

Maria Cotera

“Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster”:
Feminist Archival Praxis after the Digital Turn

What we are is what we decide we are. And what we do with our identity is also our decision, not the decision of men, the universities, “herstories,” “his-stories,” or anyone else.

—Martha P. Cotera, keynote address, Chicana Identity Conference, Houston, 1975

In the 1990s any feminist theory syllabus that aspired to represent a certain vision of the women’s movement (as a multiethnic, decentralized, democratic experiment where theory did not drive practice but emerged from it) would no doubt have included the writing of women of color anthologized in *This Bridge Called My Back*. Published in 1981, that foundational anthology introduced a rising generation of feminists in the academy to writing from the margins of academic feminism. Not surprisingly, it is frequently cited as a moment of emergence for women of color/intersectional feminism. But if you took that volume, as did so many feminists in the academy, to document the *first* contributions of women of color to the theory and practice of feminism, you would have been committing (however unwittingly) an act of erasure. The present essay narrates my response to that erasure—as a Chicana

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scholar who has labored to reinsert women of color into our collective memory and as the daughter of a Chicana who shaped feminist praxis a decade before the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*—with an account of an archival project that reaches into our shared feminist past in an effort to build a different future for feminist praxis in the academy and beyond.

My choice to preface this essay with an epigram that gestures to that past through the words of my mother, Martha P. Cotera, reflects these dual commitments. A feminist public intellectual of the old stripe, Cotera did her research and writing through public speeches, essays in movement publications, and self-published texts funded by a combination of Women's Educational Equity Act grants and "work on the side."¹ In the 1970s, by far her most prolific period as a feminist writer, Cotera produced several texts (*Diosa y Hembra* in 1976 and *The Chicana Feminist* in 1977) that debunked myths about Mexican American women and called for the recognition of a particular liberatory imaginary—Chicana feminism. These books, like much of the writing of women of color before *This Bridge*, were out of print and largely unavailable by the late 1980s.² Along with other Chicanas who were prolific writers and researchers during this period (Anna Nieto Gomez, Alicia Escalante, Francisca Flores, Evey Chapa, and many more) my mother constitutes a "lost generation" of Chicana feminism, an intellectual legacy that has been overshadowed by the twin towers of male-dominated accounts of the Chicano movement and a "wave" model of feminist history that typically figures *This Bridge* as the starting point of women of color feminism.³ Most of the women of this lost generation did not pursue PhDs or achieve tenure-track positions, but they (along with early black feminists) nevertheless shaped intersectional feminism in profound ways. And yet, perhaps because they were denied the opportunity to become fully fledged citizens of the institutions that transformed oppositional social movements into academic practices, they have been lost to history. Hence the first part of my title, "Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster"—a quote derived from Mitsue Yamada's essay in *This Bridge*—which paradoxically hails both its continuing importance to feminist theory and the ways in which historical accounts of both the women's movement and the Chicano movement have rendered invisible a much longer legacy of feminist of color praxis.

As its title suggests, this essay concerns the politics of historical meaning-making and the methodological practices that shape collective memory. There can be little doubt that the dominant historical imaginary of social movements of the 1960s and 1970s has tended to render the contributions of women of color invisible. Multiple critiques of the "wave model" of femi-

nist historiography have criticized the genealogical narrative that credits *This Bridge* with ushering in the “third wave” of the women’s movement (Sandoval 2000; Thompson 2002; Blackwell 2011). These critiques note how such historical framings feed the popular notion that women of color were relative latecomers to feminism while also, crucially, ignoring the interventions of women of color who were actively producing feminist knowledge in (and before) the “second wave” in both white feminist and ethnic nationalist spaces. Feminist critiques of Chicano movement historiography have problematized its tendency to focus on, in Maylei Blackwell’s (2011: 28) words, “a cosmology of male heroes that reifies the ‘great man’ narrative and interpretive structure.” This heteromasculinist narrative frame, they argue, mirrors the patriarchal tendencies of the movement itself, even as it erases the myriad forms of labor that contributed to the movement’s effectiveness and reach. Historians like Alma Garcia, Dionne Espinoza, and Lorena Oropeza have recuperated the community-building work and political organizing of women in the movement, demonstrating that Chicanas were active, if critical, participants in shaping the key terms of struggle within both the women’s movement and the Chicano movement. Much of this new scholarship has been built from the ground up: by finding and forging connections with the women who were active in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s; by interviewing them and conducting life histories; and by collecting and interpreting their personal archives. This is risky and important field-building work that is rarely undertaken in the traditional way. With scant institutional archives dedicated to the legacy of Chicana feminism and few secondary sources that document this history, scholars must frequently create their own archives, methodologies, and genealogies. In doing so, they produce historical work that swims against the tide of the methodological and interpretive norms of most Chicano and feminist historiography.

Inspired by this emerging work, and aware of the pressing need for archival resources documenting Chicana praxis in the 1960s and 1970s, I started a digital archiving project in 2009 to create a resource of primary materials for scholars, teachers, and students. What began as a relatively modest archival intervention soon developed into a multi-sited national digital humanities project—the Chicana por mi Raza digital archive—that sought a somewhat grander goal: to reimagine the archive not as a static repository but as an active site of knowledge production that could realize the emancipatory potential of its central subject, Chicana feminism. The primary focus of the project is to collect, organize, and preserve oral histories and archives that document the development of Chicana feminist praxis

between 1965 and 1985. Like all such digital projects, the Chicana por mi Raza digital archive involves collaboration among academics, media makers, digital specialists, students, and community members. Its labors are undertaken in multiple contexts: in the classroom, in the community, in the library, and even in the computer lab. Its audience is conceived as broadly as its collaborative production model and includes scholars, students, community members, and grassroots organizations. The impetus for the project is undeniably *archival*, but in its collaborative and multi-sited relations of production, and its efforts to reimagine archival recovery through the lens of feminist praxis, the project challenges the knowledge/power system that grounds the authority of the traditional archive. In what follows, I offer an account of how my thinking about archival praxis shifted as Chicana por mi Raza moved from a fairly straightforward digital reunification project to one that called into question the very nature of the archive—how it is constituted, what it tells us, who it represents, and how it is engaged for knowledge production.

The Politics of Archival Visibility

My work with the digital archive is, in many ways, a natural extension of my experience researching and writing *Native Speakers: Zora Neale Hurston, Ella Cara Deloria, Jovita González, and the Poetics of Culture*, a book that traced the forgotten history of women of color working in the US academic mainstream of the 1930s and 1940s. I came away from *Native Speakers* with an acute awareness of how archives both preserve and shape the historical imagination, and of how one's presence—or absence—in institutional archives is determined by one's access to discursive power. The women I focused on in *Native Speakers* had some visibility in institutional archives, but they arrived there in very different ways. Both Hurston and Deloria figured prominently in the institutional archival collections of the “great men” (and women) of their generation, but while Hurston has three major archives dedicated to preserving her legacy (Yale, University of Florida, and Library of Congress), Deloria's archives have been reunified and preserved by a tribally initiated effort to create an autonomous community-based research center: the Ella C. Deloria Research Papers. In contrast, though González was a celebrated folklorist in the 1920s and 1930s, even serving as president of the Texas Folklore Society in 1929–30 (a remarkable feat for a young Mexican American woman given the sexism and anti-Mexican sentiment that often predominated in the organization), established repositories largely ignored

her until the 1970s. Indeed, my mother played an instrumental role in acquiring her work for the Mexican American Papers project, a collection established at the University of Texas in the 1970s in response to community demands for the preservation of Mexican American history.⁴ These disparate circuits of archival preservation suggest that archives both respond to and reflect the political and social dynamics of the culture they seek to preserve. Indeed, traditional archival methods often nourish an *invisibilizing feedback loop* in which one's access to power determines one's presence in the archive, and one's presence in the archive shapes historical knowledge, which, in turn, informs the system of valuation that structures the priorities that govern collecting and preservation in institutions. Those farther away from the mechanisms of power—women, the working class, ethnic and sexual minorities—are rarely represented in institutional archives. Consequently, their lives and interventions are rarely the subject of historical meaning-making.

As a result of my research and writing for *Native Speakers*, I also became keenly aware of the contradictions inherent in my own desire to recover the lost history of women of color intellectuals. Inevitably, the archival legacies I was making visible were limited to the very institutional spaces (universities) that had marginalized Deloria, Hurston, and González during their lifetimes (and even after their deaths). As an authorized scholar at a Research I university, I had the requisite resources, credentials, and time to access these legacies. My status as an institutional “expert” granted me the authority to draw conclusions from their archives and interpret their legacies in a manner that spoke to scholarly audiences, whereas in most cases, the communities that Hurston, Deloria, and González struggled to document had very little access to either their archival collections or the knowledge I was producing as a result of my status as a scholar. This is a familiar script for scholars focusing on marginalized populations, who have long labored to recover the lives and legacies of subjects rendered invisible by dominant historiography. The books that we produce in and through this counterdiscursive will to recover have reshaped historical knowledge to an extraordinary degree, but there is reason to wonder about the political and popular impact of our scholarly interventions. Indeed, the question of audience is particularly acute for scholars who understand their place in the academy as translational, or—to crib from 1980s feminist of color discourse—as a form of “bridge-building” between the academy and the community. For those of us who continue to believe that the oppositional consciousness produced in books like *This Bridge* (and the grassroots knowledge-making that supplied

its conditions of articulation) has liberatory potential for communities beyond the academy, mining the archive to write scholarly articles and volumes seems to take us only part of the way. These fraught relations of scholarly knowledge production highlight key questions about the “publics” that our scholarship addresses and reveal another kind of feedback loop in which subaltern knowledges are recovered only to be recirculated as scholarly products that reify the academy’s authoritative status as a site of knowledge production. This problematic became central to the conceptual and methodological aims of the *Chicana por mi Raza* digital archive as it developed from a scholarly archival recovery project to one that sought to reimagine not just the content of history but also the relations of production at the center of historical meaning-making.

From Access to Praxis

In 2009 I launched *Chicana por mi Raza* as a national oral history and archive collection initiative in collaboration with Linda Garcia Merchant, an Afro-Chicana filmmaker whose mother worked closely with my own in various feminist spaces (including the National Women’s Political Caucus).⁵ Our plan was to conduct life histories and scan archives, focusing on women like our mothers who had been active in multiple sites of struggle (racial and social justice as well as women’s liberation) in the 1960s and 1970s. The project aimed to increase access to Chicana historical documents to spur new scholarship on the period, but even in this early stage it involved much more than simply building an archive. There was a strong theoretical impulse animating the project from the start: our aim was to trace contemporary women of color theory from the institutional context of the academy back to its earlier roots as a praxis that responded to and resulted from grassroots organizing. We wanted to document the experiences of Chicana feminists who (like their intellectual foremothers) labored to forge a political identity at the intersection of ethnic and feminist movements because we believed that the strategies they developed for mediating between movement ideologies offered relevant conceptual insights and “tactics” for social change (Sandoval 2000). The project was, at once, a *visibilizing* gesture that had the potential to transform movement historiography and a challenge to reenvision academic theory as praxis.

Initially I saw my aim as one of “recovery”: in a traditional scholarly cast, I would uncover the subjugated knowledge of women of color and make that knowledge available to a broader scholarly community to transformative

ends. But this narrative, which perfectly suited the inclinations of my training as a humanist, left me with a nagging feeling that I was somehow missing the point. What would I do with this “subjugated knowledge” I intended to collect? Where would it live after I had condensed its variegated meanings and disciplined its contradictions into a recognizable scholarly form? *Whom would it belong to?* These essentially ethical questions arose from the dialogical engagement with the Chicana feminists that we interviewed (all of whom wanted their stories and documents to be accessible to a broad public), but they were also incited by our exposure to the submerged feminist counterarchive we discovered in that process. Stored in living rooms, basements, attics, offices, and garages across the Southwest and Midwest, this archive included letters, photographs, meeting notes and agendas, conference programs, out-of-print books, journals, newspapers, flyers, posters, buttons, and even audio recordings and filmstrips. Stockpiled under beds, on shelves, and in boxes tucked discreetly into the corners of closets—constituted in both memory and artifact—it collectively documented a vibrant counterpublic in which women worked to forge connections between their lives as gendered, classed, and racialized subjects across multiple registers of difference. Indeed, as the women with whom we talked recounted their experiences and shared their carefully archived newspaper clippings, photos, and letters, a distinct discursive field began to take shape. Foundational texts like Cotera’s *Diosa y Hembra* and *Chicana Feminist*, and journals and newspapers like *Encuentro Femenil* and *Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc* (both published by Chicana collectives), began to pop up in multiple personal archives. Women we interviewed from across the Southwest and Midwest recalled being at the same conferences, rallies, and meetings, and fighting the same kinds of battles in multiple sites. In some contexts they were challenging the masculinist symbolic order of dominant nationalisms (which sought to incorporate women as “helpmeets” of revolution) and in others, dominant forms of white, hegemonic feminism, which too often relegated them to the margins or treated them as second-order tokens. What we saw emerging, in other words, were the traces of a vibrant counterpublic forged in the margins of multiple 1970s counterpublics, one that suggested the complex and shifting forms of political identification (and disidentification) that remain a central feature of women of color praxis today.⁶

As this complex feminist landscape unfolded before us, Linda and I were forced to reconsider the usual product-oriented ethos of the scholar/documentarian who, as “interpreter” of history, amasses an archive only to produce her singular vision of “what happened.” It seemed to us that to tame this

rhizomatic archive—forcing it to conform to a singular interpretive frame that might smooth over its productive sprawl and its unruly contradictions—would be to diminish it in a way that would inevitably enact new erasures. Inspired to these theoretical/methodological musings by the lived experiences of the women we were documenting, we began to realize that this story was not “ours” to tell. Sensible of our own identities as Chicana feminists, as knowledge producers, and as daughters who saw the continuity between our mothers’ experiences at the margins and our own, we began to see that the insights we gained through documenting this Chicana counterpublic—and its praxis at the crossroads of multiple struggles—had import beyond the academy.

I asked myself whether it was possible to capture the catalyzing energy of this Chicana counterpublic beyond simply making its texts accessible to a broader public, whether I could exit the feedback loop between archives and scholarship and expand the archive’s transit beyond the academy. Could an archive reflect the liberatory potential of its central subject: Chicana feminism? Could it be reimagined as a place not just of documentation but transformation? Could an archive offer something more than a transfer of knowledge from the community through the interpretive lens of the academy? What would such an archive look like? Who would help shape it, and who would have access to it? How might it become not just a *source* where knowledge is delivered (top-down) but a *place* for producing and exchanging new knowledges, and for transgressing the traditional boundaries between scholars, their audiences, and the communities they study? Could it be a meeting place for imagining and mobilizing new constituencies of resistance? How might a scholarly product, like a digital archive, give full expression to the rhizomatic paths of a counterpublic, not just representing it, but also, potentially, reactivating its collective imaginary? I began to imagine something more than a resource for historians (however urgent and necessary the need for such a resource continues to be). What I began to imagine was a “porous” site of exchange in which scholars, practitioners, students, and community members could come together to form new knowledges and new ways of seeing the world.

This re-visioning of the archive echoes that of other theorists who have ventured into the world of archival collection with the dual aim of preserving history and expanding the methods and reach of scholarly activity. One particularly resonant example of this “decolonizing” trend in archival production is the poet/activist/scholar Kevin Browne’s “vernacular digital archive” of Caribbean expressive culture. Browne (n.d.a) proposes an expansive defi-

nition of the archive as a site of “vernacular humanistic inquiry . . . into *what* it would require to be who we are through the exploration, collection, and reflection on the documents we and those before us have created.” Both a scholarly praxis that merges collection and interpretation and a place of collaborative exchange that links the academy to the communities in which subaltern knowledge is forged, Browne’s (n.d.a) conceptualization of the archive and its uses offers “a radical redefinition of who finds, owns, and gives knowledge.” Dispersing notions of “expertise” and “access” among a much broader public, Browne’s (n.d.b) vernacular archive is “subject to a critical lens that is characteristic of [the] social formation” that it documents. The Chicana por mi Raza project shares the emancipatory impulses of Browne’s vernacular digital archive in that it proposes a site of knowledge exchange that is open to collective interpretation and analysis from as broad an interpretive community as possible, not just scholars and filmmakers, but also students, community members, and even the women whose stories it contains. This “decolonial” vision of the archive runs counter to the one I described earlier, in which archives are collected, organized, and “housed” in institutions that are accessible chiefly to authorized scholar/interpreters who approach them as objects to be studied. It is a vision of the archive that has been made possible by the “digital turn.”

The Promise of the Digital

Many scholars, humanists especially, figure the digital turn as a disruptive force in our lives as knowledge producers. Essays on the questionable quality of online research tools (Wikipedia!), the demise of “literacy” (invariably tagged to book culture), and the commoditization of pedagogy in the age of the MOOC, fill the pages (online and off) of scholarly magazines and journals. Questions about the permanency of knowledge in the age of digital publication and of the sustainability of online scholarship as digital platforms evolve and even become obsolete (think of the once ubiquitous CD-ROM that used to accompany cutting-edge textbooks) have rightly tempered tendencies toward digital utopianism in the “post-text” age.⁷

While digital culture is hardly a utopian space, it does offer us communication tools that have the potential to interrupt the old dynamics of top-down scholarship. For example, because it opens avenues to information (including digital archives, oral histories, and interactive teaching tools) previously available only at libraries and research centers in major universities, digital scholarship can democratize knowledge access. Digital products also

represent a challenge to the authority of scholarly books and articles (still the “coin of the realm” in the humanities), which offer a one-way circuit of information in which complex, multi-sited events and processes are inevitably reduced to coherent narratives that can fit within two hundred pages. In contrast, digital tools like searchable databases, digital archives, web-authoring systems, and wikis enable users/readers to access, interpret, and even shape knowledge from the ground up (Kirschenbaum 2010).⁸ Finally, digital humanities projects often require a radical departure from the norms of humanistic research, both in terms of what we recognize as “scholarly products” and, more fundamentally, in how we approach our work as scholars (Smith 2010). For example, although scholarly books and articles will undoubtedly be generated from the materials made available through the Chicana por mi Raza digital archive, our ultimate objective in collecting these materials is not to create a monograph or documentary film but to design and implement a scalable system for the collective preservation and interpretation of memory (constituted in oral histories and personal archival collections). Developing the form and content of such a system is necessarily a collaborative effort among multiple fields of expertise. Whereas humanistic researchers like myself have been trained to value a highly individualized mode of production, models of production in the digital humanities usually involve a whole research ecosystem in which scholars, archivists, community members, and computational scientists use communication technology as they work across various divides (geographical, methodological, disciplinary, institutional) to cocreate research tools and/or scholarly products.

This dramatic restructuring of scholarly inquiry after the “digital turn” holds the potential to interrupt the invisibilizing feedback loop I described earlier, moving us beyond hand-wringing about the institutional archive as an engine of discursive power and toward a transformative re-visioning of knowledge and the relations of its production. Alexis Lothian and Amanda Phillips (2013) address precisely this possibility in their online essay/curation “Can Digital Humanities Mean Transformative Critique?” They ask: “What would digital scholarship and the humanities disciplines be like if they centered around processes and possibilities of social and cultural transformation as well as institutional preservation? If they centered around questions of labor, race, gender, and justice at personal, local, and global scales? If their practitioners considered not only how the academy might reach out to underserved communities, but also how the kinds of knowledge production nurtured elsewhere could transform the academy itself?”

These questions are especially relevant to archival practice in the digital age because, as Lothian and Phillips (2013) note, digital archives are perhaps the most “legible form of digital production” to date given the vast institutional resources that have been dedicated to developing the tools necessary to “gather, preserve and share historical documents.” Unfortunately, these tools have most often been deployed to create scholarly access points for extant archives and thus have not fully realized the radical democratizing potential of the digital turn. A quick survey of well-funded “digital reunification” projects (in which established institutions with relevant holdings collaborate to digitally “reunify” dispersed archives) reveals how the values and hierarchies of established archives all too often drive funding priorities for digital humanities. From the Codex Sinaiticus Project (which brings together a dispersed biblical text) to the Walt Whitman Archive (which reunifies Whitman’s dispersed oeuvre), institutionally based digital reunification projects continue to nourish a scholarly feedback loop that rehearses the centrality of the Western canon.⁹ Such projects suggest that the digital, for all its promise, may well recapitulate a vision of our “shared history” that centers some subjects and allows others to remain as mere traces in the historical record. Indeed, given that the scant archives of the Chicano movement and the women’s movement already exist in a relatively subordinate relationship to major archival collections, and that where they do exist, they rarely include documents from the submerged archive that we have uncovered over the last five years, one does wonder what representation of “culture” and “history” will survive the transformations of the digital age.

Moreover, while generative for scholars, such top-down approaches to questions of access and “digital democratization” limit opportunities for knowledge exchange and, as Browne (n.d.b) points out, ultimately reinforce “familiar traditions of gatekeeping.” Digital humanists, particularly those invested in the public humanities, have called for a broader approach to the democratization of knowledge, one that capitalizes on the affordances of the “digital” to create sites of collaboration with community partners through “action research, experiential learning, and civically engaged pedagogy, all of which ultimately re-situate and reformulate expertise” (HASTAC Scholars Forum 2009). Archival projects like Browne’s vernacular digital archive and, to an even greater degree, the Women Who Rock (WWR) initiative (directed by Michelle Habell-Pallán and Sonnet Retman, at the University of Washington) envision the archive as an active site of knowledge production and exchange. In their focus on “materials less often granted the legitimacy

of academic preservation,” such projects register a critique of the “power structures and silences of the archive” (Lothian and Phillips 2013), but they also move beyond the corrective gestures of “recovery” by bringing new interpretive voices and generative exchanges into the process of archival recuperation.

For example, *Women Who Rock: Making Scenes, Building Communities* is an oral history and archive collection project that documents the role of women of color in popular music and “in the creation of cultural scenes and social justice movements in the Americas and beyond” (Habell-Pallán, Retman, and Macklin 2014). The project has collected dozens of oral histories and hundreds of photographs, but its ultimate aim is less to document a hidden history than to create “new models of community-based, politically-engaged knowledge production” (Lothian and Phillips 2013). At the center of this model of knowledge production is a re-visioning of archival development as a “collaborative project driven and sustained by relationships,” what they term “feminist *archivista* praxis.”¹⁰ Here, the archive is not a site but a relationship—a process of *encuentro* (encounter) that brings together a cross-generational cohort of students, faculty, and artistic and musical collectives through participatory research, community-based learning, and “unconferences” (staged outside the university). In the words of the Women Who Rock collective, the WWR archive “does not simply cast back retrospectively to tell a static story of scenes and movements past, [it] also documents scenes and movements in the present” (Habell-Pallán, Retman, and Macklin 2014).

Despite key differences, *Chicana por mi Raza*, like *Women Who Rock*, focuses as much on the *process* of encounter initiated in and through a critical engagement with the past as it does on the *product* of our archival labors. In assembling the archive, we have created our own “scenes” and our own fluid community of inquiry, transforming *Chicana por mi Raza* into a site of *encuentro* that not only reflects but also engenders “alternative communal and creative networks and genealogies” (Habell-Pallán, Retman, and Macklin 2014). The feminist *archivista* praxis of *Chicana por mi Raza*, like that of *Women Who Rock*, “decolonizes” the archive—not simply because it expands our field of knowledge to include previously excluded groups (shifting the center in ways that fundamentally transform our understandings of politics, history, and justice), but also because it demands a shift in how we conceptualize the nature of our work and the publics to whom it speaks. Indeed, feminist *archivista* praxis forces its practitioners to shift from an individualist, competitive, and product-oriented model of scholarship

(implicitly grounded in the “ownership” of knowledge) toward a collaborative, open, and transformative vision of knowledge as a cocreative process that refigures the “collection, curation, and distribution of vernacular data [as] an *active*, rather than passive, exercise” (Browne, n.d.b). This process-oriented vision of archive as *encuentro* fundamentally challenges the traditional boundaries of “digital reunification” by pushing its aims beyond *collections* and toward *collectivities*. Indeed, the Chicana por mi Raza project is about something more than the reunification of a formerly dispersed archive—through its process of critical *encuentro* with the past (in the present), the project also opens up a space for the reunification of old networks and the creation of new cross-generational communities of inquiry.¹¹

Not surprisingly, archival *encuentros* have been transformational for the students who play an instrumental role in Chicana por mi Raza, both as research interns and in the various courses we have developed around the project. Many students emerge from their experience with new critical understandings of history and social justice, along with a strong sense of themselves as active historical agents. Moreover, as a result of their critical engagement with the archive, students come to understand the power of its silences. One student (Sarah) even articulated a newfound respect for “the role of the archivist in unearthing and documenting these stories for future generations.” She writes, “The state largely controls the ‘official’ history and therefore has a monopoly on collective memory and societal understanding. However, by uncovering these hidden memories that are so often ignored by the state, archivists and oral historians are able to construct a counter-history. These counter-histories are not only powerful in combating the official memories of the state *but influential in shaping future activists and the changes they strive towards*” (my emphasis).¹² The crucial connection Sarah makes here, between “official history” and the politics of collective memory, highlights how the silences of the past shape the possibilities we might imagine for the future. Her insight demonstrates how a critical engagement with the past can open up questions about the political dimensions of historical knowledge, questions that have relevance beyond the academy.

As sites of critical memory, recorded oral histories are central to both the content of the archive and our archival praxis of *encuentro*. Indeed, in many ways, the archive is structured around these memories of lived experience, which function as narrative anchors that contextualize and link to the collected documentary “evidence” of the period (letters, photos, newsletters). But oral histories provide something more than mere documentation and

contextualization. Unlike the (relatively) unmediated nature of digitally reproduced texts and images, these narrations of embodied experience also provide an important interpretive lens on the period. While the oral histories we collect are necessarily subjective—they offer particular perspectives on the past that are both highly individual and filtered through the concerns of the present—this does not mean that they represent exclusively “individual cognitive processes” (Camp 2004: 86). Indeed, as the feminist historian Tina Camp lucidly points out in her work on black Germans in the Third Reich, memory is “a deeply social process through which individuals construct and articulate their relationship to the world and the events transpiring around them, both now and then” (86). Camp characterizes both “official histories” (found in history textbooks and government documents) and individual recollections of experience as “memory technologies” that articulate and construct the meanings of “identity, experience, events, and history” (13). All “technologies of memory” are active (though not necessarily conscious) constructions of the past that shape and are shaped by relations of domination and subordination in the present. But only some collective memories are authorized (those that concord with dominant conceptualizations of “what happened”), while others are marginalized as particular or “subjective” and erased by the discursive limits of what counts as history. For Camp, memory narratives are far from innocent, unmediated, or transparent reflections of the past; their construction involves an active mode of historical labor (what she terms “memory work”)—a social “technology” that produces not only “dominant accounts of history, but also the potential for alternative forms of knowledge production and meaning-making” (82). Camp’s exploration of the individual memory narratives of black Germans in the Third Reich is itself a mode of “memory work” whose narrative of the past engages not only the memory technologies of official state power but also those of the individuals who theorize its subjectivizing gaze through their narrations of personal experience. Crucially, in her recuperation of these narratives of countermemory, Camp does not suggest that they constitute an “irrefutable form of truth, fact, or evidence” that counters the memory work of official history; rather, she sees them as “highly mediated representations” of the past, forms of historiography that are themselves subject to interpretation (86).

In a similar vein, in *Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (2011), Blackwell draws on oral history and archival interpretation (of Chicana feminist print culture) to examine the uses of memory within Chicana counterpublics. Echoing Camp’s formulation of

the politics of “memory work,” Blackwell posits “retrofitted memory” as a mode of feminist epistemology that deploys memory to create “new forms of consciousness customized to embodied material realities, political visions, and creative desires for societal change” (2011: 2). A social practice of counter-memory, retrofitted memory involves the critical deployment of both “dominant” and “resistant” technologies of collective memory to illuminate the suppressed knowledges of multiply oppressed subjects and thereby craft new visions of political subjectivity in and through narratives about the past (91). Blackwell’s primary historical example of uses of retrofitted memory is Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc, an early Chicana collective (est. 1971) that drew its name from a feminist organization active during the Mexican Revolution. As an act of retrofitted memory, the collective’s choice of name referenced the long history of Mexican feminist organizing, even as it slyly resignified (patriarchal) nationalist appropriations of indigenous history and culture within the Chicano movement.¹³ Blackwell’s analysis of how Chicanas used retrofitted memory to explore the gaps of accepted history and develop new historical imaginaries in which their praxis as women of color *made sense* reflects her own investments as a scholar and a feminist of color. Indeed, her project, like the one articulated in the conferences, essays, and interventions of the Chicanas that she documents, deploys its own mode of retrofitted memory, one that excavates the “gaps, interstices, silences, and crevices” of history, where “possibilities lie for fracturing dominant narratives and creating spaces for new historical subjects to emerge” (2).

Both Camp and Blackwell explore memory as a site of productive meaning-making, a narrative practice that makes sense of the past through storytelling and reflection in the present. And both suggest that the “techniques” employed in the memory work of self-narration and archival preservation are important sites of *theory* in that they offer articulations of history, experience, and subject formation that can help us complicate the schemas of collective memory that tend to shape our understanding of the past. Likewise, the Chicana technologies of remembrance documented in the Chicana por mi Raza digital archive, from self-narrations to idiosyncratic collections of artifacts, offer much more than simply a contestatory account of “what really happened.” At times self-consciously, and at times through the act of storytelling and documentation, the memory work collected in and through Chicana por mi Raza’s archival process articulates a complex “theory in the flesh” that (in Cherríe Moraga’s words) reflects on “the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we

grew up on, our sexual longings . . . to create a politic born out of necessity” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981: 23). Beyond theory for theory’s sake, “theory in the flesh” is, at its heart, a praxis of critical memory that highlights the relevance of personal experience to the development of theories of resistance and, conversely, the importance of theory for understanding the meanings of lived experience.

In and through their engagement with the feminist *archivista* praxis of the Chicana por mi Raza project, students cannot help but develop new understandings of history, but as critical witnesses engaged in their own “memory work” through their *encuentro* with the past, they also develop a deeper understanding of the connections between theory, experience, and political action. For example, when my student Sarah reflected on the life history she witnessed, she noted how critical witnessing helped her to finally see the connections between experience and theory: “The concepts [intersectional feminism] we were learning about were not merely ideological frames through which behaviors can be understood, but rather behaviors from which ideological frames are derived” (Skaluba 2013). Sarah’s “click moment” transformed her conceptualization of feminist theory from a largely abstract analytic apparatus (which might be used to “understand behaviors”) to a critical frame derived from and embedded within experience. Such insights suggest that archival recovery that includes the recuperation of memory as a site of critical meaning-making about the past might help “heal the split” between theory and practice and teach a new generation of feminists, particularly those in the academy, that “you don’t think your way into a different way of acting; you act your way into a different way of thinking” (Judy Smith, quoted in Smith 2005: 203). These moments of insight are fundamental to the aims of the Chicana por mi Raza project, which seeks not simply to recover lost histories but also to animate new border crossings and “new constituencies of resistance” in the interest of transforming not just *what* we know but *how* we know (Sandoval 2000: 63).

***Encuentro*: The Shock of the Old**

I have asked throughout this essay whether an archive can become a *site* of history and not simply its *source*—a space not just of “recovery” but revolution. This question is perhaps most appropriately answered by an anecdote from the field, my own kind of memory work. In 2009, when Linda and I planned our first oral history trip, we decided to take two undergraduates along for the ride, an impulse that became our standard practice as the proj-

ect developed. We chose to start in Austin, Texas, because several of the women with whom we intended to conduct oral histories lived in or near the area. Moreover, my mother was still working as an archival consultant for the Mexican American Papers project, an archive with significant Chicano movement holdings that she helped establish at the University of Texas some thirty years before. She also retained a significant collection of archival materials in her home, where we could stay at no cost. We spent a little over a week in Austin. During the first few days, we identified and digitized materials in my mother's personal archives and in the Mexican American Papers project. On the weekend we conducted oral histories with women active in Raza Unida Party politics in the 1970s, including my mother.¹⁴ By the end of the week we had succeeded in digitizing hundreds of materials, photocopying those materials we could not digitize, and interviewing some of the most significant women in Chicano politics in Texas. My students spent long hours in the library and stayed up late going through my mother's archives at her home. Watching their excitement as they uncovered the memos, speeches, posters, conference programs, radical journals, and ephemera documenting the history of Chicanas' engagement with feminism was a touching reminder of the passion that led me to the archive at the beginning of my career.

Frequently, at the end of a long day of *encuentro*, we would share a document that we found to be resonant or moving, something that somehow spoke to us from the past. We leafed through a radical youth movement publication written by teenagers in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1971; we looked at a self-published book about lesbians of color that predated the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back* by several years; we examined memos, posters, and other artifacts that opened up whole worlds of experience heretofore unknown to us. One night, one student singled out a document—a one-page “Press Release Procedure” memo—handwritten by Evey Chapa (n.d.), who at the time (1972) was working as a campaign manager for Ramsey Muñiz, the Texas gubernatorial candidate for the Raza Unida Party. Chapa was about twenty-one years old when she wrote the memo. A few years later, in collaboration with my mother, she would found the Chicana Research and Learning Center (dedicated to producing materials by and about women of color for university curricula), but for now she was playing a major organizing role in the gubernatorial campaign, and she was in way over her head working with party leaders—some of whom were very sexist men. The handwritten memo was a rather pedestrian document on writing and distributing party press releases:

- 1) Take call from Carlos Guerra [State Party Organizer]
- 2) Take dictated Press release
- 3) Produce 20 copies
- 4) Take them to the Capitol Press Room
- 5) Leave a copy in each mailbox
- 6) Go home, satisfied with a job well done.

Across the top of the document was the message: “don’t fuck it up.” My student selected this seemingly insignificant artifact because it spoke to her in some profound way. Perhaps it was because she knew that Chapa was her age when she wrote it, and that Chapa’s standing in party politics was complicated by her age and gender, or perhaps it revealed something to my student about the everyday practice of real politics. In any case, she was apparently moved by the archive, as was her research partner.

On the last night of our trip, as we chatted and decompressed after a long day of sifting through the archive, we hit on a metaphor that seemed to encapsulate our experience: it was like a dream in which you discover a door to a hidden room in a house, perhaps your own home. Opening that door transforms everything. All of a sudden, what was pedestrian, familiar, and common becomes a new terrain, a place of possibility and promise, all within your reach. Discovering unknown histories in our midst is like opening that door and finding a new world that reshapes our relationship to the old one. That night, the two sneaked off and returned a few hours later with tattoos inspired by the iconography they found in the radical newspapers they uncovered during their research. The next morning, the student who had singled out Chapa’s memo, a self-identified “farm girl from Tecumseh, Michigan,” showed me her tattoo with great pride. Spread over eight inches across her midsection was an inscription of theory on flesh: an image of a dark-haired woman staring defiantly at the viewer, a rifle slung across her back. In the original image the woman held a baby, but my student had replaced one mode of revolutionary nurturing for another—in her tattoo the woman held a sheaf of wheat. Written underneath this retrofitted image of revolutionary womanhood were the words: *Viva Feminista!*

Notes

I would like to thank Lisa Disch for her patient and wise editing of this essay. She was an excellent guide as I thought through the implications of the work I am doing in the archive. Michelle Habell-Pallán’s and Sonnet Retman’s powerful work with the Women Who Rock archive helped me think more deeply about feminist praxis in the context of the archive. Their intellectual and professional generosity and their commitment to collaboration have served as a continuing example of the kind of work that matters.

- 1 The Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA) was established in 1974 as an amendment (Title IV-A) to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to "promote educational equity for girls and women, including those who suffer multiple discrimination based on gender and on race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, or age, and to provide funds to help education agencies and institutions meet the requirements of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972." Martha Cotera's nonprofit Chicana Research and Learning Center (founded in 1974) developed an array of educational resources with the help of WEEA grants, including the *Multicultural Women's Sourcebook: Materials Guide for Use in Women's Studies and Bilingual/Multicultural Programs*, which she edited with Nella Cunningham (published in 1981), and an assertiveness training manual for Latina girls and women, *Doña Dormat No Está Aquí*, which received a \$50,000 grant but was not published because WEEA funding for publication was discontinued in the early 1980s.
- 2 Cotera's *Diosa y Hembra: The History and Heritage of Chicanas in the United States* (partially funded by a WEEA grant), offered the first historical genealogy of Chicana feminism and was adopted in several early classes on "La Chicana," including Gloria Anzaldúa's first Chicana studies class at the University of Texas. Cotera's historical account reached as far back as the pre-Conquest, recuperating indigenous *diosas* (goddesses) and historical figures like La Malinche. There is archival evidence that Anzaldúa's recuperation of indigenous mythology was inspired by Cotera's thinking (Sendejo, forthcoming). *The Chicana Feminist* was a collection of Cotera's speeches and essays, selections from which were regularly assigned in early Chicana feminism classes.
- 3 For a deeper analysis of the mechanics of erasure around *This Bridge Called My Back*, see Norma Alarcón, "The Theoretical Subjects of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo American Feminism," in Calderón and Saldívar 1991: 28–42; and Sandoval 2000: 42–63.
- 4 A university-trained librarian and archivist who had worked for the Texas State Library before her political organizing made it impossible to keep her job, Cotera played an instrumental role in the drive to establish the Mexican American Papers project (housed in the Benson Latin American Collection). As an archival consultant for the project, Cotera collected archives documenting the political ferment of her time (including the Raza Unida Party Papers and the Jose Angel Gutierrez Papers), and she also collected the papers of women from a previous generation who she felt had been lost to history, like González.
- 5 I asked Linda to collaborate on the project because she had recently completed a groundbreaking documentary on the Chicana Caucus of the National Women's Political Caucus: *Las Mujeres de la Caucus Chicana* (2008), DVD.
- 6 My understanding of counterpublics draws from the foundational work of Nancy Fraser (1990) and Michael Warner (2005), both of whom chart the conceptual limits of the Habermasian "public sphere."
- 7 For an excellent analysis of the benefits and challenges that the "digital turn" brings to humanistic scholarship, see Sentilles 2005.
- 8 See also digitalhumanities 2008.
- 9 For more information on these digital reunification projects, see www.whitmanarchive.org/, <http://www.codexsinaiticus.org/en/>.
- 10 Melding various linguistic codes and dissident traditions, "archivista" is a neologism that captures the methodological, theoretical, and political interventions of Women Who Rock's archival praxis. Habell-Pallán recounts that the term emerged in one of

her *encuentros* with Alice Bag, “the East LA Chicana punk pioneer and memoirist,” and Martha González, who calls herself an “artista.” In González’s conceptualization, activism is both a form of border crossing (between “scenes” of production) and a practice that reveals the “organic relationship” between art and activism.

- 11 The *encuentro* at the center of Chicana por mi Raza’s feminist *archivista* praxis includes multiple publics, opening up opportunities for border crossings between academy and community and avenues for connection between the women we interview and the scholars, archivists, students, and community members with whom they share their stories. Over the last five years the Chicana por mi Raza digital archive has sponsored panels (that include both scholars and activists) at conferences and movement reunions, supported and encouraged graduate research, and brought together more established scholars to produce new work that focuses on Chicana activism in the 1970s and 1980s. The project has also curated community-based historical exhibits and contributed to cultural events that document the work of long-forgotten activists. It has allied with other women of color digital projects and provided guidelines, curricular models, and server space for local oral history initiatives, which have, in turn, expanded the archive. In short, the Chicana por mi Raza project has played a key role in reactivating a vibrant counterpublic through sites of *encuentro* (both “virtual” and “real”) that have created new “coalitions of resistance” and animated new activist imaginaries.
- 12 For more student reflections on their work with the project, see the Chicana por mi Raza Class Blog: cpmr-class.blogspot.com/.
- 13 The organization was formerly called Las Chicanas de Aztlán, a name that also drew on neo-indigenous ideologies. Blackwell notes that the name change occurred when members of the organization decided to center feminism in their praxis, as a result of the gendered contradictions they were experiencing within Chicano student movement spaces. Refusing the movement script that would have them act as *soldaderas*, or supporters of their men in struggle (a script reinforced by Chicano male countermemories of the Mexican revolutionary period), Chicanas opted instead to reference a long tradition of independent Mexicana/Chicana revolutionary activism and thereby reinscribe women into the historical record as fully articulated political agents. See Blackwell 2011: 6–7, 100–103.
- 14 The Raza Unida Party (RUP) was a radical third party that arose in Crystal City, Texas, in 1969 in response to the political, economic, and social marginalization of Mexican Americans. Tasked with organizing the “whole family,” women were central to RUP’s political strategy in rural South Texas, which relied on gaining electoral majorities. They were able to get women to vote in large numbers (in many cases for the first time) and even run for office. For more on the Raza Unida Party, see García 1989; for an incisive analysis of Chicana’s participation in the RUP, see Espinoza 2011: 191–210.

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