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Nicole Perez

Rosa Yadira Ortiz

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Cover Page Footnote

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DYKE MARCH 2008: TWO VIEWS FROM THE TRENCHES

Nicole Perez and Rosa Yadira Ortiz
Chicago, Illinois

VIEW ONE: NICOLE PEREZ

Building a movement is hard work. Building a movement that includes and celebrates all of its constituents is even harder. Tactics of fear, of power and control, and of divisiveness permeate within movements and communities in Chicago. Way too often, social justice movements cast aside and even demonize members of their own communities in an attempt to gain acceptance and legitimacy from mainstream society. If we accept into our struggle the queer, the transgender, the gender non-conforming, the poor, the brown, the undocumented, the previously incarcerated, the homeless... however will they take us seriously? Does there exist a place, a movement, a struggle that allows us to be whole in our identities, to come as we are, to be embraced and accepted based on our like-minded political ideologies and shared vision of humanity? Is this really possible?

I began to be involved in various community movements in Chicago when I was about 19 years old. I had taken the time to come into my identity as a rather radical Cuban queer woman, and I was ready to start doing some work. I remember in my earlier years of organizing how filled with hope I was, and how little I knew about the politics of organizing and the impact that this would have on me in the future. I began first to work with different LGBTQ groups and communities in Chicago to fight against homophobia and various forms of discrimination against LGBTQ people. I participated in marches, spoke at rallies, and worked hard to organize and mobilize members of the LGBTQ community to fight back, to speak up and be advocates, and to build solidarity with each other. And this is where I started to learn some very important lessons, lessons that would change me and inform my politics for many years to come. Instead of finding a unified, non-judgmental LGBTQ community (as I had expected), I found instead that the same issues of racism, classism, sexism, xenophobia, and transphobia that permeated mainstream society were also in fact rampant in LGBTQ communities. In my many conversations with LGBTQ community members I would hear them say things like: illegal immigrants are terrorists, immigrants are stealing needed jobs away from Americans,

immigrants need to learn to speak English, bisexual and transgender people are confused and need help, lesbians are too angry and just need to calm down... When I heard these things my mind would just start spinning. I remember asking myself how communities that are so oppressed by mainstream society can turn around and use those same tactics of oppression against other marginalized communities. What will it take for us to understand the interlocking nature of our oppressions? To understand that the very tactics that are used to oppress and silence LGBTQ communities are the SAME as those used to oppress and silence immigrant communities, people of color, the poor, etc. We need to understand that when we scapegoat, when we make harmful generalizations about communities, and when we exclude people from our struggles and movements that we are only further harming ourselves and doing a great disservice to our overall cause.

During this time I also began to organize with communities of color around immigrant rights and workers rights, and against issues of racism, classism, and xenophobia in Chicago. I again participated in various marches, spoke at rallies, and worked to mobilize communities to take action and to build solidarity with each other. As with my earlier involvement in LGBTQ organizations, I was hopeful about the prospect of being involved in a movement that embraced and celebrated the identities of all of its constituents. Again, however, I soon discovered that this was not the case. When I talked to my *hermanas* and *hermanos* about fighting also for the rights of LGBTQ immigrants, many would say things like: immigration is not a queer issue, visible LGBTQ people would damage the legitimacy of the growing movement, LGBTQ people were either sick or sinners, and that LGBTQ people should not be around children (even at immigrant rights protests or rallies).

I also personally had a very negative experience at the May Day *marcha* in 2006. I attended the *marcha* that year with my partner (a Mexican immigrant), and we were marching with the LGBTQ immigrant contingent in a sea of rainbow banners and flags from numerous different countries. It was when the march stepped off

that we began to experience some problems. Many people began staring at our contingent. People started to snicker, laugh, point, pull their children closer to them, and frantically run away from our contingent as to not be associated with being LGBTQ. In the middle of the *marcha* someone actually turned to my partner and me and said to us, “*Faggots! You have no right to be at this march. You should be ashamed of yourself. This is not a gay-rights rally or a place for your gay shit- go home!*” Needless to say my partner and I were crushed and mortified to have been treated in that way. We chose to exit the march shortly after this encounter because we felt, overall, just really defeated. When I was walking home that day my head started spinning again. I again asked myself how communities that are so oppressed by mainstream society can turn around and use those same tactics of oppression against other marginalized communities. What will it take for us to understand that our oppression is connected? To understand that the very tactics that are used to oppress and silence communities of color are the SAME as those used to oppress and silence LGBTQ communities. To understand that the right to express oneself and one’s *cultura* (as a *Latina*, a *Mexicana*, a *Cubana*, etc.) is directly related to the right to express one’s culture as an LGBTQ person. What will it take for us to understand that we can never be truly liberated while others are being oppressed?

It was a combination of these experiences that lead me to be involved in organizing with the Chicago Dyke March Collective (CDMC). I was seeking, and was truly in great need of, a space that believed in validating, celebrating, and fighting for the visibility of all of its constituents, regardless of identity. My participation with the CDMC has been refreshing overall; not without its problems of course, but definitely refreshing and revitalizing overall. The CDMC is a collective of activists, artists, and community members from various different backgrounds all united in working together for a shared vision: to celebrate, to advocate, and to fight for the visibility and acceptance of all LGBTQ community members and their families/loved ones. CDMC acknowledges that LGBTQ people come from every country, live in every community, and are active members of every society, both here in Chicago and all over the world.

It was precisely because of this and because of our collective commitment to address issues of racism, classism, xenophobia, etc., that CDMC decided to move the Dyke March from its regular location in Andersonville (predominantly white, upper-class neighborhood on the North side), where the march had been taking place for the last 12 years. The CDMC, along with other community members, decided that as of 2008 the Dyke March would move to a different neighborhood in Chicago every year. This decision was reached with the knowledge that LGBTQ people live in every neighborhood in Chicago, combined with the reality that many LGBTQ people of color experience significant amounts of racism, classism, and xenophobia in White, Northside neighborhoods. Through a series of community forums it was decided that Dyke March 2008 would take place in the Southside neighborhood of Pilsen, a predominantly Mexican, working-class neighborhood. And the *marimarcha* was born!!

CDMC’s decision to move the march every year was met both with a mixture of excitement and resistance. We received overwhelming support from LGBTQ communities of color and allies to our struggles, but also received resistance from White LGBTQ communities and some Latino communities in Pilsen. Many White

LGBTQ people expressed concerns about the safety of marching in Pilsen. They viewed Pilsen as a dangerous, violence-ridden neighborhood that would not accept the Dyke March walking through its streets without some kind of retaliation. Among communities in Pilsen, some expressed concerns that the march would be promoting homosexuality in front of younger children, that the march would bring an influx of White people to the neighborhood (a neighborhood already struggling with issues of racism and gentrification), and that the march would promote indecent behaviors and forms of expression. Within the context of a segregated city such as Chicago, the decision to move the Dyke March every year and try to build solidarity with many different communities across the city was no easy task. CDMC hosts regular meetings and forums to continually assess its own process and to get feedback from many different community members. The work that goes into connecting and educating communities from varying identities and backgrounds is intense; it is challenging, frustrating, and difficult, but it is also rewarding. If we build a movement that ignores or condemns any community or group of people, the foundation of our movement will crumble. This is not social justice. This is ignorance and fear. Our movements, our struggles, and our communities must learn to embrace and celebrate the many diverse faces of its constituents. I am proud to continue to work with the CDMC. CDMC has given me hope that a movement can in fact be built that does not actively exclude members of its own community (or any community for that matter). Building an inclusive, intentional, and unified movement like this is not easy, but it’s worth it.

VIEW TWO: ROSA YADIRA ORTIZ

I remember reading “This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color” and how I longed for that sense of intimacy and familiarity that emanated from those pages. As a young Latina who was barely coming out, I felt as if those authors were speaking to me as I had felt when I first read Cherríe Moraga’s now infamous line, “...it’s about making familia from scratch.” I couldn’t put my finger on it then, but I knew I wanted to create my own familia...one that would support, understand, and cultivate my wants and desires. Those that have led me to perform my own understanding of femininity, to recover from my catholic upbringing and release the shame that has haunted me for many years along with reclaiming my body from the self-loathing high schooler to the sucia-positive and high-heel loving person I am today.

When I moved to San Francisco I was in awe. Complete awe. There were so many people of color there, so many queer people of color, so many trans and gender non-conforming folk. I felt like I had gone to that familia-from-scratch place. It was beautiful to be around people that expressed themselves, their genders, and their sexualities in complicated and multifaceted ways. While this did wonders for my heart and spirit, I knew this wasn’t real. I somehow always knew it was a bubble. When I returned to Chicago, I ached once again for that familia. That familia that never assumed me to be femme because I wore my high heels and sashayed as I walked into a room fully knowing these heels provided a sense of awakening. That familia that got that gender is so fluid and that we are always performing it. And yet I knew that Chicago had something so powerful. I remember discussing this with a friend of mine and agreeing that there was something palpable about Chicago in the past years—folks were going strong here and for those of us who had left and chosen to return, we’d come back

with a vengeance. And so it was only natural to get involved with Dyke March upon my return.

The year before I left, I was part of the organizing committee and selected to give one of the main speeches of the March. In 2004, Dyke March Chicago held its first women of color party. Not only was this a fundraiser for our grassroots collective, but also a celebration of the importance of women of color spaces. Amidst this groundbreaking event, Dyke March also heard negative feedback from those who we assumed to be our allies and even from those who we hadn't heard from. White folks felt that this space was exclusive, their tone was full of fear and white privilege. During the same time, many of us were still lamenting the loss and physical departure of our hermana Gloria Anzaldúa and so this attempt to invade and dismiss our sacred safer space was only more salt to our wounds. Nonetheless, our warrior women spirits continued with our women of color celebration, our communal mourning over Anzaldúa's passing, and solidified our commitment to women of color visibility.

Upon returning to Chicago I immediately re-joined. At our first meeting in the fall of 2007, I was in awe of how many brown faces were at the meeting. We had started early that year certain that Dyke March needed to change and toying with the idea of moving. The planning, in retrospect, seems like a blurb. Meetings filled to the brim with agenda items; numerous forums to discuss and decide where we were going to move the march; countless stories of disdain and rejection from folk for wanting to move the march. The majority of these comments were filled with thick undertones of racism, classism, xenophobia that only echoed our sentiment as queer women of color that indeed we weren't safe in the larger queer movement and neighborhoods.

What I remember most about the planning was the processing. Oh gosh, that processing that would make anyone go crazy! But in spite of that, in spite of all of that, the processing was one of the main reasons this worked. All of us were so intentional, so committed to making this move work, to making sure we were reaching out to as many communities as possible and being as inclusive, as sensitive, and as committed to what Dyke March stood for. In the end, I still wish we would've processed less, but I'm certain that it's what made Dyke March 2008 such a success.

I remember listening to the podcast of Dyke March while in a hostel in Rio de Janeiro. I heard part of it and immediately turned to my lover, and with a childish excitement, tapped her arm and said "listen, listen...dyke march is on a podcast!" And so we both listened in. Each of us desperately holding on to the headphones that were joined together with a plastic band, hoping to catch a glimpse of the queer familia that was created in June of 2008. I remember being part of that interview. When Eric asked me about the move of Dyke March a month earlier, I spoke to our commitment of inclusivity, our need to take back Dyke March

beyond the parade it was quickly becoming, our need for visibility outside of what was perceived a safer space and haven for lesbians in Andersonville. But I was also nervous. I wasn't sure what the outcome would be, what our neighbors would say, how we would respond if we only had fifty people attend the march—mostly our family and most committed friends.

But when Eric interviewed me on June 28, 2008, I was ecstatic. In retrospect there are few moments that have taken my breath away in that capacity—seeing my niece take three steps by herself for the first time; wearing my first corset and feeling completely whole and comfortable in my body; my mentor telling me that I had indeed produced a well written thesis after years of struggling with my writing. Yes, all a bit different but all moments that took my breath away. And still do. The presence at Dyke March was beyond just our family and friends, although many of them were there including my mom, sister, brother in law, and of course my niece. But also there were people who wanted to take a stand with Dyke March. Folk who wanted and needed a politicized space to express and celebrate their queerness, amongst many other identities. People who thought that moving was long overdue and very necessary. Community members who knew that to be in collaboration and to build solidarity movements, allyship was necessary and their presence a must. Queer and straight white folk who knew that discussions that called in to question the safety of Pilsen as the new location for Dyke March were inundated with racism, classism, and white privilege. It seemed that all those present, over 1,000 people, we all needed this.

NICOLE PEREZ is a US-born Cuban queer woman raised in the Chicagoland area. She has an MA from the Interdisciplinary Studies Program at DePaul University with a focus in Women's and Gender Studies, Latino Studies, and LGBTQ Studies. She recently served as the Principal Investigator for **Proyecto Latina: Descubriendonos**, an extensive research study on the lives of Latina LGBTQQ women in the Chicagoland area. As part of her senior project in her undergraduate degree at DePaul, Nicole wrote a proposal and led the effort to establish the LGBTQA Student Services office on DePaul's campus. She currently serves on the board of directors for Amigas Latinas, Orgullo En Acción, and the Chicago Dyke March collective. Nicole currently works as a research project coordinator at Howard Brown Health Center with the TWISTA Program (a peer-led HIV intervention program for young transgender women of color), and C-Talk (a peer-led, harm reduction HIV intervention program for MSM amphetamine users).
To contact: nicole.perez7@gmail.com

ROSA YADIRA ORTIZ is a queer-xicana/Latina who considers México City, Chicago, and San Francisco home. She completed her Masters in Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University and received her BA in Latin American and Latina/o Studies from DePaul University. Rosa is honored to be an Amigas Board Member and **hearts** learning about money, grants, and surplus as the Board Treasurer. Her most recent joys are participating in moving Dyke March Chicago to Pilsen, super cute purple pumps, and her niece's smile that is a pure delight!
To contact: rosayadira@gmail.com