Chicago History Museum

OUT IN CHICAGO

LGBT HISTORY AT THE CROSSROADS

Jill Austin and Jennifer Brier, editors
TOWARD AN ARCHIVE OF LATINA/O QUEER CHICAGO
Art, Politics, and Social Performance

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The archives, written histories, and media representations of gay and lesbian activism and culture in the United States have not generally acknowledged a Latina/o presence. When accounts have focused specifically on queer Latinas/os, they have rarely landed in Chicago, offering us instead a bicoastal map that almost exclusively focuses on that well-rehearsed triumvirate of Latina/o queer mythology: New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. This essay is in large part an invitation to engage with the history of queer Latinas/os in Chicago by promoting further documentation and circulation of knowledge about this significant and vital component of the queer community. The diversity of sites, practices, and communities introduced here highlight the historically strong and presently thriving Latino queer community in this city. This essay offers but an introduction to the plethora of historical materials to be found in the many personal archives, political and artistic ephemera, and individual and collective memories that evidence a Latina/o queer presence in Chicago.

I. Entrando por La Cueva: On the Geographies of Latina/o Queer Chicago
Chicago has had a strong Latina/o presence since the beginning of the twentieth century, when large numbers of Mexicans arrived escaping the
unsettling conditions of the Mexican Revolution and attracted by the growth in industrial and agricultural labor opportunities in the Midwest with a steady flow continuing to the present when over 1.3 million Mexicans reside in the Chicago metropolitan region. They were followed by a sizeable migration of Puerto Ricans, who arrived during the 1940s to assume positions in the thriving steel industry and as domestic laborers. They currently form the second largest group of Latinas/os in Chicago, numbering over 150,000. Cubans, which constitute the fourth-largest group at close to 19,000, began to arrive in large numbers during the 1950s, with a second wave arriving in the city from 1960 to 1973 as exiles of the Fidel Castro government; a third wave relocated from the Mariel boatlift in the 1980s, while a fourth wave of balseros came to the region in the 1990s. Guatemalans (presently the third-largest Latina/o group in the city at an estimated 30,000) and Salvadorans (8,000) migrated in large numbers during the 1980s as part of the Sanctuary Movement, which offered refuge to residents of war-torn Central American nations. The city of Chicago is home to communities of Latinas/os from every single Latin American national origin with Ecuadorians, Colombians, and Peruvians numbering with populations of over 10,000.

In 2010, the Latina/o population approached the two-million mark in the metropolitan region and will soon constitute a third of the total population in the city of Chicago. It is diverse in national, ethnic, racial, and class makeup; including affluent and professional Latin Americans, political refugees, and economic migrants alike. Overwhelmingly a working-class community with a sizeable and growing middle class, Latina/o Chicago boasts what is arguably one of the most diverse Latina/o demographic profiles in the nation.

With over a century old presence in Chicago, Latina/os of varying ethnic and national backgrounds have a shared history of social, economic, and cultural proximity. Relations across groups of origin characterize the experience of many residents of Latin American descent who establish social and cultural networks in Chicago that exceed traditional narratives of national belonging. They create new intersections, both identitarian and affective, that result in an increasingly inter-Latina/o city. These intersections are palpable in the queer social networks that developed throughout the city, most prominently since the 1980s, when Latina/o queer-specific cultural, political, and social efforts began to appear in most affirmative and public ways.

The now famous Latina/o drag club La Cueva located in the Mexican enclave of LaVillita is one prominent example of both the history and often-tacit presence
of Latina/o queer life in the city of Chicago. La Cueva is located in the southwest corridor of the city, a combination of nineteenth-century industrial and residential development initially occupied by Bohemian and Irish immigrants and now constituting the largest Mexican neighborhood in Chicago. The club began as a single event hosted by Ketty Teanga—an Ecuadoran-born drag queen who since age eleven lived with her mother and Puerto Rican stepfather in New York and Puerto Rico—at another La Villita historic gay watering hole, El Infierno. Due to its popularity, it soon moved to the owner's larger establishment, La Cueva. Credited as being one of the oldest Latina/o drag clubs in the country still in operation, La Cueva does not boast a flashy identifying street sign nor the roped-off entrances of Chicago's Boystown establishments. Instead the plain white wood-paneled and quasi-anonymous facade of the single-story building insinuates itself subtly within the Mexican business district that surrounds it. Here, within the second largest business district in the city, working-class gay Latinos, and increasingly Latinas, have drunk, danced together, and witnessed for close to three decades the spectacular performances of Latina drag queens impersonating the vast repertoires of Latin American and U.S. Latina/o popular music from bolero and ranchera divas to salsa queens and the more recent bubble-gum Mexican pop stars.
Despite the long histories of queer Latina/o presence in the city and the existence of pioneer spaces and performers such as those found in La Cueva, our history remains for the most part unknown. Hidden behind the unassuming facades of marginal geographies often rendered mute by the LGBT mainstream, the history Latina/o queer Chicago often recedes into the realm of invisibility. La Cueva is but one such site, historical event, and community in need of recognition, documentation, and celebration as part of queer history, Latina/o history, and Chicago history. Another example is how Latina lesbian organizers in Chicago helped to develop social and political communities. Latino queer artists have similarly created spaces where Latino and queer interests, passions, and desires meet, clash, and dance along with the messiness of inhabiting the intersections between queer, ethnic, and racial experiences. Latina/o queer Chicago is a palpable if little-acknowledged presence in the queer geographies of the region.

In the pages that follow we introduce important organizations like Latina Lesbians en Nuestro Ambiente (LLENA) and Amigas Latinas and artists such as Achy Obejas, Rane Arroyo, Rose Troche, Coya Paz, and Fausto Fernós. As a reader we hope you become familiar with these names but also with the important work—social, political, artistic—that each of these groups or individuals have done and continue to do to make Latino queer life in Chicago the pleasurable, at times a little painful, but always richly textured experience it has been, continues to be, and certainly will be for a long time to come. This is not an exhaustive survey of the history of social, political, and artistic efforts by and on behalf of Latina/o queer Chicago. Instead, this essay offers a glimpse into the archives and focus areas of each of us as scholars invested in documenting aspects of this history.

II. Latina Lesbian Organizing in Chicago
In the late 1980s, there were not many spaces in Chicago that openly welcomed Latina lesbians. This changed when Maria Amaparo Jiménez, a Mexican who had just moved to Chicago from Mexico City, called for a meeting of Latina lesbians in Outlines (a Chicago-based gay newspaper). Ten women showed up to their first meeting in November 1988; subsequent meetings in those early days often drew between thirty to forty women. The group decided to call itself LLENA, an acronym for Latina Lesbians en Nuestro Ambiente (in our space). Marilyn Morales came up with the name after a few meetings of the group. "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, on Sheffield Avenue on the North Side of the city.

A few years later, some members of the group expressed a desire to meet in one of their Latino neighborhoods so that the meeting would be more accessible to Latinas. LLENA members also felt unwelcome at Horizons, which they experienced as a mostly gay male space. LLENA leaders eventually accepted the invitation of José Lopez, the executive director of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, to meet at its space in Humboldt Park, in the heart of the Puerto Rican community. This was an example of an early push to establish a public lesbian presence within a predominantly heterosexual Latino space. Initially, some of LLENA’s members were reluctant to meet at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center because of its reputation for radical activism around the independence of Puerto Rico during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Even though the center was a frequent target of FBI surveillance and harassment, the group opted to meet there.9

As LLENA members recall, the meetings drew all kinds of Latinas. While the original organizers were mostly 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.\textsuperscript{10} They often lasted more than four hours. The meetings drew scores of women of all Latin American national backgrounds (Puerto Rican, Mexican, Cuban, Ecuadorian, and Colombian). They attracted women of all ages (from their early twenties to sixty-year-olds), married or closeted women, women who were just coming out, veteran dykes, professional women, undocumented women, and women from all class backgrounds. LLENA provided a space for all these women who never before had a place of their own.\textsuperscript{11} From the beginning, members of LLENA were also keenly interested in organizing not just Latina lesbians, but lesbians of all races and ethnicities. They had an expansive vision of who they were and they were clearly committed from the beginning to building bridges between Chicago Latina lesbians and other women, both women of color and white women locally, nationally, and internationally.

LLENA’s orientation toward coalitional building and its trans-national vision were very much in line with the feminist politics and organizing being articulated across the U.S. at the time. In the late 1980s, there was much excitement about the possibility of creating a Third World Women of Color feminist movement. Feminist women of color offered a stinging critique of white mainstream feminism at the same time that they began to promote the building 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 coalitional politics and organizing.\textsuperscript{12}

Another of LLENA’s more successful projects involved living up to its mission by organizing with lesbians of all colors. LLENA cosponsored the International Women’s Dance in the late 1980s and early 1990s that brought together thousands of women in annual dances. The first dances were held in 1989 at the Electricians Union Hall on South Ashland. As the dances grew, they moved downtown to the Congress Hotel on Michigan Avenue. There they attracted more than fifteen hundred women to the event. This effort led to the building of working relationships, networking, and friendships among women of many different backgrounds who organized the dance. Among the other organizations that cosponsored the events were progressive groups of working-class women of color such as the Chicago Women in Trades, Literary Exchange, The Mozambican Women’s Support Project, and Women United for a Better Chicago. Only organizations with a membership of at least 75-percent women of color were invited to cosponsor the event.\textsuperscript{13}
LLENA members were very intentional about why they were committing to the International Women’s Day Dances: they didn’t see them solely as fundraising ventures, although this was an important element that motivated the work. According to the November 1991 minutes, the goals for the dance were: “1) to network/connect with other women’s organizations, 2) to publicize each organization, 3) to work together acknowledging and respecting our differences, 4) to do something fun/social, 5) to celebrate international women’s day, and 6) to work cooperatively sharing the benefits and work.” While there was some debate as to whether to advertise the event as a lesbian or a women’s dance, the organizers decided that they would attract more participation if they promoted the dance as simply a women’s dance. A heated discussion surfaced every year about whether or not to allow men to attend the dances. Some of the women felt strongly that all their events should be exclusively women’s spaces, while others felt comfortable with supportive male family, friends, and allies. In fact, the degree to which the group should work and form coalitions with men led to fiercely contentious debates. In terms of the International Women’s Day Dance, 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 was that “men would be allowed but not encouraged.”

LLENA was especially interested in building coalitions with women of color but they also worked with white women. The fall 1990 issue of their bilingual newsletter _Lesbiana_ highlights LLENA’s expansive vision of who they were as an organization and makes clear their commitment to enacting an inclusive and pluralistic Latina lesbian feminism. One article states, “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 build bridges between our community and the Asian, African American, and white/Anglo lesbian communities.” The April 1990 minutes recorded a presentation to the group by Sarah Hoagland, a noted white feminist philosopher who was then-leader of a group called CLEAR (Chicago Lesbians Emerging Against Racism). CLEAR was a white, feminist, lesbian separatist group that offered to fundraise to send some of the Latinas to the Fifth Feminist Gathering (Encuentro) of Latin American Lesbian Women held in Costa Rica in 1990. LLENA members recall that there were various responses to these political presentations. Some women actively engaged with the ideas presented, while others listened politely but were more interested in socializing with their Latina lesbian sisters rather than listening to white lesbians discussing feminist separatist politics.
In its short life, LLENA promoted its expansive vision, organized successful political, social, and cultural events, and had a strong record of successful networking across communities. In 1993, only five years since their first organizational meeting, LLENA disbanded. Former members suggest that class, political, and language issues ultimately divided the group and led to its disintegration. Others say that differences of opinion about the direction of the group lead to the formation of factions and the ensuing infighting. Still others suggest that personal relationships and dating within the organization lead to conflicts and hurt feelings that destroyed the group.17

Members who participated in LLENA believe that lessons learned from the earlier attempt at Latina lesbian organizing in Chicago may have prevented similar issues from disrupting Amigas Latinas, the Latina lesbian organization that followed it.18 As Tracy Baim documents in Out and Proud in Chicago, Chicago in the mid–1990s experienced a proliferation of organizing by queer people of color.19 Ethnic identity groups such as Affinity and Chicago Black Lesbians (two groups that represented African American lesbians), Khuli Zaban, (a group that represented South Asian and West Asian queer women), and ALMA (the Association of Latino Men for Action) formed. Amigas Latinas,
like many of these other organizations, was actually a splinter group that developed from a larger, multiethnic group, Women of all Colors and Cultures Together (WACT) that hosted potluck lunches once a month throughout the 1990s. One of the founders of WACT, Evette Cardona, was also a founder of Amigas Latinas.

In the summer of 1995, several years after the demise of LLENA, Evette Cardona and a small group of Latina lesbians decided it was again time to bring together Latina lesbians. One source of inspiration was ALMA (The Association of Latino Men for Action), a group that began organizing Latino gay men in the mid 1990s. Initially conceived of as a support group for lesbians and bisexuals, Amigas Latinas has established itself as a strong and visible organization that advocates for the Latina lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LBTQ) community in Chicago. Amigas Latinas is unique because it is one of the few Latina lesbian organizations in the United States that has sustained itself over a decade and continues to meet the needs of the Latina lesbian community. In 2003, Amigas Latinas achieved non-profit organizational status and has grown to over three hundred members. Through its various programs, Amigas Latinas works to educate and empower queer Latinas, as well as to educate service
providers, the Latino community, the general gay community and legislators about the issues relevant to the Latina LBTQ community.

An important difference between LLENA and Amigas Latinas was the political context out of which each of the groups emerged. Chicago in the late 1990s and 2000s was a much friendlier place for Latino gays and lesbians than during the 1980s. Remarkably on this change and LLENA’s contribution, Morales (a member of both LLENA and Amigas Latinas) notes, “We put Latina women on the map in terms of what was going on in the 80s as far as the gay scene, I mean there’s Boystown, you had all these gay groups, it’s all white affiliated. . . . It was not 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.”

Several factors can explain Amigas’ sustainability. Amigas Latinas has survived as long as it has because it recognizes that Latinas are not a monolithic group. Amigas attempts to make a place for Latinas of different nationalities, language preferences, age groups, and sexual identifications. It provides regular ongoing programming to Latina LGBTQ with diverse interests. It offers programs for youth, older women, and families, as well as social and educational events that attempt to bring all these interests together. Amigas also regularly surveys its membership about the direction Amigas should take. Invariably, women declare that the space created by Amigas is crucial to their lives: “During my coming out process, the camaraderie of Amigas Latinas really assisted me in this process. Amigas has always been like a family for me, they will always be there for women who need a place to be herself without fear or retribution. The comfort of being with people like yourself is an incredible strength and gives tremendous support! I am completely grateful that Amigas Latinas exists and provides a safe place for women who love women. Thank you.” Similar responses consistently appear throughout the fifteen years of Amigas Latinas’ existence.

This is not to suggest that attempts to navigate differences don’t sometimes challenge the group cohesion. For example, several years ago, some members of the board lobbied to modify the mission of the organization so as to include transgender Latinas. At that time Amigas’ mission specified that the organization advocated for lesbian and bisexual rights. Not everyone agreed, but the majority of the board voted to change the mission to also represent and advocate for transgendered Latinas, and to run a series of programs educating the
membership about the issues of Latinas who identified as transgender. This was a top-down decision that was not meet with universal approval by the board and the membership, but most of the group’s board members felt that this was the right thing to do.

Both LLENA and Amigas Latinas expanded the options for Latina lesbians in Chicago. They offered (and Amigas Latinas continues to offer) a space for queer Latinas to meet other queer Latinas and to discuss issues that were central to our lives. LLENA was the first organization to offer Latina lesbians a space (outside of the few bars where Latina lesbians felt welcome) to call their own. With its diverse membership that included immigrant, Spanish monolingual first-generation Latinas, second-generation, English-dominant women, married, older closeted women, twenty-year-old new dykes, etc., LLENA worked to bring this complex community together with its vision of a transnational, global lesbian feminism. Unfortunately, LLENA was not successful at mediating all the differences within the group and at dealing with internal group dynamics but it offered an inspiring early example of Latina lesbian organizing. Amigas has been successful at sustaining its organization through a strategy of offering a wide range of programs for the diverse constituents of the Chicago Latina
El Poder de Ser Transgenero y Latino!

Te gustaría aprender más sobre la dinámica y el poder de la identificación y construcción de ser transgenero y Latino?

Amigas Latinas Grupo Juvenil te invita a un presentación y taller con Sebastián Colsín, un transgenero boliviano activista, poeta, artista y luchador por los derechos humanos. Hijo de madre boliviana y padre español, Sebastián es hoy día un estudiante graduado de la Universidad de Michigan. El carro que pinto en Puerto Rico, donde trabajó como diseñador de ropa para hombres y mujeres por más de 10 años. Después de salir del closet como transgenero en el 95, Sebastián se mudó a Austin, Texas donde continuó su trabajo como activista y su lucha por la justicia social. Sebastián se identifica como FTS - "Female to something else".

Do you want to learn more about the dynamics and power of Latino transgender identity?

Amigas Latinas Youth Group invites you to a presentation and workshop with Sebastián Colsín, a radical Bolivian transgender activist, poet, performer and social warrior. He is the son/daughter of a single Catholic mother and a graduate student at the University of Michigan. Sebastián grew up in Puerto Rico, where he was out as a radical lesbian and community organizer for more than 10 years. After coming out as a transgender person in 1985, he moved to Austin, Texas where he continued his work as an activist and his constant fight for social justice. He identifies as FTS - "Female to something else".

Center on Halsted | 2555 N. Lincoln | Octubre/October 6, 2006 | 6:00pm - 8:00pm
Para más información/For more info llama/call 312-409-5697 or info@amigaslatinas.org

Flyer for a 2006 Amigas Latinas event at the Center on Halsted.

queer community while it has also worked to bridge national and international issues through its work around immigrant rights. It continues to meet the challenges posed by differing agendas and shifting identifications.

In addition to Amigas Latinas and ALMA, several new queer Latino groups have recently organized in Chicago, including Orgullo en Acción and Boricua Pride. Young Latinos have been at the center of much new queer organizing. In the last few years Chicago youth have held an annual Latino Queer Prom. Since 2002, Radio Arte (a youth-run public radio station, funded primarily by the National Museum of Mexican Art) has produced Homofrecuencia, the first Spanish-language radio program in U.S. history that targets LGBTQ youth and allies. Pedro Serrano recently founded Readers of Queer Latino Literature, a group of mostly young Latino males who get together once a month to discuss queer books and readings. Two other more recent Chicago Latina cultural organizations, La Dulce Palabra Spoken Word Ensemble (which has been documented by the filmmaker Linda García Merchant) and Teatro Luna, showcase queer Latina experience.23
III. Queer Latina/o Arts and Culture in Chicago
The work of cultural and political organizations such as LLENA, Amigas Latinas, and ALMA and the social relations developed at places such as La Cueva and Circuito (the Latin Night held at Circuit Night Club in Boystown) is complemented by the artistic productions of Chicago-based queer Latina and Latino cartoonists, filmmakers, performers, podcasters and writers who have focused their attention on the rich and enormously varied queer experience of this city. One key example is the openly gay radical political cartoonist Daniel (Danny) Soromayor (1958–92), who was born in Humboldt Park and was of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent; his fearless editorial cartoons and activist work denouncing the AIDS crisis were a fundamental contribution to American society. Authors such as the lesbian Cuban-American novelist, short-story writer, journalist, and poet Achy Obejas and the gay Puerto Rican poet, short-story author, and playwright Rane Arroyo have portrayed the realities of characters caught between Chicago and the Caribbean, who negotiate linguistic, cultural, and social differences along with their divergent sexual orientation. Filmmakers such as Tadeo García (who directed On the Downlow in 2004) have portrayed relationships between young Latino men who do not publicly identify as gay, and the challenges they face in negotiating their sexualities and desires. In her widely distributed and very memorable debut film Go Fish (1994), the lesbian Puerto Rican director Rose Troche conjured an utopian vision of young, multiracial lesbian integration in Wicker Park in the early 1990s. More recently, the lesbian Peruvian American Coya Paz and the pan-Latina ensemble Teatro Luna have showcased the experience of diverse Latina women in Chicago (for example, in their extraordinary multi-voiced, collectively written play S-E-X-Oh!), while the gay Puerto Rican podcaster and performance artist Fausto Fernós has been putting Chicago on the international map in his multiple-award-winning Feast of Fun show, produced five days a week from his home in Andersonville, in which he, Marc Felion, and many collaborators and guests prominently discuss queer Latina/o experience in the Windy City. In this section, we will briefly showcase the work of some of these artists and see what they tell us about queer and LGBT Latina/o life in Chicago. These are just a few examples of a much larger group.

Achy Obejas
The Cuban-American writer Achy Obejas was born in Cuba in 1956 and came to the United States with her family in 1962. She is the author of a book of short stories titled We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?
AIDS activist Danny Sotomayor stormed the Chicago International Film Festival, October 24, 1988, to protest Illinois Governor James R. Thompson’s approval of HIV antibody tests without patient consent. Photo by Rex Wockner/Chicago Outlines newspaper.

GAY TALK SHOW

WITH FAUSTO FERNÓS & MARC FELION

(1994) and several novels including Memory Mambo (1996) and Days of Awe (2001). All of these books are marked by the author’s interest in exploring the experiences of queer Latinas in Chicago.

The stories included in *We Came All the Way from Cuba so You Could Dress Like This?* introduce us to a Latina/o Chicago cultural geography of neighborhoods, families, accidents, relationships, tears, laughter, and joy. This exploration of space, geography and identity continues in *Memory Mambo*, a novel that tells the story of Juani, a twenty-four-year-old Cuban-American lesbian in Logan Square who hasn’t gone to college and works in her family’s laundromat.

*Memory Mambo* centers around the protagonist’s desire for knowledge about Cuba and for an identity as a young person in the Midwestern United States. Juani does not seem inclined to celebrate the duplicity of her cultural/national experience, but rather seems stuck in a cultural and existential void of not really knowing who she is or what she wants, lacking control over the direction in which her life is going.

Obeja’s novel is framed by Juani’s breakup with her Puerto Rican closeted lesbian girlfriend, Gina, who is a radical independentista (or pro-independence advocate) and works on the political campaign of a Puerto Rican alderman candidate. The frailty of Cuban national-ethnic identification in a strongly multi-cultural environment in the United States (that is to say, outside of Miami’s Little Havana) is highlighted in this novel through inter-ethnic relations, in the context of the prejudiced views that each group has about each other. Cubans and Puerto Ricans are shown stereotyping each other mercilessly, making fun of the particular historical circumstances that have determined so
much of these groups’ experience in the United States. The conservative political views of exiled Cubans regarding the Revolution are pitted against nationalist Puerto Ricans’ desire for a free, independent homeland. The relative economic superiority of Cuban exiles, often times fostered by disproportionate U.S. government assistance, is compared to the chronic poverty of the Puerto Ricans, who are portrayed in a negative light.

The fact that this novel is set in Chicago is meaningful given the very particular dynamics of inter-Latina/o relationships in the city. Scholars such as Félix Padilla, Ana Yolanda Ramos-Zayas, and Nicholas de Genova have extensively analyzed Puerto Rican and Mexican interactions in Chicago, also discussing (to a much more limited extent) the Cuban presence. In her book *National Performances*, Ramos-Zayas discusses Cuban/Puerto Rican tensions originating from disagreements over leftist, nationalist-oriented politics; she analyzes how Daniel Alvarez, a Latino officer of the Chicago Park District and the son of a Cuban father and a Puerto Rican mother was portrayed as “un cubano” due to his opposition to erecting a statue of the Puerto Rican Nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos. This tension taps into deep-seated perceptions (correct or incorrect) of Cubans as anti-communist conservatives and Puerto Ricans as anticolonial radicals. Yet, according to scholar Erika Gisela Abad, the inherent heterosexism and patriarchal structure of dominant Puerto Rican cultural and political organizations in the city also provokes problems for women and for queer Puerto Ricans.

Questions of Latina bisexuality acquire a more nuanced representation in Obesjas’s 2001 novel *Days of Awe*. Here, the Cuban American protagonist Alejandra San José is portrayed as a bisexual woman raised in Chicago who discovers her family’s Jewish identity and decides to travel back to Cuba to learn about her family but also herself, sexually, religiously, and otherwise. *Days of Awe* signals a more mature, sophisticated stage of Obesjas’s writing, in which she is able to account for very complex interethnic, multireligious, and transnational phenomena. The portrayal of Latinos in Chicago is also more expansive that in most dominant representations.

**Rane Arroyo**

Born in Chicago to Puerto Rican migrant parents, Rane Ramón Arroyo (1954–2010) was a prize-winning poet and playwright who also lived in Ohio and Pennsylvania, where he received a Ph.D. in American Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. A self-professed gay writer, he
was also a literary critic and performance artist, and taught in the University of Toledo’s Creative Writing program for many years. Arroyo’s work is marked by his references to Caribbean and Latino life in the Midwest (particularly in Chicago), by his consistent engagement with canonical literary figures of American and English modernism as well as with Latin American and Spanish poets, and by his exploration of his own personal experiences, including his longstanding relationship with the poet Glenn Sheldon, his affection for his cat Diva, and his awareness of his own process of aging. He published ten books of poetry, including *The Singing Shark* (1996), *Pale Ramón* (1998), *Home Movies of Narcissus* (2002), and *Same-Sex Séances* (2008), plus a collection of short stories called *How To Name A Hurricane* (2005).

Arroyo’s self-reflexive poetry and fiction often focus on the inner conscience of a poetic persona, a gay Puerto Rican writer who feels out of place in the world and who is constantly struggling to grapple with what it means to be marked by racial, sexual, and linguistic difference. In this universe, poetry and fiction are construed as the space where memory comes together, the space for the appreciation of that which surrounds the individual, a way to come to terms with the world and to reflect about politics, news, racial relations, immigrant experience, and quite markedly, with what it means to be an American.

At the core of Arroyo’s universe is his family and the Puerto Rican traditions (dance, music, food, the Spanish language) and social experiences (factory work,
poverty, migration) that characterize them. There is a recurrent set of characters that reappear throughout many of Arroyo's books; these include Mami, Papi, Aunt Sylvia, Uncle "Rachel" (the transvestite uncle), as well as his many cousins. His poetry often expresses intimate (and evolving) relationships with these individuals, highlighting issues of masculinity and gender in relation to the father and uncle, of tradition and assimilation in relation to his mother, and of youth and coming of age with the cousins.

Arroyo's writing is marked by the variety of topics it covers in a most colloquial way, wandering from considerations of Latino popular and mass culture (Andy García, Antonio Banderas, Ricky Ricardo, Rita Moreno, West Side Story, Speedy González, and Taco Bell), to revisionist historic dialogues with Christopher Columbus and conquistadors such as Juan Ponce de León, to profound analysis about the specific environs of a particular neighborhood or serious critiques of racism or the effects of drug trafficking and drug addiction. It is a poetry and fiction that tries to reconcile geographic specificity (his own love of Chicago and his parents' Puerto Rico) with cosmopolitanism (a learned engagement with the Western tradition and extensive travels throughout the world). There is a clear attempt to address dominant conceptions of Latinos in the United States, engaging with damaging stereotypes as well as with issues specific to Mexican-Americans/Chicanos, Cuban-Americans, and Puerto Ricans.

Arroyo's short story "X, My Ex" (in How to Name a Hurricane) is a good example of how the author tackles these topics. "X, My Ex" focuses on the reminiscences of a first-person narrator, a Puerto Rican gay man named Emir who lives in Boystown, the main gay neighborhood in Chicago, and who tells of his relationship with a man dressed in a Zorro outfit (the "X" of the title) whom he meets "at one of those rooftop barbecues Chicago is famous for, where tenants bring out their potted plants and create green walls between the party and the city" (100). After a year of dating, Emir is dumped by "X," the white, previously heterosexual man from Utah whose name is never revealed. Chicago is marked by men such as "Jerry, a nice man known for cruising the johns at Wrigley Field whenever the Cubs were losing, or in other words, often" (101), by Emir's friend Linc, who calls him up to report a sighting of X "by the Belmont Rocks" (105), and by John, a friend with AIDS from Milwaukee who hangs himself. In this tender, vulnerable story, Chicago is a city populated by numerous gay men who have all slept with each other, where heartbreak is negotiated through alcohol, romantic reminiscences about Puerto Rico, and resistance to ex-boyfriend's special requests.
Cover of How to Name a Hurricane by Rane Arroyo.

Rose Troche

Rose Troche is a Chicago-born Puerto Rican filmmaker who has achieved significant mainstream commercial success, having her first feature-length narrative film Go Fish picked up for distribution by the Samuel Goldwyn Company at the Sundance Film Festival in 1994, then directing a high-budget English gay comedy (Bedrooms and Hallways, 1998), a major Hollywood film (The Safety of Objects, 2001, starring Glenn Close and Patricia Clarkson), and some of the most talked-about cable television programs in the U.S., including numerous episodes of Showtime's The L Word (a lesbian-focused series that she also cowrites, although one marked by its poor representation of Latinas) and one episode of HBO's Six Feet Under.

Her feature-length directorial debut Go Fish was cowritten and co-produced by Troche and her then-girlfriend Guinevere Turner; the film was initially conceptualized in August of 1991 and made in Chicago with an extremely limited budget and with nonprofessional volunteer actors. Go Fish was a box-office success in 1994, achieving major national and international
distribution, and has been frequently identified as a key component of the 1990s American “New Queer Cinema.” It is often compared to Spike Lee’s debut film *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986) and described as doing for lesbian film what Lee did for African American cinema, a comparison that unfortunately is often read as devoid of racial/ethnic specificity and that by extension suggests it refers to “white” lesbian film. In spite (or perhaps because) of this, the film is very rarely considered to be a “Puerto Rican movie.” Rather, people tend to see it as centered on the romantic experiences of two non-Latina white women—a young, trendy, somewhat angst-ridden writer/college student called Max (played by Guinevere Turner herself) and a dowdy, hippyish, slightly older veterinarian’s assistant called Ely (V. S. Brodie)—in the context of a group of multiracial and multiethnic lesbian friends—a butch African American college teacher named Kia (T. Wendy McMillan); her girlfriend, a femme, semi-closeted, divorced Puerto Rican nurse named Evy (Migdalia Meléndez); and a sex-radical, “happily promiscuous,” lesbian-identified, slightly butch young white bartender named Daria (Anastasia Sharp)—who conspire to bring Max and Ely together in early 1990s Chicago, specifically in Wicker Park, a neighborhood that before gentrification was a part of West
Town and that for a brief moment in the late 1980s and early 1990s had an important multicultural lesbian community.

Audiences' and (most) critics' lack of awareness about the Puerto Rican specificity of Go Fish has to do with widespread lack of knowledge about the history of Puerto Ricans in Chicago and also (and especially) with the subtle, almost incidental, and oblique treatment of this issue in the film: Wicker Park is not portrayed as a neighborhood with a Latino population (which it was, or had historically been, as Gina Pérez and Félix Padilla have noted), but rather as an artsy, bohemian, and lesbian one (i.e., the one it was becoming as a result of white artist and gay and lesbian migration and yuppie gentrification that started in the 1970s); the words “Puerto Rico” or “Puerto Rican” are never mentioned in the film; and while Evy and her mother speak Spanish and code-switch between Spanish and English, the only way to know that they are Puerto Rican is by recognizing distinct linguistic markers, by being familiar with the history of Latino populations in the Near Northwest side of Chicago (including Wicker Park but also the nearby West Town, Humboldt Park, and Logan Square), or by simply making an interpretive assumption and speculating that the character is a stand-in for the director herself.31 There are specific filmic elements that make Evy's Puerto Ricanness difficult to grasp, and as a result, it is much easier to perceive Evy as a generic “Latina” than as a Puerto Rican, suggesting Troche’s possible (perhaps unconscious) critical move away from nation-specific identities towards more pan-ethnic, collective ones, or a belief that Puerto Ricanness can be determined by simply looking at someone and hearing them speak Spanish, a tricky and imperfect test. Complicating this even further is the fact that Troche’s own comments on her Puerto Rican heritage, frequently articulated in interviews, and her discussion of the importance of Migdalia Meléndez’s Puerto Ricanness are often implicitly dismissed and/or not perceived as particularly relevant (or just simply unknown) by most people familiar with the film.

Go Fish has been celebrated by critics and audiences alike because of its low-key, fairly realistic, positive representations of what seem to be predominantly happy lesbian-of-color and white lesbian characters, at times engaging in sensuous lovemaking, in a film with catchy music including Cuban mambo as well as acoustic folk rock by Mila Drumke; fascinating lighting; unusual camera shots; and masterful experimental editing done by Troche herself. While the film is not easily read as Latina, it is an important document of our queer Latina Chicago history.
IV. Circuitos de la memoria: Latina/o Queer History in Chicago

A common denominator between the social and political organizing efforts of Latina lesbian organizations and the myriad Latina/o queer artistic proposals discussed in the previous section are the social intimacies they promote. These moments—from time spent together in a discussion group to the collective spectatorship of a film—are instances in our social history in need of documentation. But these practices of sharing also model the ways in which the archives of Latina/o queer history are continuously activated in the present. These collective pedagogies of the historical past are beautifully staged in the nightlife geographies of Latina/o queer club cultures.

It is a typical Thursday night in Chicago and a crowd of young queer Latina/o men, women, and other-gendered folk (as well as some straight friends and family members) wait in line at the entrance of Club Circuit, one of the largest dance clubs in Chicago’s Boystown neighborhood. One by one they go through the ritual of the I.D. check, pay their cover, and extend their forearm toward the bouncer who stamps them with the temporary assurance of belonging to the night’s social scene. It is “La Noche Loca,” a weekly party advertised as “Chicago’s longest running Latin night” and hosted by no other than La Cueva’s grand dame Miss Ketti Teanga. The evening features a diverse musical program as the DJ spins cumbia, hip-hop, salsa, merengue, and pop sets frequently enhanced by an add-on techno beat or a Latin house arrangement. It also showcases lip-synching performances by a rotating roster of Latina drag queens anchored by Miss Ketti’s sharp wit and her typically flirtatious rapport with the audience.

Miss Ketti’s girls rely on a repertoire of contemporary pop music both in English and Spanish. But every so often an old bolero or a pop song from the 1970s or 1980s, even the early 1990s, will sneak in and Miss Ketti will inquire from her audience whether they recognize or remember the song. She will often remark teasingly upon her audience’s youth and school them on the appreciation of Latina/o queer anthems of yesteryear. This sixty-three-year-old pioneer of Chicago’s Latina/o queer public culture and her fellow divas perform these songs to new generations of young audiences with incredible gusto and a passionate commitment. Their performances not only honor the shared experiences of Latina/o queer community in music and dance but stage for a new generation the labor of the drag queen as an important convener of this social scene. Miss Ketti and her fellow queens participate in what scholar David Román has termed “archival drag” or performances that “set out to
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Promotional flyer for party at Circuit Night Club, Chicago, June 2, 2010.
reembody and revive a performance from the past.” Miss Ketty’s performances of history, invested as they are in accessing the archives of queer memory, transfer among the gathered youth knowledge about the ways we live, love, and struggle as queer Latinas/os. They also propel us to imagine our futures in a city where our presence is long-lived if little documented, where our beauty and creative wisdom is spectacularly displayed at clubs from La Cueva to Circuit as well as stages, airwaves, chapbooks, and posters and where we seek community and political solidarity in the intimacy of the potluck, the energizing chaos of the street rally, or the subtlety of the poem.

It is important to record the groundbreaking works of Miss Ketty Teanga, LLENA, Amigas Latinas, Achy Obejas, Rane Arroyo, Rose Troche, Coya Paz, Fausto Fernós and many others for the Latina/o queer archive. But it is just as important to circulate this archival knowledge to new generations who seek the wisdom of the past to imagine their queer futures. Much like a 1970s anthem song performed on “La Noche Loca” at Circuit, Latina/o queer history begs for invested, embodied, and yes, pleasurably witty engagements. Want to join the dance?

ENDNOTES


2. This and all subsequent demographic figures are cited from Berenice Alejo, The Latino Landscape: A Metro Chicago Guide and Non-Profit Directory (South Bend, Ind.: The Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame, 2008), 9.
3. Ibid., 10.

4. La Villita (also known as the Little Village or South Lawndale) is also the setting of Tadeo García’s film *On the Downlow* (2004), which is about “the relationship between Isaac and Angel, two young Latinos involved in a Southside Chicago gang” (Gilberto Magna, plot summary of *On the Downlow*, Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com).


7. For an excellent discussion of La Cueva, especially the performances that take place there, see Achy Obejas’s recent essay “Juanga Forever,” *TriQuarterly Online* (July 5, 2010), accessed July 26, 2010, http://triquarterly.org/nonfiction/juanga-forever.


10. LLENA was committed to ensuring that all their meetings were accessible to both monolingual Spanish-speaking and monolingual English-speaking women. All meeting minutes were issued in both Spanish and English.

11. Jamie Jimenez, interviewed by Lourdes Torres, November 21, 2008; Carmen Abrego, interviewed by Lourdes Torres, January 29, 2010; Marilyn Morales, interviewed by Lourdes Torres, February 27, 2010; and Amparo Jimenez, interviewed by Lourdes Torres, August 7, 2010.


14. Quoted from LLENA minutes, December 12, 1989; also Carmen Abrego, interviewed by Lourdes Torres, January 29, 2010; and Amparo Jimenez, interviewed by Lourdes Torres, August 7, 2010.

15. Only one issue of the newsletter was published.

17. The reflections on LLENA’s demise are by Marilyn Morales, Jamie Jimenez, Carmen Abrego, and Mona Noriega, interviewed by Lourdes Torres, various dates.


19. Tracy Baim’s Out and Proud in Chicago: An Overview of the City’s Gay Community (Chicago: Surrey Books, 2008) is the first book to document Chicago’s queer history through a rich archive of photos and incisive essays by key journalists and scholars. The book is a companion piece to a documentary of the same name that explores the history of Chicago’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) citizens from the Civil War to the present.

20. Evette Cardona (statement during question and answer period) at Out@CHM event, March 4, 2010.


25. Achy Obejas, We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This? (Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1994); Memory Mambo (Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1996); and Days of Awe (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).


29. Rane Arroyo, “X, My Ex,” in How to Name a Hurricane, 100–10.

30. For a more extensive analysis of Go Fish, see Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in the Diaspora (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 108–22.

32. See the Circuit’s weekly events calendar: http://www.circuitclub.com. (accessed on August 17, 2010).
