

Women and Gender Research Initiative Faculty Fellowship 2009-2010
Latina Lesbian Organizing In Chicago

Abstract:

My research project documents Latina lesbian political activism in Chicago by examining the founding, development, and demise of Llena, a Latina lesbian Chicago based organization that existed in the mid 80s. My research methods include oral interviews and archival research. The project seeks to contribute to the important work of making visible the individual and collective efforts of Latina lesbians to advocate for themselves and to create and occupy public space in the mainstream gay and lesbian community and the Latino/a community.

While there is a growing body of literature on lesbian and gay theory and history, there is much less documentation on the histories of racial and ethnic gay and lesbian communities and activist organizations (Aponte-Pares, Guzman, Negron-Muntaner, Ramos, Roque Ramirez). This work is necessary to expand the gay and lesbian historiography that has emerged by specifically articulating how race and ethnicity shape this vibrant history. Although a project that focuses on Queer Chicago history (Baim) has recently been published, it contains very little information on queer Latinos. My project addresses this gap in the literature by documenting and exploring the history of Llena, a Chicago based Latina lesbian organization, from its beginning in the mid-1980s to its demise in the early 1990s.

A few years ago, I began a project to document the 14-year history of Amigas Latinas, a Latina lesbian organization in Chicago that was founded in 1995. As I went about this work, I discovered that another organization called Llena (Latinas Lesbianas en Nuestro Ambiente) preceded Amigas Latinas. From what I have been able to gather so far, Llena began in the mid 80s and disbanded in the early 1990s. I propose to study this organization and document its history. I have learned that some Latinas activists, many of whom are still in Chicago started Llena in the 1980s. Activists such as Mona Noriega, Carmen Abrego, and Amparo Jimenez, organized Latinas lesbians to work on political and cultural Latina issues. One of their successful projects involved bringing together lesbians of all colors. They co-founded the International

Women's Dance that brought together more than 500 women in annual dances; first held at the Electricians Union Hall on South Ashland, as the dances grew they moved downtown to the Congress Hotel. This effort brought together women of all colors to work on organizing the dance and then through these friendships and contacts other activist projects developed. I have learned from a few interviews with Amigas Latinas leaders, who had also participated in Llena, that class and language issues ultimately divided the group and led to its disintegration in the early 90s. The lessons learned from this earlier attempt at Latina lesbian organizing in Chicago may have prevented similar issues from disrupting the Latina lesbian organization that followed Llena, Amigas Latinas.

My plan is to research the organizational history of this group during the fall and winter quarters of the fellowship period in order to document its existence and examine how it attempted to negotiate the complex ethnic, linguistic and sexual politics of Chicago from its inception in the mid 1980s to the early 1990s. My methods including oral history and archival research. Through an interview with Mona Noriega, a former member of Llena, I have learned that the organization kept excellent records. I have access to a rich archive of documents collected throughout its brief history (documents include flyers announcing events, pictures, newsletters, and minutes from organizational meetings, etc.). I will use this material to help me map out the history of the organization. I will also interview at least 5 former Llena leaders. (I have IRB approval to research Latina lesbian leadership). The interviews will focus on the interviewees' experiences with Llena as a social and political organization over the years. I am interested in documenting the coming together of Llena's founders and their successful and unsuccessful efforts to negotiate divergent ethnic histories (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Central American), class differences (poor, working class, middle class), citizenship status (documented and undocumented immigrants and citizens), and linguistic differences (Spanish monolingual,

English monolingual and bilingual. I will examine how the organization was initiated, grew, and fell apart.

I plan to share this history with Latina lesbians in the Chicago community in the Spring 2010. I hope to organize a forum on Latina lesbian leadership through my work with Amigas Latinas. As part of this forum, I will discuss both the histories of Llena and Amigas Latinas. Getting access to this information, particularly the rich tradition of Latina lesbian leadership in Chicago is empowering and inspiring for young Latinas who rarely see Latina lesbians represented as vibrant and effective leaders in the Chicago community.

The goal of my project nicely dovetails with the Women and Gender Research Initiative's mission to document, collect and make public the contributions of individuals whose lives reflect previously untold experiences and undocumented resilience. My project specifically seeks to contribute to the important work of documenting the individual and collective efforts of Latina lesbians in Chicago to represent themselves and to create and occupy public space in the mainstream gay and lesbian community and the Latino community.

The research materials will be shared with students in my Latin@ Sexualities and Latina Feminist Theories courses. In these classes, I always have a section on activism. Students will study the transcripts and archival materials gathered in this project to consider the strategies that Chicago based Latina lesbian activists have used to improve life for their community. Another product of this project will be an article on the history of Llena that I will submit to the journal *Latino Studies*.

A student research assistant could assist me in transcribing the interviews, organizing and analyzing the archival materials and planning and executing the forum on Latina Lesbian leadership in Spring 2010. S/he might also help me explore other archives at the Chicago Historical Society or the Gerber Hart library for information on Latina queer organizing in Chicago.

References

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Time Line**

Fall 2009

Contact and ask Llena leaders to participate in interviews
Complete five 1 to 2 hour interviews with Llena leaders
Transcribe interviews
Collect documents form leaders (minutes, flyers, mission statements, newsletters)
Research Latina lesbian organizing in Chicago in mid 80s and early 90s, check collections in Chicago History Museum.

Winter 2010

Research Latina lesbian organizing in Chicago in mid 80s and early 90s, check collections in Gerber Hart libraries.
Analyze the data
Contact Amigas Latinas Organization about conducting a Program on Latina Lesbian leadership in Chicago
Work with Amigas Latinas Board members to plan this event

Spring 2010

Conduct program on Latina Leadership that highlights the information gathered on Llena
Write first draft of paper on Latina Lesbian organizing in Chicago in 1980s