

Latina Lesbian Organizing In Chicago
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I'd like to thank the organizers of the Out at CHM series, Jenny Brier and Liz Garbay for inviting me to present today. Thanks also to Ramon for his introduction. I'm really pleased to be here to talk about my ongoing research project on Latina lesbian organizing in Chicago. I'd also like to thank my DePaul student research assistants who have been helping me with the project, Yvonne Valencia and Emily Williams.

For the sake of full disclosure, I guess I should open by letting you know that I have been a member of Amigas Latinas for 10 years, since I moved to Chicago. It was actually while working on Amigas' board that I decided to document the organization's history.

Although we now have Tracy Baim's wonderful book *Out and Proud in Chicago*, it contains very little information on queer Latinas. Accounts of Latina lesbian organizing, and organizing by other people of color around the country are sorely needed to expand the gay and lesbian historiography that exists by specifically articulating how race and ethnicity shape this vibrant history. Also, these accounts are vitally important to Latina, and other queer women of color who don't see our specific issues and concerns addressed in white gay and lesbian histories and in Latino(a) and immigrant community histories.

My ongoing project addresses these gaps by documenting and exploring the history of two organizations in Chicago -- Amigas Latinas, a Latina lesbian, bisexual and transgender organization that was founded in 1995 and is celebrating its quinceañera (or 15th birthday) this year and another Latina lesbian organization, Llena, which I learned about through my study of Amigas Latinas, and predated Amigas by a few years; Llena ran from about 1988 to 1992. My

research methods include conducting oral interviews with leaders and members of the groups as well as studying their archival records; I have acquired minutes, flyers, newsletters, and financial papers of both organizations and am looking at all the media reports on the two groups in the Chicago gay press.

A primary goal of my project is to document the collective efforts of Latina lesbians to represent, define and defend their identities and to create and occupy public spaces in Chicago. In the larger work, I describe the founding of Llena and Amigas Latinas, the efforts of the organizations to bridge the "Latino" and "lesbian" social and political cultures of Chicago, and their successful and unsuccessful efforts to negotiate divergent national and ethnic histories, class and linguistic differences, and the diverse political stances of their membership. I also look at the coalition-building politics that the groups established with other Latino and queer communities in Chicago. For today's presentation, I will give you a taste of the history of the organizations, highlight some of their successes, and touch upon some of the tensions and obstacles they have faced.

Although it may not seem like that long ago, Chicago in the 1980s was not the friendliest place for Latina lesbians. In the late 1980s, there were not any public sites in Chicago that openly welcomed Latina lesbians until a small group of Cuban, Puerto Rican and Mexican women decided that it was time to create such a space. They were shocked and thrilled that despite only word of mouth advertising, over 30 women showed up to their first meeting in November 1987; subsequent meetings in those early days often drew between 30 to 40 women. The group decided to call itself "Llena." **(SLIDE 2)** Llena is an acronym for Latina Lesbians en Nuestro Ambiente. Llena in Spanish means complete or full. One former leader remembers coming up with the name after a few meetings. She told me - quote, "Llena was perfect because that's how it was at

the beginning, we were in our own space and there was a sense of completeness.” The group met every other Friday first at Horizons, a gay and lesbian Center (now Center on Halsted), on Sheffield Ave. in the North Side of the city. They drew all kinds of Latina women; while the original organizers were mostly all first generation Spanish speaking immigrants, they welcomed all Latinas no matter how they identified. According to former members, the meetings were intense, bilingual and chaotic and often lasted four hours or more. The meetings, social and cultural activities, and parties attracted scores of women **(SLIDE 3)** of many Latin American national backgrounds, lesbians of all ages from their early 20s to their 60s, married, closeted women, some who were just coming out, veteran dykes, professionals, undocumented women and lesbians from all social classes. A former Llena leader explains, quote- “We welcomed everyone, I remember Maria Rodriguez (not her real name), this is probably the geekiest of the geeks, Puerto Rican woman, very low income, you know, I mean very homely looking, very dyky, probably unemployed, and I saw her and I brought her into the group...and within a year to see this girl, who – low self esteem, shy, fat, glasses, short hair, I mean she was just- to see her bloom because people finally recognized her for who she was. I’ll always remember, and Maria became like like my body guard and I didn’t want that, but I think she felt so loyal because- that we would just say: you know, come on with us, no issues about your identity, how you looked, what you made, what kind of work you had or didn’t have.... And that’s how we were, so we made everyone feel comfortable.”

After a while, Llena members decided to find a place in one of their Latino neighborhoods so that the meeting would be more accessible to Latinas. Also, they had started feeling unwelcome at Horizons, which they experienced as a mostly white, gay male space. They complained of rude behavior by the men who ran the Center. For example, if some of the women

arrived early, they were not allowed into their meeting room, rather they had to wait outside in the cold. Llena leaders gladly accepted the invitation of Jose Lopez, the executive Director the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, to meet at its Center in the Humboldt Park, Puerto Rican community. **(SLIDE 4)** This was an example of an early push to establish a public lesbian presence within a dominantly heterosexual Latino space. Initially, some of Llena's members were reluctant to meet at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center because of its radical reputation. Due to the Center's activism around independence for Puerto Rico, in the late 80s and early 90s, it was a frequent target of FBI surveillance and harassment. Despite these reservations, the group began to meet regularly at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and did so for years.

Right from the beginning, the members of Llena seemed very interested in organizing not just Latinas, but lesbians of all colors. They had an expansive vision of who they were and they were clearly committed to conversations between Llena and other lesbians locally, nationally, and internationally. This perspective is evidenced in Llena's bilingual newsletter called *Lesbiana*. The inaugural fall 1990 issue **(SLIDE 5)** announces: "We are here to Stay!" Articles in the newsletter discuss their dream of creating an inclusive and pluralistic Latina lesbian feminism. One article states, quote: "We are committed to establishing a place for Latina lesbians within the 'the lesbian community'. In as much as this newsletter will contribute to our visibility and further enrich the lesbian community in Chicago, we also hope that it will help built bridges between our community and the Asian, African American, and white/Anglo lesbian communities."

Llena's orientation toward coalition building and its transnational vision were very much in line with the feminist politics and organizing being articulated across the US at the time. In the 1980s there was much excitement about the possibility of creating a Third World Women of

Color feminist movement; we see this in the writings by lesbian feminists of color in the US such as those of the Combahee River Collective, those of Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa and others. The anthology *This Bridge Called My Back, Radical Writings by Women of Color*, published in 1981, was one of the first collections that highlighted the writings of feminist women and lesbians of color and offered a stinging critique of white mainstream feminism at the same time that it promoted the creation of a third world women's movement that would offer a more nuanced analysis of multiple identities, the simultaneity of oppression and the urgent need for coalition politics and activism.

One of Llena's more successful projects involved living up to its mission by organizing with lesbians of colors. For instance, throughout the late 80s and early 90s, Llena co-sponsored the very successful annual International Women's Day Dance (**SLIDE 6**). The first dances were held at the Electricians Union Hall on South Ashland and as the events grew they moved downtown to the Congress Hotel on Michigan Avenue and attracted over fifteen hundred women. This effort led to the building of working social and political relationships, networks and coalitions, as well as friendships among women of many different backgrounds who organized the dance. Among the other organizations that organized and cosponsored the events were progressive groups of working class women of color such as Literary Exchange, The Mozambique Women's Support Project, the Chicago Women in Trades and Women United for a Better Chicago. Only groups whose membership included at least 75% women of color were invited to co-sponsor the dance.

While there was some discussion as to how to advertise the event, the organizers decided that they would attract more participation if they promoted it as simply a women's dance rather than a lesbian dance. An ongoing debate surfaced every year about whether or not to allow men

to attend. Some of the women felt strongly that all their events should be exclusively women spaces, others felt comfortable with inviting supportive male family, friends and allies.

Ultimately, the group decided that they would welcome the financial support of men but they made it clear that they preferred that men not attend the dances. The policy that prevailed and was printed on some flyers was that “men would be allowed but not encouraged.” The events drew from 200 to 1500 women and the presence of men at a few of the dances some times caused a bit of friction.

In its brief existence, Llena was successful in promoting its expansive vision, organizing successful political, social and cultural events, participating in marches in the Puerto Rican community, and coalition building and networking across communities, but by 1992, four years later, the group had disbanded. I am still in the process of learning about why Llena ceased to exist. So far, women I have interviewed offer a range of explanations about the group’s demise. Some suggest that that class, political, and language issues ultimately were the reasons. Others say that differences of opinion about the direction of the group lead to factions forming and infighting, and still others suggest that personal relationships and dating within the organization lead to irresolvable conflicts and hurt feelings, which destroyed the group.

While Llena disbanded, it clearly made its mark and paved the way for the emergence of Amigas Latinas in the mid 1990s. Speaking about the significance of Llena, one member reflected, “We put Latina women on the map in the 80s as far as the gay scene, I mean there’s boys towns, you had all these gay groups, it’s all white affiliated... It wasn’t easy being gay in the 80s. The gay scene was like, no one talked about it in the Latino community, it was horrible... So I think that Llena really kind of cemented that there is this population in the Latino community that is gay, and we are here.”

The 1990s in Chicago offered a more welcoming climate for gay and lesbians. In fact, Chicago in the mid 1990s experienced a proliferation of organizing by women of color. Women of all Colors and Cultures Together (WACT) hosted potluck lunches once a month throughout the 90s. Many lesbian groups, formed around ethnic identifications such as Amigas Latinas, Affinity (a Chicago Black Lesbian organization that also still exists), and Khuli Zaban, a group that represents South Asian and West Asian queer women. So this was a different time and there was a lot of energy and commitment to both forming particular groups and groups that tried to create coalitions and conversations among the groups.

One of the founders of WACT, Evette Cardona, was also a leading founder of Amigas Latinas. Evette has been a strong and steadfast leader in ensuring the survival and success of Amigas. Indeed, Amigas Latinas is really unique because it is one of the few Latina lesbian organizations in the United States that has sustained itself over a decade; most organizations of its type do not survive for more than two or three years. Women who participated in both Llena and Amigas Latinas share a sense that some lessons that were learned from this earlier attempt at Latina lesbian organizing in Chicago may have prevented similar issues from disrupting Amigas Latinas. And certainly the timing of its emergence with so many other groups in Chicago has been key to its sustainability.

But other than timing, several other factors can perhaps explain Amigas sustainability. As I mentioned, Amigas had the example of Llena and it built on many of Llena's initiatives and accomplishments. In its first call in 1995 to once again organize Latina lesbian and bisexual women, the conveners paid tribute to Llena, **(SLIDE 7)** clearly indicating that they wanted to follow the lead that had been established.

Another factor that has sustained Amigas is that it has been able to change with the times. Amigas started as a support group for lesbian and bisexual Latinas. It became best known for hosting monthly platicas or discussions around multiple issues of concern to Latina lesbians (such as coming out **(SLIDE 8)**, passing **(SLIDE 9)**, and dealing with racism and classism **(SLIDE 10)**) but it has also been successful at adapting to new situations to meet new challenges. Amigas has expanded its focus as a support group to also serve as a leading educator and advocate for the issues of bisexual, queer, and transgender people in the Latino community, the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities, and in Chicago as a whole. Amigas Latinas has developed into a not-for-profit organization with over 300 members that has been good at periodically assessing what it offers the community and responding to a changing reality.

This is not to suggest that attempts to navigate differences don't some times challenge the group cohesion in Amigas. To highlight a more recent example, several years ago, Amigas started providing programming around transgender issues **(SLIDE 11)**. Some board members advocated changing the mission, which until then only mentioned lesbian and bisexual women, to also represent and advocate for transgendered Latinas. There was a fierce debate about how this change would impact Amigas. Would this alienate members who did might not understand how transgender issues were connected to issues of lesbians and bisexuals? Did this mean we would now represent Female to Male transgendered people? The majority of the board's members ultimately decided to opt for the more inclusive mission, but this did not happen without some opposition. The board committed itself to running more programming to build awareness of how transgender people have always been part of our diverse community, and that

the struggle to establish civil rights protections for transgender people cannot be separated from the struggle to win freedom and equality for lesbian, and bisexual people.

Finally, I think that Amigas Latinas has survived as long as it has is because it has been more explicit about the fact that Latinas are not a monolithic group. Over the years, Amigas began to provide ongoing, targeted programming for Latinas with diverse interests (**SLIDE 12**). It offers specific programs for youth, older women, families, etc. as well as more general social and educational events that attempt to bring everyone together. I think that Llena sought to bring together all these women with a range of needs and interests, but it failed to address the different needs of its membership. Amigas has been successful at sustaining its organization through a strategy of offering a wide range of specific and general programs to meet the challenges posed by differing agendas and shifting identifications.

There is so much more to say about these organizations but I'll stop here. I hope I have sparked your interest to learn more about Llena and Amigas Latinas and I hope that you agree with me that the work, contributions, and visions of both of these organizations need to be recognized and valued. The stories of how lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Latinas have worked to claim a space in Chicago, to define and defend who they are, needs to be part of Chicago's documented history. While they might not have been totally successful in every instance in meeting the challenges of organizing a group with constituents who represent a wide range of nationalities, language preferences, class backgrounds, age groups, and political perspectives, the recognition of these overlapping and multiple identities that the organizations represented, have provided the grounds for a transformational politics within Latina, queer, and immigrant communities - that all of us could learn from.

And I'll leave with a quote from LLena's newsletter, Lesbiana: **(SLIDE 13)** "We must no longer permit others to exclude our accounts or to interpret them under the pretense that they understand our lives; we must work toward an inclusive community as well as a pluralistic feminism"

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