

Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encuentros

The Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encuentros have played a catalytic role in making the needs and requirements of Latina lesbians visible and in strengthening Latin America's feminist movement. They are also part of the few organized efforts that enable Latinas from both Latin America and the USA to come together to share experiences. However, it is my observation that conflict based on lesbophobia and heterosexism, and ethnic, race, and class differences, has created a rift between alliances of women of Latin America and Latinas from the USA. In my judgement this rift serves to disempower both the feminist and lesbian movements in Latin America. This article addresses the socio-political conditions under which Latina women from the USA and from Latin America live. Understanding the differences may offer opportunities for greater understanding so that conflict may be transformed into empowerment.

by
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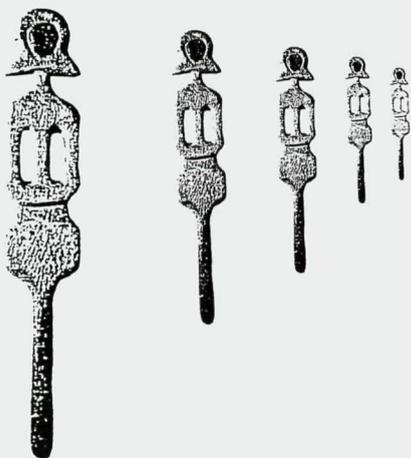
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Introduction

The Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentros* are of historical importance to the empowerment of the feminist movement of Latin America. They represent one of the few organized efforts that enable Latinas from both Latin America and the USA to come together to share experiences linked to social group membership (ethnicity, race, class, etc.). The Latin American and Caribbean Lesbian *Encuentros* have subsequently played a catalytic role in making the needs and requirements of Latina lesbians visible and in strengthening Latin America's feminist movement. However, it is my observation that conflict based on lesbophobia and heterosexism, and ethnic, race, and class differences, has created a rift between alliances of women of Latin America and the Latinas from the USA. In my judgement this rift serves to disempower both the feminist and the lesbian Latin American movements.

Historical Background of the *Encuentros*

Latin American nations have historically been politically and economically vulnerable. Thus, Latin American women share with women from other Third World nations common legacies of social, economic, and political conditions, and cultural ideologies, status, and role (Boserup, 1985; Miller, 1991; Sein & Grown, 1987). The feminist movement of Latin America has proposed that economic dependency, poverty, and colonial relationships with advanced Western nations are key to understanding the conditions in which Latin American women live. Furthermore, patriarchal ideologies characterize women's lives. Among these ideologies are traditional norms and values about women's social status and economic role; little access to formal political structures and educational resources; the unequal division of labor and the exploitative nature of women's work (Carner, 1987;



Bose & Acosta, 1995; Deere, 1976; Nash, 1995; Safa, 1995; Stoltz-Chinchillas, 1991; Vasquez, 1994); racism directed primarily at women of color (i.e., of native and African descent and Mestizas); and the historical heritage of *machismo* and *Marianismo*.

In the early 1980's Latin American feminist women began to empower themselves by organizing biannual, region-wide Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentros* (Navarro, 1982). These have offered women a vehicle for becoming politicized and for developing strategies to fight against prevailing sexism, racism, economic disparity, neocolonialism, and political repression in Latin America.

The Encuentros: A Personal Testimony

The Peru Encuentro

In 1983, I attended the second Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentro*, held in Peru. It marked my first experience participating in a Latina women's event. As I grew up in rural Puerto Rico, my awareness of gender oppression was a slow and often frustrating personal process. I remember my first experience at this *Encuentro* as one filled with excitement and pain. My excitement grew from the opportunity to unite with Third World Latina feminists and to search for a space to secure support and develop ties of solidarity with other Latina lesbians. The pain grew from noticing that lesbian-

ism was absent from the *Encuentro's* program and that the level and manifestation of lesbophobia was rampant and overwhelming. Prior to attending the *Encuentro*, I was intellectually aware of the oppressive and repressive conditions that sexual minorities live under in Latin America. In Puerto Rico, as well as in many Latin American countries that I am familiar with, lesbianism is a shameful illness or something to be kept secret and invisible. More im-



portant, I knew that coming out is not a choice because of existing forms of repression, perse-

cution, torture, and, in some countries, violence. In spite of the potential risks involved, many lesbians, most of whom were from the USA, chose to come out at this *Encuentro* because we felt a need to be visible, to fight against lesbophobic values and attitudes, and to support the women who were unable to do the same.

The news spread quickly about who the lesbians were and it did not take long before a wave of oppressive behavior based on fear, rejection, and mistrust was displayed. For example, many heterosexual women broke into tears as feelings of fear overcame them. Some threatened to leave the *Encuentro*, while others refused housing with the lesbian participants. In response to the resulting chaos, some of us proposed and facilitated a workshop on lesbianism. That approximately two hundred women attended

the introductory workshop was interesting. The workshop served as a ground-breaking experience and a historical moment for the Latina lesbian movement. It also informed the feminist movement, prompting a beginning effort at inclusion and solidarity.

The Brazil Encuentro

The subsequent feminist *Encuentro* was held in 1985 in Brazil. The organizers officially included a series of all-day workshops on lesbianism. These were not conflict free. However, they were well attended and offered a space for dialogue between the hetero-



sexual and the lesbian women. One major accomplishment of the *Encuentro* was the formation of a discussion group, led by women of various lesbian organizations from Mexico, to organize the First Latin American and Caribbean Lesbian Feminist *Encuentro* in Cuernavaca, Mexico. It took place in 1987, a week before the Fourth Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentro* held in Taxco, Mexico.

The First Lesbian Feminist Encuentro: Mexico

Once again, I felt great enthusiasm about being part of a social movement that unified us as Latina lesbians. Furthermore, the idea of forming and being a member of a Latin American Latina lesbian network (*La Red*)—which the organizers proposed—meant an important process of political and social empowerment for me.

However, conflict between the women of Latin America and the Latinas of the USA surfaced, taking over most of the conference schedule. Given that this time the women were all lesbians, for many women this rift felt more painful than the original lesbophobic rift. It appeared that Chicana women were affected the most. The new sentiment was a result of a closed meeting, which focused on keeping the USA Latinas from participating in *La Red*, held by the Mexican women. The result was four days of conflict, a series of discussion meetings, and the need to employ a participant who was an expert in conflict resolution to guide the discussions. By the end of the *Encuentro*, and in spite of the conflict, different workshops took place, some women formed new alliances, and many embraced the conflict as a learning process. This process grew and at the Fourth Feminist *Encuentro* that followed in Taxco, many lesbian women worked together to create and facilitate a workshop on lesbianism.

The Second Lesbian Feminist *Encuentro*: Costa Rica

The next lesbian *Encuentro* was planned for 1990 in Peru. However, the early momentum did not last. Many of the Peruvian organizers began to receive death threats from both ultra-right and ultra-left political groups and they moved the conference to Costa Rica because of potential violence against the participants. The organizers assumed that Costa

Rica, with its history of democracy, liberalism, and no army, was a perfect choice. The city of San José had a large and active lesbian organization called *Las Entendidas* and a lively gay community. However, a week before the *Encuentro*, local newspapers published a series of sensationalist stories and editorials with leads such as: "An invasion of 150 foreign lesbians, along with a group of Costa Rican lesbians is expected. They



will corrupt and pervert the minds of innocent young women," and "Lesbians coming to Costa Rica to have a satanic orgy." Initially, some of the women who arrived in Costa Rica denied the possibility that such a level of homophobia could exist. After all, Costa Rica was celebrating 100 years of democracy.

Nevertheless, the uproar and anti-lesbian hysteria that the press and the church had created pressured the government to try to stop the conference. Since the government officials did not know who the organizers were or where we would hold the conference, they went on to enact a law prohibiting entrance into the country to

anyone considered "undesirable." This meant not only controlling who entered the country, but deporting those suspected of being lesbians. In spite of the danger that the conference posed, the organizers decided to hold it in a secret location. The repression forced us to go underground, pledge secrecy, and agree to remain on the premises until the *Encuentro* ended.

The *Encuentro* offered a range of workshops and social activities held in a climate of harmony. Support and nurturance were displayed between the women from Latin America and Latina women from the USA. However, this harmony was severed when on the last night of the conference, a group of men in trucks surrounded the location and began to shout obscenities and threaten to attack. The fear continued until the next day when everyone could leave, due, in large part, to the help of the rural town police.

In spite of the lesbian baiting, the *Encuentro* ended with a strong sense of solidarity between the women. Because of the vulnerability that coming out in public posed for the Latin American women, a group of foreign women called a press conference. They denounced those individuals and policies that created the situation of fear and violence. The press conference was a great opportunity to organize for the civil rights of gay, lesbian, and transgender men and women. Moreover, the print media and TV news responded well, presenting a less distorted portrayal of lesbianism after some women filed a formal complaint with

the United Nations Human Rights Commission.

The Third Lesbian Feminist Encuentro: Puerto Rico

In 1992, Puerto Rico sponsored the Third Latin American and Caribbean Lesbian Feminist *Encuentro*. One hundred sixty-one lesbians attended. Sixty-one of the participants were Latinas from the USA, sixty-eight from Puerto Rico, and thirty-two from different Latin American countries. The *Encuentro* was very well organized with a series of structured workshops and events. However, the conflict between USA and Latin American lesbians once again surfaced and found its way into various workshops. The "they" and "we" rift (called *la grieta*) created an emotional whirlpool for all of the participants. *La grieta* was particularly painful for the women from Puerto Rico, many of whom felt torn between both sides of this division because of the USA colony status of the Island.

Because of *La grieta*, the conference schedule was changed to fit the creation of two separate workshops, one for the Latin American women and another for the Latinas from the USA. Two women from Los Angeles, one woman from Washington, one woman from Miami, and I facilitated a workshop to discuss and process feelings and to negotiate the political and emotional controversies that had surfaced. The reactions of most of the women were similar to those that I experienced during the *Encuentros* of Peru

and Mexico. The women felt rejected and hurt by some of the accusations made by the Latin American women about their privilege as lesbians from the USA. While many of the feelings of pain and anger surfaced in an excitable manner, fortunately a subsequent workshop brought both groups together to discuss sources of conflict and differences. Versions differ as to the outcome of this interchange. However, I observed that by the end of the *Encuentro*, many women appeared to bridge some of their ethnic, class, political, and ideological differences and appeared more interactive.

The Fourth Lesbian Feminist Encuentro: Argentina

The most recent lesbian *Encuentro* was held in 1995 in Argentina. The representation of Latinas from the USA was poor. Providing a precise explanation for this is difficult, but assumptions may be drawn. Traveling to Argentina from the USA is very expensive, and the registration cost for Latinas from the USA was much higher than that for Latin American participants. While the organizers of the Puerto Rico *Encuentro* promptly provided the Argentina organizers a mailing list, those of us from the USA did not receive the information until late. Also, it would be safe to assume that the rift that continues to exist between Latin American and USA women had had a disempowering impact.

Discussion and Meaning

In order for me to understand and deal with the rift that has surfaced numerous times during the *Encuentros*, it is important to recognize the existence of significant differences between the experiences of Latina women. Varied cultural and racial heritages, mixed social, economic, and political realities and ideologies, as well as regional differences, contribute to the widely diverse formations of contemporary Latin American countries and of Latino communities in the USA. Latina women, both from Latin America and the USA, reflect this heterogeneous reality. In addition, Latina women who have immigrated or are USA-born present differences due to social group membership and to levels of ideological awareness and political exposure to issues of ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, and heterosexism. The *Encuentros* reflect such differences. Moreover, I have observed that the interactive and peer-led open-debate format of the *Encuentros* seems to draw two types of reactions. One is the potential for conflicts based on ignorance, intolerance, and the belief of hierarchies of oppression. The second is—in the spirit of solidarity—to deny that differences exist and that conflict should be avoided.

In my opinion, while conflict around differences is often accompanied by painful feelings, it is often necessary. Conflict, when managed within a framework of empowerment, may be of great importance to

any process of group development and conscientization. Conflict offers opportunities for addressing and celebrating differences, as well as becoming politicized.

While developing awareness, one must recognize that gay men, lesbian women, and transgender people, particularly those who live or come from societies with a history of violation of human rights and of hate crimes, face manifestations of oppression that are more severe than those encountered by people who have access to more validating types of environments. It has been my experience that in Latin America, being able to come out is extremely dangerous, if not impossible. Many gays and lesbians today continue to witness the horrors of repression. For example, in some regions, gay and lesbian bars continue to be raided despite financial compensation to police officers to stay away. Gays, lesbians, and transgender people have reported violence and gang rape by police and the military. There have also been reports of death.

I have come to view the rift of the *Encuentros* as indicative of the complexity of the varied nature of oppression faced by Latina lesbian women in the USA and in Latin America. I believe that women who come from extremely oppressive environments often experience the *Encuentros* as a safe place to share and develop consciousness about their realities as oppressed populations. Thus, while healing, some women may lash out against others

who may be different from themselves or whom they may perceive as more privileged. I have noticed that many lesbians, particularly those who do not have a supportive Latina community, attend the *Encuentros* in hope of finding longed-for connections and solidarity. Expectations can be unrealistically high and when they are unmet, frustration and anger can emerge. The baggage carried from patriarchal, homophobic, heterosexist, and colonial homelands is too enormous and deep seated for such a magical resolution.

I believe that it is important to recognize that conflict over differences often grows out of ignorance and assumptions. In my observation there is often a lack of knowledge, and stereotypical assumptions are made about the history and the life conditions of different social group members, both from Latin America and from the USA. Ignorance about social movements may also present a problem in cases where, for example, a person from Latin America assumes that gay and lesbian Latinos hold positions of power in the gay and lesbian movement in the USA when, in fact, the contrary serves to be true.

Drawing from my own experience, I have noticed that many Latina lesbians from the USA have more access and exposure to information about and resources on institutionalized heterosexism, racism, and classism than their Latin America counterparts. While written material on Latina lesbians is frequently unavailable and hard

to publish, many Latinas from the USA have more access to literature on lesbianism. I want to also note that supportive services such as self-help groups and culturally competent psychotherapy exist. Moreover, identifiable sexually diverse communities that promote a gay-friendly environment are often a reality in some regions of this country. Unfortunately, during the *Encuentros* I often observed some of the USA Latinas using these privileges to measure and judge the experiences of Latin American women. I have also observed competitiveness, arrogance, and attitudes of superiority when describing resources or information about social movements, organizations, and communities in the USA.

In my judgement, it is critical that issues and behavior, which denote respect and sensitivity, are addressed in understanding the conflicts that may exist between these two groups. I thus suggest the use of the method of *conocimientos*, or dialogue groups, where different participants share their personal life experiences in order to enhance open communication and decrease intolerance and stereotyped assumptions about who we are. For example, this method may enable Latinas from the USA to learn about what Latin American women may perceive to be their power or privilege. Moreover, Latin American women, both heterosexual and lesbians, may listen to USA women regarding their marginalized status in the USA without comparing oppressions.

Conflict resolution skills and clear ground rules may also be helpful tools during the *conocimientos*. These may help bring issues of differences out in the open and manage disagreements and confrontations if they arise. The use of a framework grounded in the concepts of empowerment and conscientization is also a useful mechanism for creating awareness and respect.

While the *Encuentros* have often made me feel frustrated, I also recognize the opportunity that they have offered me to understand our struggles and how we have often been pitted against each other due to our own realities with internalized oppression. In my judgement, the lesbian and gay movement of the USA must gain an interest in learning more about the social realities and conditions of sexual minorities from Latin America, especially those that represent populations at risk. Furthermore, Latin American women, both heterosexual and lesbian, must understand that they are not the only victims of oppression and that hierarchies of oppression serve to create antagonism and prevent our joining in a united front.

In coming together as a unified front, I suggest that people of both dominant and marginalized social groups form alliances and learn ways to share power and privilege. For example, it is critical that those who have access to mainstream institutions and resources work together to organize international forces and support the struggles of Latin American oppressed

population groups. In many Latino nations, violence has become an every day affair. Many gays and lesbians live without hope or the possibility of having their pain seen or shared. Professional organizations and human service institutions, especially in the field of social work, must join forces with other groups by building skills and coalitions to work with sexual diversity and by using their personal, institutional, and international expertise and resources to fight these and other injustices.

It is only in this spirit that pro-feminists, transgendered people, and feminist lesbians of the Americas will some day discover a safe space for sharing with each other in empowerment and will welcome conflict simply as an opportunity for growth. □

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