russian often cohabitated in specific, more affordable districts of the city, and although single ethnicities frequently congregated in similar regions, they often spatially overlapped and were only *significantly* separated by Whites, (Varzally 2008). In these multi-ethnically concentrated



areas of working class communities, often referred to as barrios, baseball became a central meeting ground of leisure interaction. With no training or expensive equipment required, pick-up baseball games could be played wherever a tract of land could be found, consequently, making it especially appealing to the working class. Each ethnic group formed multiple baseball teams that participated in local and regional leagues, which not only provided a means of healthy community competition, but also a means of economic support for establishments who sponsored the teams. After games, to show their appreciation, players would patron their sponsor's bar, restaurant, etc. that had donated money for a team uniform or other type of equipment.<sup>1</sup> In this way, men's and women's teams began to form among the different nationalities in community leagues that bridged cultural boundaries, providing a sense of national pride for each team while also fomenting a sense of community cohesion and cooperation, (Alamillo 2006).

While Mexican migrant workers were graciously received by employers as cheap labor to fill an agricultural labor shortage, they were openly shunned by the white American public at large. Contradictions in Mexican perceptions seemed to abound as they had reputations of being both hard workers and lazy, hypersexual and sexless, drunkards as well as disciplinarians. Often arriving without families, "solos"<sup>2</sup> were viewed as "genderless beings" and single women travelers often faced harassment at the borders and accusations of prostitution, (Alamillo 2006). They were seen as a "mongrel race" eugenicists declared "inherently degenerate and dangerously fertile," (Oropeza

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<sup>1</sup> Often teams would solicit several businesses for small donations such as a single uniform with their business's name on the back, as local establishments did not have excessive expendable income. While not much equipment was needed, those individual players who provided bats or gloves often gained positions in the starting line-up for their contributions, (Alamillo 2006, 113).

<sup>2</sup> Single or married men who traveled back and forth across the border without the presence of a woman, (Alamillo 2006, 36).

2005, 16). Mexicans were thought to be biologically inclined for hard labor after years of servitude, yet ironically, carriers of disease. Although not socially segregated by law, as were African Americans at the time, Mexicans were still viewed as inferior to whites and were routinely refused service from white establishments, children of Mexican descent often attended separate, substandard schools, and if Mexicans were allowed to enter public leisure facilities, a certificate of health was often required (Alamillo 2006).

This sense of what Timothy Amos refers to as “internal exile” in which “residential, physical, and social isolation combined with day-to-day humiliation,” caused a deep-seeded need for cultural and community solidarity (Amos 2005). While attempting to Americanize to gain economic opportunity, social mobility, and political clout, Mexicans also guarded many cultural traditions or combined the two influences, resulting in a hybrid Chicano identity. Baseball is a shining example of this cultural fusion. Baseball provided a venue of cross-cultural competition with historic Mexican as well as United States national significance in which the Chicano was able to excel and “level the playing field” in a country that otherwise discounted his utility outside of the realm of physical labor. The dynamics of cross-cultural leisure setting also allowed a space for the development of new gender roles. As a reaction to feelings of social injustice males and females used baseball to take out aggression on the field and prove themselves as equals by demonstrating their skills in league games and tournaments.

The urban environment during the 1930s-1950s, unlike many rural towns at the time, fostered female participation in sport. Schools, companies, local business establishments and various community organizations such as the YWCA sponsored women’s teams in the area allowing them to play local teams as well as granting them the

opportunity to travel around Southern California to play in tournaments engaging women in large-scale community network/support systems (Alamillo 2006). This foundation of mobility set the groundwork for a space that continued to give women public visibility, self-confidence in their roles outside of the home, female support networks, and freedom to explore the boundaries of gender and sexuality.

### **A New “Strike” Zone**

The 1941 labor action ending a violent worker riot in Corona, California exemplified an era of transformation in Chicano/a identity throughout the region. After continued economic exploitation of Mexican American labor, workers began to organize to demand higher wages and better working conditions. Appropriately enough, major organizers in the town were former Corona baseball players utilizing leadership skills and regional network systems they had established playing ball. Women also played roles, albeit supporting roles, in these state-wide strikes, forcefully illustrating that they no longer the passive creatures of Mexican tradition, but rather active members of a repressed faction of society. They were able to utilize the same leadership and organizational skills of their male counterparts to fight for Chicano rights.

Baseball's role in the formation of activist leaders is clearly visible as major unions like the UCAPAWA<sup>3</sup> solicited baseball clubs for assistance in organizing and provision of space (Alamillo 2007). Meetings were often held on the actual baseball fields, which were hidden from the view of the police. The leisure tool once used by citrus companies to stop unionization proved to be a formative sight of labor activism.

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<sup>3</sup> United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America

## **II. Softball as a Tacit Space of Lesbian Socialization Within the White Community**

The sport of softball as a tacit lesbian space provided what Lillian Faderman refers to as a “geography...where [lesbians] could be assured of meeting others like themselves and being accepted precisely for that attribute that the outside world shunned,” (1991). Softball thrived among the working class but gained a negative reputation for housing “mannish” women often suspected to be homosexual. As Susan Cahn asserts, “The very cultural matrix that produced the pejorative image also created possibilities for lesbian affirmation.” Labeling the softball milieu with such a negative connotation created an easily identifiable public space for women seeking such a venue to create community networks and foster an unspoken subculture not permitted outside of the confines of sport. While many heterosexual women played softball, Faderman asserts that most leagues in the 1950s had one or two strictly lesbian teams, with scattered representation within the other teams, (1991) and former players have estimated in interviews that up to seventy-five percent of their softball communities were homosexual (Cahn 2006, 357). Members of these large-scale social networks soon began to recognize their organizational potential and seized the opportunity use the softball milieu as a venue of feminist political activism.

### **“White” Softball**

Where softball evolved as a working class form of leisure for the Chicano/a in southern California in the 1930s, middle and upper class white women had been playing the sport for over a decade in the Midwest and for nearly a half a century in New England. As early as 1866 women’s colleges like Vassar, Smith, and Mount Holyoke, among others, promoted various forms female physical health, and baseball was the most popular form of exercise among the students. Stretching back further to the turn of the twentieth century, female physical fitness was encouraged to overcome a prior mid-nineteenth century ideology that espoused the notion of the “cult of ill health in which women proved their femininity with invalidism,” (Twin 1979). Society realized, as Allen Guttmann sums up so well, “Eve healthy was a better helpmate than Eve bedridden with a nervous breakdown,” (1988). However, “healthy activity” was encouraged among women of this era involved very little strenuous activity and consisted primarily in domestic housework. Physical exercise augmenting *strength* was mainly encouraged among the working classes, while activity performed by middle and upper class women was minor and intended solely to avert physical decay. Female athleticism carried a strong social stigma for the middle to upper class mentality because of its “masculinizing” effect, which led to “mannish, failed heterosexuals,” (Wittner 1934). Debates discussed whether “masculine” women played the sport, or whether the sport “masculinized” the women who played. Participation in sport contained idealized male attributes such as aggression, physicality, and competitive drive that affirmed manliness, and for a women to enter this territory threatened Victorian polarized concepts of gender, (Cahn 1993). The transformation of the female body due to frequent exercise,

appropriation of masculine mannerisms and attitudes, and the fact that most who played were unmarried began to give ballplayers a Sapphic reputation. The problem with physical exertion and visible acquisition of muscular strength, however, is unique to the middle and upper class, as blue-collar workers were more accustomed to physical labor, in which strength is seen as an advantage. Women's bodies, even while playing sports, were still expected to be aesthetically pleasing to men, thus, participation in sports that caused women to perspire were viewed as vulgar gender transgressions.

Regardless of the negative gender and sexuality connotations, women's softball rapidly spread throughout the country. As a 1920 survey of Cleveland schools shows, ninety-one percent of high school girls participated in softball on school grounds, (Fidler 2006). Participation continued to grow during the Great Depression with "enforced" leisure activity for the working classes (Zipter 1988). Parks and playgrounds were constructed to provide work that would not compete with local businesses, and softball's minimal financial investment, its feasibility for participation by both genders, and utilization of lighted fields provided universal access to this community leisure activity, (Regalado 2000). Women continually asserted their place in this athletic setting and by "the very effort to gain civic athletic space, women actually shaped the spatial contexts of softball; through that effort and in those spatial contexts, subcultures emerged and interacted," (Enke 2007, 148). A series of interviews conducted by female sport historian Susan Cahn suggests "from at least the 1940s on, sport provided space for lesbian activity and social networks and served as a path into lesbian culture for young lesbians coming out and searching for companions and community," (Cahn, 2006, 357).

In spite of seemingly universal participation within communities throughout the United States, the sexuality of all-women teams never fell away from the suspicious eye. While the accusation of lesbianism was never explicitly stated, women assumed the defensive role in proving their heterosexuality by hyper-stressing their femininity off the field to prove that athletic aptitude did not necessarily connote “sexual deviance.” The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGBBL) that lasted from 1947-1954 is a concrete example of this mentality (Fidler 2006). While professional baseball players were away at war, women were called upon to fill their positions as professional ballplayers, but such visibility required precautions against implications of homosexual behavior. Skirts, make-up, charm school and strict chaperones aided in an exclusively feminine image, which many feel was crucial to the success of the league. Though speculation continually loomed among female ballplayers, “athletic women of the forties, while perhaps viewed as oddities, were not looked on with as much suspicion and contempt as their counterparts in the seventies,” when political activists began to use softball as a venue for public visibility (Zipter 1988, 45).

Softball’s motto before the Feminist Movement of the 1970s seemed to be “‘play it’ don’t ‘say it,’” which allowed generally uncontested participation. Lesbianism was not talked about, often not even among friends, and as long as one was discrete about one’s sexuality, one was *tolerated* within society.

### **1970s-1980s: The Second Wave (White) Feminist Movement**

Though the construction varied in style and method, softball, for women of a variety of races and ethnicities across the United States, provided an exclusively female

public space. Different from the clandestine gay bar scene, softball offered a community venue that promoted physical and mental health as well as community involvement. It gave players a connection to women with similar interests and/or cultural backgrounds, created possibilities for social networking, and taught them team work and other organizational skills that would serve them later in the realm of political activism. Softball fostered a spatial milieu where subcultures freely surfaced and matured, most perceptibly among these groups was the lesbian feminist community.

Although the softball field had for decades tacitly denoted a meeting ground for lesbian culture, the strong focus on building new feminine public space in the late 1960s and early 1970s began to exploit this venue for activist goals. D'Emilio asserts that politicization is a natural result of a space containing a shared identity and community consciousness (1983), and Dobkin, in Zipter (1988) states, "softball is the singly greatest organizing force in lesbian society." Recognizing the long-standing foundation of social networks within the framework of softball communities across the country and its consideration as a legitimate community space, activists with few resources or permanent meeting locales were eager to integrate softball culture into the Feminist Movement.

As the Second Wave Feminist Movement gained momentum, clear frictions between "white" activists and "feminists of color" surfaced as feminists of color felt that integral issues of class and race were not being addressed by the middle to upper class white activists who seemed to hold the organizational clout. For this reason, many feminists of color turned their attentions to other political movements that more acutely addressed their needs. Because of softball's uniquely public setting (often in parks or community centers), history of working class and minority participation, and primary



focus on leisure, it was able to mediate many of these tensions and foster a sense of unity among participants.

An example of the breadth of these social networks can be seen during the McCarthy era of homosexual witch-hunts during the 1950s. Informants would use traveling softball teams as part of an underground pipeline that warned women in the military who were accused of homosexual activity and scheduled to be up for investigation (Faderman 1991). The 1960s and 1970s ushered in a whole new level public visibility which pushed the envelope of political possibility, but also making the motto “play it’ don’t ‘say it” a less viable option for those who wished to remain closeted.

Teams like Wilder Ones of Minneapolis directly dealt with issues of sexuality using softball as a means of claiming themselves as openly lesbian feminists, whereas other organizations like Secret Storm merely recognized the potential of the softball as an site for socialist organizing and recruitment but ended up unavoidably addressing sexual identity in the course of its duration (Enke 2007). During the 1970s, female homosexuality became a public topic of discussion, marking the women’s movement as a time that a good many women of that era identify as the point that they began to incorporate “being a lesbian” into their personal identity (Franzen 1993).

Though a liberating moment for some, the open discourse on homosexuality of the 1970s was divisive in many ways. It emphasized the “in” versus “out’ of the closet” dichotomy, implying a negative connotation for those who chose to say “in” and also divided women by race, class and ethnicity due to conflicting convictions of primary goals of the movement and unequal representation in leadership.

### **“Chicana” First, “Lesbiana” Later**

In the 1970s, rather than join ranks with the Second Wave Feminist Movement, the Chicana feminist lesbian aligned herself with “La Causa”—the Chicano movement, emphasizing *Chicanismo* as an ideology encompassing cultural pride and unification, (García 1997). Coming out of the closet for the Chicana bore a different set of cultural baggage than for the middle-class, white feminist, and her main concerns lay in economic security, cultural unity, and promotion of racial and ethnic equality. She rose up to fight the sexism and male domination within the Chicano movement as a means of internal reformation but did not acquire a voice in regards to her sexuality until the late 1970s (García 1997). The idea of *lesbianism* was so culturally foreign that the very aspect of claiming a homosexual identity was considered selling out to Anglo culture, thus making homosexuality “counter-revolutionary.” So, rather than becoming a *vendida* (sell-out) to her culture, she put other concerns at the forefront of her activism. This all changed in the 1980s when Chicana feminist lesbians like Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, among others, eloquently articulated the oppression experienced by the Chicana lesbian in regards to ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and social class. Their writings mark the beginning of a continuing open discourse on Chicana lesbianism.

While I can make no direct link from current literature regarding the historical prevalence of homosexuality within Chicana women’s softball, inferences could be made regarding team names of the time (Los Tomboys) or comments recorded by Chicanas about special intimacies shared between women on the team, however, these conclusions are mere speculation as the topic certainly merits further exploration. Few other venues allowed exclusive female participation and cultivation of non-filial female relationships.

Participation in baseball/softball allowed women to shape gender boundaries by praising masculine-identified attributes such as physical strength, teamwork, and a competitive nature. Women performed these new facets of identity openly in a historically “male” environment and took advantage of the benefits of travel, postponement of marriage, and acquisition of leadership and organizational skills that ushered in possible participation in political activism as early as the 1940s with the agricultural strikes and continuing into the Chicano movement of the 1970s. While baseball/softball played slightly different historical roles for the Chicana than for the White or African American ballplayer, for both, participation in the sport helped cross ethnic boundaries, break traditional confinement to the domestic space, and foster an exclusively female environment uncontrolled by men that addressed the needs of its participants.

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