

**Latina Lesbian Organizing In Chicago**  
Queering the Midwest Conference  
Lourdes Torres September 2010

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. While there is a growing body of literature on lesbian and gay and history in the US, including the foundational work of John D' Emilio, Estelle Freedman, Elizabeth Kennedy, Madeline Davis, and George Chauncey, there is much less documentation on the histories of racial and ethnic queer activist groups,<sup>1</sup> and practically nothing on Latina lesbian organizing in the Midwest.<sup>2</sup>

Such documentation is also 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 or in Latino/a 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 advocacy organization that was founded in 1995 and celebrated its 15<sup>th</sup> birthday this year and another Latina lesbian organization, LLENA, which predated Amigas Latinas and 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.

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<sup>1</sup> On Latino queer organizing, see the pioneering work of Aponte Pares, De Monte, Guzman, Negron Muntaner, Ramos and Roque-Ramirez.

<sup>2</sup> *Finding the Movement* (2007) by Anne Enke and *Are We there Yet? A Continuing History of Lavander Women, A Chicago Lesbian Newspaper, 1971-1976* (1985) describe lesbian organizing in the Chicago but contain almost no mention of Latina activism.

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 focus on the history of LLENA, highlight some of its successes, and touch upon some of the tensions and obstacles faced by the group, which may have led to its demise just four years after its birth.

In the late 1980s, there were not many spaces in Chicago that openly welcomed Latina lesbians. This changed when Maria Amparo Jiménez, a Mexican who had just moved to Chicago, called for a meeting of Latina lesbians in *Outlines* (a Chicago based Gay newspaper). 10 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," an acronym for Latina Lesbians en Nuestro Ambiente. Marilyn Morales came up with the name after a few meetings of the group. She explained, "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."<sup>3</sup> The group met every other Friday first at Horizons, a gay and lesbian Center, on Sheffield Ave. in 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. Also, the women started feeling unwelcome at Horizons, which they experienced as a mostly gay

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Marilyn Morales, June 2009

male space. LLENA leaders eventually 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. 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 and in the late 80s and early 90s, it was a frequent target of FBI surveillance and harassment. Despite the reservations of some of members, the group opted to meet regularly at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center.<sup>4</sup>

As LLENA members recall, the meetings drew all kinds of Latina women; while the original organizers were primarily 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 more than four hours. The meetings attracted women of all Latin American national backgrounds (Puerto Rican, Mexican, Cuban, Ecuadorian, Colombian), women of all ages from their early 20s to 60 year olds, married, closeted women, women who were just coming out, veteran dykes, professional women, undocumented women and women from all class backgrounds.

Negotiating these many differences was a challenge that LLENA faced right from its inception. This diversity of the women was a source of both exhilaration and tension. One constant thread that ran through the life of the organization was the conflict between women who were primarily interested in LLENA primarily as a space to socialize with other Latina lesbians and others who were interested in creating social change.<sup>5</sup> This disagreement surfaced in myriad ways across the years. For example, one contentious issue was the degree to which the group

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Carmen Abrego, January, 2010

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Jamie Jimenez, August 2008 and Amparo Jimenez, August 2010.

would seek to have a public identity in the Latino community. For some of the LLENA's members, visibility was a central goal of coming together. Amparo Jimenez remembers struggling with women around this issue. As someone who had been out since she was a teenager and who suffered the loss of her child to her ex-husband in Mexico because she lived an openly gay life, she had little patience with her more closeted sisters. She felt that women's fear of being out kept the group from advancing her goal of promoting the issues of Latina lesbians in the Latino community. Other women in the group were closeted and/or undocumented and did not want to publicize the group's activities. In one of the initial meetings, when Jimenez suggested that the group produce a newsletter, women who feared that a publication would bring them unwanted attention rejected the idea.

At the same time that in the early years few women wanted to speak out publically, Jimenez also felt that others resented her because she became the public face of LLENA. Jimenez was a long time activist who came to Chicago and immediately found work as an advocate for STOP AIDS Chicago, an organization devoted to educating Chicagoans about HIV/AIDS. She had been involved in lesbian feminist politics in Mexico and who surprised to find that there were no signs of Latina lesbian visibility in Chicago. Because she was vocal about this absence, she was invited to write a column in *Outlines* (a gay and lesbian newspaper) by Tracy Baim, the editor of the paper. Through her monthly column "Encuentro Latina" in *Outlines* and her activism around LLENA, Jimenez became a powerful voice for Latina lesbian organizing in Chicago. According to Jimenez, while Latina lesbians were happy to finally have a space to be together, they were also resentful that she, a non-Chicagoan, outsider to the community, started the group and became identified as its spokesperson.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Jamie Jimenez, August 2008

Given the diversity of the group, language use was another thorny issue. Most of the early organizers were Spanish dominant, first generation Latinas and they preferred that meetings be conducted in Spanish. While Jimenez, posted the initial ads convening the group in Spanish in her Spanish language column in *Outlines*, the meetings drew women who were monolingual Spanish speakers, bilinguals and monolingual English speakers. The consensus reached after much debate was that meetings would be bilingual so that every one could participate. The seriousness of this commitment to inclusivity is clear given that most documents produced by the group: newsletter, flyers and organizational minutes were published in both Spanish and English. While many members noted how frustrating and time consuming it was to conduct business in two languages, they all agree that it was a necessary accommodation of the diverse membership.

LEENA's orientation toward coalitional 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 late 80s 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 The Combahee River Collective, Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa and others.<sup>7</sup> *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 of color and offered a stinging critique of white mainstream feminism at the same time that it began to promote the

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<sup>7</sup> See for example the writings by lesbian feminists of color in the US such as Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Old Westbury: NY: The Feminist Press, 1982); [Cherrie Moraga](#) and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. (Persephone Press, 1981), Barbara Smith, ed., [Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology](#), ed. ([Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press](#), 1983), and [Cherrie Moraga](#), *Loving in the War Years* (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983).

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. These foundational texts were central to the organizing mission that some of the group's leaders hoped to enact through LLENA. The initial leaders seemed very interested in organizing not just Latina lesbians, but lesbians of all colors. They had an expansive vision of who they were and they were clearly committed from the beginning to bridge building between Chicago Latina lesbians and other women, both women of color and white women locally, nationally, and internationally. The following text stating the focus of the organization was included in a flyer announcing a cultural event organized in 1989, one year and a half after the groups' founding:

“LLENA es una organizacion joven, fundada para ofrecer un espacio a las Latinas Lesbianas de Chicago y suburbios. En casi un año y medio de existencia, Llena ha organizado eventos culturales y sociales que contituyeron exitos completos y que tuvieron la concurrencia de mujeres Latinas, Negras, Asiaticas, Nativas Americas y Anglas, todas compartiendo la emocion y las esperanzas de nuestra organizacion que esta aqui para quedarse, y que coninuara presentando el desafio de existencia, no solo a la comunidad Latinoamericana de Chicago, sino a la comunidad en general, de esta ciudad, el pais y el extranjero.”

**(LLENA is a young organization, founded to provide a space for Latinas Lesbians of Chicago and the suburbs. In almost a year and a half of existence, Llena has organized very successful cultural and social events which have brought together Latinas, Blacks, Asians, Native Americas and White women, all sharing the excitement and hope for our organization that is here to stay, and that will continue to present a challenge due to its existence, not just in the Latino community in Chicago, but the community in general, of this city, the country and abroad.)<sup>8</sup>**

Quite a few of LLENA's members were writers and artists and they created events that showcased Latina politics and creativity. Through these efforts LLENA began to reach out to Latinas beyond those who attended weekly meetings. LLENA held periodic cultural and social events, which brought together large numbers of women both heterosexual and queer. These

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<sup>8</sup> Flyer for International Women's Day Dance, 1989.

events, which were held in Latino community spaces, were never publicized as lesbian events although many of the featured performers were lesbians. One event in 1989 titled, “Words and Images by Latina Women” featured an impressive line up that included Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros.

Another of LLENA’s more successful projects involved living up to its mission by organizing with lesbians of all colors. LLENA co-sponsored the International Women’s Dance in the late 80s and early 90s that brought together thousands of women in annual dances; the first dances were held at the Electricians Union Hall on South Ashland beginning in 1989; as the dances grew they moved downtown to the Congress Hotel on Michigan Avenue and attracted over 1500 women. 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 whose membership had a membership of at least 75% women of color were invited to co-sponsor of the event.<sup>9</sup>

LLENA members were very intentional about why they were committing to the International Women’s Day Dances: they didn’t see them solely as fund raising ventures, although this was an important element that motivated the work. According to the November 1991 minutes, the goals for the dance were as follows: “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

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Carmen Abrego, January, 2010.

day 6) to work cooperatively sharing the benefits and work.” While there was some debate as 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 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. Marilyn notes, “working with men was a big deal, most women in the group weren’t separatist, not anti male, but very pro-women and pro women’s spaces.”<sup>10</sup> 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 and captured in the minutes was that “men would be allowed but not encouraged.”<sup>11</sup>

LLENA was especially interested in building coalitions with women of color but they also worked with white women. The April 1990 minutes report on a presentation to the group by Sarah Hoagland (a noted white feminist Philosopher); she was then leader of a group called Clear (Chicago Lesbians Emerging Against Racism) –CLEAR was a white, feminist, lesbian separatist group that offered to fund raise to send some of the Latinas to the 5<sup>th</sup> Feminist gathering 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

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Marilyn Morales, February 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from LLENA minutes, December 1989; also, interview with Carmen Abrego, January, 2010 and interview with Amparo Jimenez, August, 2010



socializing with their Latina lesbian sisters then listening to white lesbians discussing feminist separatist politics.<sup>12</sup>

LLENA finally did launch a bilingual newsletter, *Lesbiana*, two years after they were founded, although only one issue, fall 1990, seems to have been published. Many articles in the newsletter highlight LLENA's expansive vision of who they were, and makes clear that they were very much committed 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 built bridges between our community and the Asian, African American, and white/Anglo lesbian communities."

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, but by 1992, four years later, they had disbanded. Former members suggest that that class, political, and language issues ultimately divided the group and led to its disintegration in the early 90s. Other say that differences of opinion about the direction of the group lead to factions forming and infighting, and still others suggested that personal relationships and dating within the organization lead to conflicts and hurt feelings which destroyed the group.

Former members stressed the importance of LLENA which for many was their first attempt at organizing, and while they remember making many mistakes, they treasure the community they built and the skills that they developed, including: organizing events in the Latino community, forming coalitions with other groups, garnering media attention, and fundraising. Most women noted there while there was never a consensus about the goals and objectives of the organization, everyone was pleased that they had formed a community outside

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Jamie Jimenez, 2008

of the bars. LLENA brought together a very mixed group, and the leaders had little understanding of how to deal with these differences. They had a strong sense of their mission but were less sure of how to develop and sustain the organization.<sup>13</sup> Many of the initial group of organizers grew frustrated and left the group one by one. The tension between women who defined themselves as feminist lesbian activists and those who were just being introduced to these conversations was never resolved or dealt with head on. Jamie Jimenez, who came to the group when the original founders were departing noted, “there is a certain way of presenting information so people could feel that they have a stake in the discussion, people didn’t know how to balance where people’s levels of awareness and education were.”<sup>14</sup> Class and education differences among the women were also identified as at the root of the divisions. Jimenez also observed, “women with more privilege and education were more close-minded to the ideas of other women, they had stronger personalities. The suggestions got knocked out, the educated had to run everything.”<sup>15</sup> Looking back, Jimenez takes some responsibility for not being more sensitive to the women who were less politicized, “Yes, some of us wanted more visibility, we should have done more mentoring in a nurturing kind of way, but some of us have an edge, the fact that some were in the closet and others were not was frustrating.”<sup>16</sup>

Despite its limitations, LLENA unquestionably expanded the options for Latina lesbians in Chicago. LLENA was the first organization in Chicago to offer Latina lesbians a space (outside of bars) to meet other queer Latinas and to discuss issues that were central to their lives. With its incredibly diverse membership that included immigrant, Spanish monolingual 1<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Mona Noriega, July 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Jamie Jimenez, November 2008 and interview with Mona Noriega.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

generation Latinas, 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, English dominant women, married, older closeted women, 20 something, baby dykes, etc., LLENA worked to bring this complex community together with its vision of a transnational, global lesbian feminism. LLENA was ultimately not successful at mediating all its internal group dynamics and differences, but it indisputably offered an early example of Latina lesbian organizing which inspired the Chicago Latina queer groups that followed in its footsteps.

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