

Education for Latino equality: Oral histories of Chicano women leader

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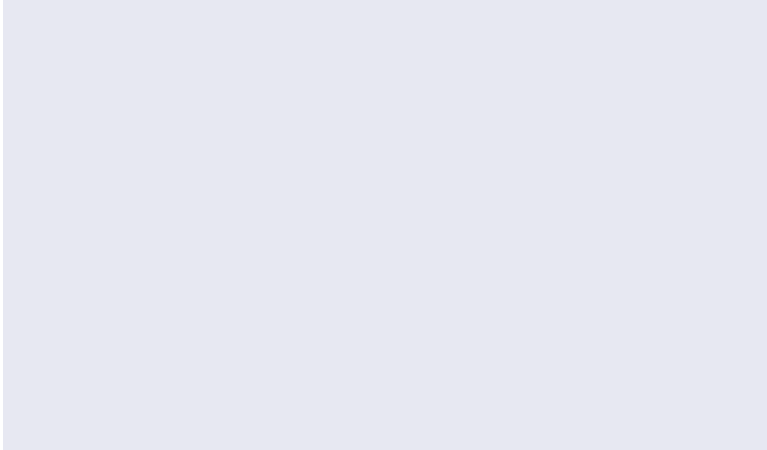


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Advocating for Latino equity: Oral histories of Chicago women leaders



the tradition of ethnography and oral histories, this in-depth interview study chooses a small number of participants to make meaningful contributions to knowledge (Small, 2009). The researcher was hired as the Chicago oral historian after being recommended by a community leader to Centro. The author interviewed female community leaders from the Puerto Rican Agenda, a collective in Humboldt Park, Chicago. All participants were nominated as notable Puerto Ricans by other community members and vetted by Centro. The three women interviewed as part of the project represent different timeframes, demographic features, urban migration experiences, and activism.

Oral histories, when combined with critical race theory (CRT) is a method that allows us to uncover the perspectives of people of color (POC) who's voices have been whitewashed and placed in the space of subordination in history books (Bernal, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, 1993; Matsuda, 1991; Yosso, 2005). In particular, this research is based on the principle of feminist CRT practice in oral history, which draws from the interviewees' memory and reflections as a tool for feminist and POC intersectional scholarship (Gluck & Patai, 1991; Johnson, 2000; Matsuda, 1991). Collective memory studies are an essential method for urban sociology to construct a history of space and illuminate social inequalities (Hunter et al., 2018; Tota & Hagen, 2015). While research on female leadership exists, primarily in an urban context, there is limited research on the impact of racial-ethnic identity and activism (Hicks, 2010; Yoder et al., 1998; Yosso, 2005).

Research on female leaders, mostly White women, tends to concentrate on positive feminine leadership characteristics or personality traits such as assertiveness, competence, and team-building (Hogan et al., 1994; Werhane, 2007). In these studies, which predominately represent the dominant group, operational strategies associated with women's leadership are listening, non-threatening collaboration, and communal consensus in civic engagement (Rosenthal, 1998; Wilson & Boxer, 2015). Adding complex dimensions of identity, CRT feminist scholars have discussed race, discrimination, gender, family relations, education, resistance, and activism through the unique lens of women of color (Davis, 1983; hooks, 1981; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983; Yosso, 2005). Several feminist CRT oral histories have discussed the general experiences of women of color. Until now, there has not been a study that directly documents their experiences organizing in highly contested and segregated cities with visibly apparent racial and ethnic inequalities like Chicago. Perhaps an exception has been Dolores Huerta, who organized in rural communities across the U.S. and co-founder of what is today the United Farm Workers. Sill, her contributions have been obscured compared to fellow activist Cesar Chavez (Sowards, 2019).

In the case of Puerto Rican women, this research finds that their stories revolve around their racial-ethnic-gender vectors of identity and social activism in the city. These female community leaders work to address urban problems that could be seen as a specific spatial phenomenon that affects Latinos and other communities of color, such as over-policing, the lack of representation, barriers in employment, education, housing, and health care, to mention a few (Dávila, 2004; Enchautegui, 1997; Fawcett et al., 2018; García, 2018b; Garcia-Hallett et al., 2019; García & Rúa, 2018; Sorlie et al.,

awareness of ethno-racial inequities as young women born in Puerto Rico who become adults in the United States. Oral history participants shared how they took challenges and risks as activists (e.g., getting involved in political and advocacy campaigns) and how that provided opportunities not only for them but for Latinos and Latinas in Chicago as a whole. Overall, participants practice community-driven strategies and leadership styles with a feminist, collectivist, and egalitarian approach based on different aspects of their collective social and political identity. Finally, female community leaders also discussed the value of popular education and career-related social justice mentorship and how much it meant and the support and encouragement of others in positions of political recognition or power to transform the city and its historical conditions effectively.

The rest of the article is organized as follows: first, it offers a literature review on gender and Puerto Rican migration to Chicago and the use of oral histories and critical race feminism as a methodology. Second, the methods employed are presented. Third, the oral histories of three extraordinary female Puerto Rican community leaders creating change in Chicago in various fields—that is, Hilda Frontany (community development, employment, education, and housing), Aida Maisonet Giachello (health), and Ada López (education)—are synthesized. Finally, in the discussion and conclusion, four key themes that emerged from the oral histories are discussed.

Literature review

Gender and Puerto Rican migrants to Chicago

Early historical work has privileged the accounts of European immigrants in the context of urbanization (Duany, 2002; Whalen, 2001). For example, the Chicago School of Sociology and its human ecology framework contributed to the social construction of race and ethnicity, which became the foundation of assimilation theory (Chavez, 1992; García, 2019; García & Toro-Morn, 2018; Macisco, 1968). African American migrants, who moved from the South, were thought to be unable to assimilate (Imani & Cullors, 2020). Latinos' ambiguity as not Black or White in the Windy City made them unassimilable too (Fernández, 2014; Rúa, 2012).

Sociologist Maura Toro-Morn, the most recognized Chicago contemporary feminist Puerto Rican scholar, has identified three themes in her work: (1) how the U.S. colonial relationships have led to the massive migration of Puerto Rican women (Alicia) to cities like Chicago, which became the third-largest U.S. Puerto Rican city after New York and Philadelphia (Toro-Morn, 1999; Toro-Morn, 2001; Toro-Morn & Alicea, 2004; Toro-Morn & García, 2017); (2) class relations also distinguished the migration of Puerto Rican women recruited to work in

Toro-Morn & García, 2017). This shift is attributed to broader societal changes like more women entering the labor force and the growth of educated women (García, 2018a), like Aida Giachello, who migrated from the island to obtain an education in Chicago. As we can see from above, the feminist literature on Puerto Rican women has concentrated on women's work, not on community leadership—a gap that this article seeks to fill. Furthermore, even if not explicitly, an author like Toro-Morn has given visibility to Latinas and Puerto Rican women by using counterstories to break the presumptions of women of color as stay-at-home mothers, which was the dominant White and middle-class narrative at the time. The next section describes the link between critical race theory and counterstorytelling.

Critical race theory and counterstorytelling

Tara Yosso, who is a Latina critical race theorist (LatCRT) scholar, employed “counter-storytelling” as a methodological strategy—that is, a recount of narratives, testimonies, ~~and oral~~ oral histories about “the experiences of racism and resistance from the perspective of those on

On oral histories

Oral histories are the collection, compilation, and study of past events gathered directly from an eyewitness through interviews that may be recorded in audio and, increasingly, video (Portelli, 2010). In the context of the 1970s audiotape, Studs Terkel (precisely in Chicago) conducted the oral histories of ordinary people who lived in the city, including hundreds of immigrants, documenting how they lived, where they worked, and their everyday activities (Terkel, 2006). Although he did not interview Puerto Ricans specifically in his work *Division Street America* (1967), these interviews are

again and re-write, as I misunderstood several points and the order of events. I was fortunate to have the participants help me with the editing of their biographies and this article.

I paid utmost attention to each narrator's autobiographical memory while listening to the videos because this tells us how and why a narrator still remembers specific events. As Penny Summerfield poses, an event that is of great importance to a person will always be in her memory and will most likely be retold at the slightest opportunity to do so (Summerfield, 2004). There is a very close relationship between memory and meaning: we remember because it meant something. Toni Morrison describes how enslaved Africans' individual and collective memories are remembered because they were traumatic experiences (Denard, 2015). Although traumatic events are remembered more vividly, people generally tend to remember life-changing events (Hunt & McHale, 2007). The next section discusses the life stories of three amazing women leaders for whom I conducted oral histories.

Findings: Three Puerto Rican women creating change in Chicago

I met Hilda Frontany, Aida Maisonet Giachello, and Ada López at the Puerto Rican Agenda. In this collective, Puerto Rican leaders, institutions, and individuals discuss and address the needs and dreams of Puerto Ricans living in Chicagoland. There, I had the privilege of getting to know each one of these extraordinary women

the Lakeview Latin American Coalition, she began to tackle many issues relevant to housing. Hilda explains the conditions in which many Latino families were living:

They were running buildings that were criminal housing. Because many of these buildings had exposed lighting. Many of them did not have running water. So the committee met with the Cook County State Office because they had a unit where they try to prosecute the landlords that were found to be criminal of negligence.

One of the first and most important problems she dealt with was the treatment of tenants in the area. Wealthy and greedy landowners bought entire blocks “sometimes up to 18 or more buildings” and displaced the Puerto Rican families living there. Frontany would ensure that these displaced families were aware of their rights and given proper notice of eviction. Most times fighting for tenants’ rights was a losing battle, but eventually, they made a huge win. Hilda was part of a team that resulted in a deal with the local senator and the Department of Housing “so that some of these families could return to 10% subsidized housing once this development was finished.” Many of those who bought these buildings had no intention of gutting and rebuilding, and Hilda, along with her church, organized processions in which they “moved from building to building praying for owners and tenants.” At the end of these processions, the groups would assemble in St. Sebastian Church’s basement and meet with the landlords. Fighting injustice peacefully was critical for Frontany, who was formally trained in community organizing tactics.

At the request of her mentor, Father Kyle, Hilda, and other community organizers were fortunate to attend classes at the Industrial Areas Foundation, a national network of local faith and community-based

employment opportunities for the Latino community. One of the biggest challenges that the Open Door faced was recommending Latinos to employers who ultimately fired them due to a lack of English-speaking skills. As a result, *Universidad Popular* (The People's University) was formed by the coalition and taught "English as a second or survival language." She further explains:

When we began organizing Latinos to be employed, we found out that employers said, "We cannot employ you because you

Aida Maisonet Giachello

Dr. Giachello is in the Department of Preventive Medicine at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. She is a respected educator and researcher who has been involved in community mobilization and action around health education, culture, and empowerment. Aida founded several organizations, including (1) the Midwest Hispanic AIDS Coalition, a nonprofit engaging in HIV prevention and education, training, and research and, (2) the Midwest Latino Health Research, Training, and Policy Center, a community-based research center at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) focus on health disparities. Recognizing the intersecting roles of race, ethnicity, age, class, gender, and sexual orientation, she was involved in countless grassroots efforts.

Because of her anti-racism work in health, Aida has received over 44 awards and recognitions throughout the years, including being honored in 2005 by *Time Magazine* as "One of 25 Most Influential Hispanics in America." Later on, in 2010, Aida was named "One of Ten Persons Who Inspire" by the American Association of Retired Persons, together with Clint Eastwood, Raquel Welch, and others. In 2014, she received the "Health Equity Champion" award from the Centers for Disease Control.

Aida was born in December 1945 in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Her parents were Ramón Maisonet Seise and Hortensia González Cordero. At the age of 3,

I was the only one. It was mandatory to take an entrance exam to the University of Puerto Rico, and in my group of friends, I was the only one who passed the exam. I feel so bad because a lot of people wanted to go to college. I was the one not thinking about going to college, but now that I was accepted, I have to go!

In the above quote, Aida admitted guilt because she made it and her close Santurce friends did not. She first earned a bachelor's in sociology and psychology from the University of Puerto Rico (UPR). It was at UPR, after managing a team of researchers and training them to conduct interviews, the study investigators from Northwestern University made her a job offer to move to Illinois.

forward. By then, Giachello “had three small children and was convinced that she wanted to get a PhD and do research, my first passion,” she explained. At the time, Puerto Rico did not offer PhD programs. She immediately applied to the PhD program at the University of Chicago’s Sociology Department. While working toward her PhD, she started simultaneously working full-time as a medical social worker for the Chicago Department of Public Health, which opened a new clinic (the Lower West Side Neighborhood Health Center) in the Pilsen community. This community served as a point of entry to Mexican immigrants. Working there, she discovered “her second passion,” which was health care:

This was a critical time in my life. Because I fell in love with health care. I

Hispanic health policy plan to address

ASPIRA, and, like Hilda, she worked closely with the Young Lords and other like-minded grassroots Puerto Rican efforts. As a student organizer at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), Ada was a crucial figure in developing the Latin American Recruitment and Educational Services (LARES) and the Rafael Cintrón Cultural Center, two organizations dedicated to promoting success for Latinos at UIC. López had been extraordinarily active in public policy, serving as a board member for the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teacher's union in the early 1980s, the Mayor's Advisory Commission on Latino Affairs in the mid-1980s, and Illinois's Board of Education in the early 1990s. In 1993, she was the first Latina to run and win statewide elections to serve on the Board of Trustees in the University of Illinois system.

Ada López was born in 1947, and like Hilda, her family is originally from Arecibo, Puerto Rico, where she enjoyed playing hide and seek in the mountains. Thanks to an Indiana company's recruitment effort in Puerto Rico in the 1950s, her father found work in the steel mills of Indiana while providing for his family back home. Her father did not like Indiana, and at the recommendation of a very close Italian American friend, he moved to Chicago with his family a few years later. When she moved to Chicago, Ada had never been exposed to American culture or the English language and found herself having a hard time fitting in. She, thus, experienced "discrimination, bullying, and misunderstanding in the school setting." López attributes these first experiences as the beginning of her "cross-cultural communication training," which is part of Ada's academic field, trying to understand how people of different cultural backgrounds communicate in similar or other ways.

While a student of Chicago's community colleges, Ada became an activist and organizer. At this time, in the late 1960s, Ada and others were trouble to administrators, demanding a higher level of engagement in the form of involvement in the decision-making process from ASPIRA. This educational organization started in New York City and had recently moved to Chicago. Ada now talks about her feistiness, a little bit ashamed of it because she directly challenged Antonia Pantoja, which became her mentor. After questioning the intents of Antonia Pantoja and ASPIRA—in meeting the needs of college students like her—to her surprise, she was offered a job within the organization as a club organizer, which she accepted. Ada shared:

I was a teenager by the time I became active with ASPIRA. I was one of the first

Latin American communities' cultural and social progress. Another important initiative that came out of her efforts was the Rafael Cintrón Ortiz Latino Cultural Center. This space hosts lectures, events, research, and community projects about Latino communities' cultural heritage.

Upon graduating in 1973, López established the Lakeview Alternative School, where she spent about 2 years as a teacher. In 1975, she started work with CPS as a

with all her self-doubt, in 1993, López ran and won the statewide election with 3 million votes, becoming the first Latina to do so. She remembers her deep frustration,

At the time cultural programs were under threat, I was able to increase the budget for them. I thought that when I was elected in 1993 that I will be doing more, and LARES could do more and expand. But it was not like that. It took a lot of energy to maintain what we had. I

Chicago African American mayor, who partner with López and Giachello to engage in the Mayor's Advisory Commission on Latino Affairs and the Mayor's Women's Commission. Ada was also the first Latina to run and win statewide elections to serve on the Board of Trustees in the University of Illinois system. Similarly, Hilda helped elect Miguel del Valle and Chuy Garcia. For them, politics was about social change and not about power. Hilda, Aida, and Ada spoke of relational and collaborative leadership styles that offer a counterstory that stands in opposition to the White and male leadership style.

- (4) *Education, mentorship, support, and encouragement as a way to raise critical consciousness.* To challenge inequities, one has to de-normalize inequities. All three women mentioned how crucial it was for them to support and mentor others. They want to pay forward the mentorship they received, for example, Hilda's mentorships of her church priest, Charlie Kyle, Aida's relationship with Silvia Herrera from ASPIRA, or Ada's close alliance with Aracelis Figueroa at the CPS Board of Education. All of these mentors socialized them to see the reality of power, privilege, and oppression and how they related to the conditions of their community. Mentors helped them to recognize opportunity gaps in their own lives and how they could raise critical race questions to create change. Similarly, Frontany, Giachello, and López chose to empower others by providing educational growth opportunities. Ada's LARES, Hilda's involvement in *Universidad Popular*, and Aida's Midwest Latino Health Research, Training, and Policy Center clearly show how education was a means to empowering Latino students, professionals, and the community.

These common themes are things that most community leaders do or experience regardless if they are Black, White, Asian, Latino, or Latina, especially living in the civil rights era. What is different is that Latina and, in this case, specifically Puerto Rican leaders, were invisible at the time. Perhaps they still are, which makes us think that they are less critical and, therefore, not worth writing about. All of these migrant women at a young age thought they could be part of Chicago's fabric as social changers and makers of the new American future.

These oral histories show that participants actively engaged in self-discovery and took charge of their lives, goals, and visions for themselves and their community. They also have a sense of obligation to serve their community, motivate others, and create social change among the larger society. Overall, participants had leadership styles with a collectivist and communal view, which other feminists such as Rosenthal (1998) and Wilson and Boxer (2015) have previously described. Still, for our participants, these were center to their own racial and ethnic identity.

particular, this article has taken upon telling the stories of a group that has been ignored by scholars, thus filling a much-needed historiographical gap. Hopefully, the above “counters-tories,” in the form of oral histories (Yosso, 2005), take a bold step to show not only that these stereotypes are not accurate for Latina women leaders, but that *pioneras* have “shaped change” not only in their own lives and families but their communities and beyond.

The intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender-motivated these female community leaders makes outstanding contributions in housing, health, and education. Frontany understood place and fought to resist displacement as a Catholic woman, who saw her own Christian community reject her mother because she was a Latina. By forming a social connection to a historically Puerto Rican neighborhood, Hilda fought for equal rights in housing, education, health, and political representation—to mention a few of her long-standing community battles. Giachello wanted to assume the more traditional role of a mom, so she resisted getting an education, but mentors, like Silvia Herrera, continuously supported her. She sought out her passion for health research, and she was able to advance cultural competency among this group in local and national public health. Similarly, Ada was pushed forward by Herrera to take part in leadership roles in education, ultimately becoming the first Latina on the University of Illinois’s Board of Education.

To echo Angela Davis’s (1983) previous findings of

Notes

1. The 10 themes are: (1) a critique to liberalism, (2) storytelling/counterstorytelling and naming one's own reality, (3) revisionist interpretations of American civil rights law and progress, (4) A greater understanding of the underpinnings of race and racism, (5) structural determinism, (6) race, sex, class, and their intersections, (7) essentialism and anti-essentialism, (8) cultural nationalism/separatism, (9) legal institutions, critical pedagogy, and minorities in the bar and, (10) criticism and self-criticism; response.
2. Gloria Jean Watkins chose bell hooks as her pen name and decided not to capitalize it as a way to call attention to her work and not her.

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