

Introduction

Michelle Téllez

It's been an honor to contemplate such an important moment: fifty years of Chicana feminism, a field of thought that gained urgency at the 1969 Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, where young Chicana activists vocalized their frustrations within a movement that failed to consider their experiences, to today, in 2020, when online media platforms and projects like Xicanisma and Nalgona Positivity Pride draw on Chicana feminist theory to disseminate a radical critique of racialized patriarchy and attract thousands of followers and supporters in so doing. This trajectory demonstrates the impact and continued importance of this work and analytic.

Chicana feminism is a body of knowledge that is born from, and rooted in, community struggle and social transformation. As such, the field has been collectively defined and reimagined over time. The impact of Chicana feminist thought can be seen in the arts, in literature, in educational settings and beyond, demonstrating that for fifty years we have been embracing—and fighting for—the right to self-determine our experiences, our identities, our bodies, and our histories.

Chicana feminists have been at the forefront of establishing a women of color body of thought by confronting heteropatriarchy and by offering a language that imagines a brown, queer futurity. The seminal text *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, is an important example of this work. Chicana feminists have modeled revolutionary internationalism in their writing and activism—I think of pioneers Betita Martínez and Olga Talamante and their solidarity work in Cuba and Argentina, respectively, as well as the Zapatista solidarity work that happened between Chiapas, Mexico, and US Chicana communities in the 1990s. Chicana feminism has given us the language to think transnationally, to be rooted in the decolonial while also recognizing the importance of the work that has to be done locally.

I envisioned this dossier as an intergenerational exchange of ideas, perspectives, and research aimed at examining how Chicana feminism is utilized across disciplines and experiences, how it has developed, and how we are imagining the future. Each essay adds to this conversation in unique ways, but there are several overlaps between the essays that I want to highlight. First, the essays by both Susy Zepeda and Cherríe Moraga demonstrate that Chicana feminist thought is drawing from and being shaped by ancient traditions and ancestral wisdom that this discipline can no longer ignore, as evinced in the edited volumes *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women's Lives* (Facio and Lara 2014) and *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices* (Medina and Gonzales 2019). There is an important reckoning with our indigenous selves and histories that Chicana feminists are demanding be recognized. Second, many of the experiences shared by the authors (Martha Gonzalez, Maria Cotera, Linda Garcia Merchant) evoke mothering as they explore how their upbringing—and specifically the influence of their mothers—has shaped their writing, activism, and political projects. Chicana mother-scholars, mother-activists, and mother-artists have become more visible in the field, resulting in development of the concept of Chicana m(other)work (Caballero et al. 2017; Télez 2011). Ana Castillo writes in the foreword to *The Chicana M(other)work Anthology*:

From the decision to return to the classroom while our babies are still being breastfed, because we feel the need to continue guiding students; to running for public office while our children are dealing with adolescent angst at home; to volunteering with community organizations or human rights groups when our children no longer require our daily vigilance—Mother-Scholars are not all things at all times, but we are consistently conscious of our desire and will to leave the world a little less askew than how we came to it. (2019, x–xi)

And, finally, these essays reveal that Gloria Anzaldúa remains central to Chicana feminism as her ideas continue to shape and reshape new projects and theories. Karen Mary Davalos has argued that the major reason for Anzaldúa's prominence in Chicana feminist theory "is her argument

MICHELLE TÉLEZ is assistant professor in the Department of Mexican American Studies at the University of Arizona. She writes about transnational community formations (and disruptions), Chicana feminism, and gendered migration. She is co-editor of *The Chicana M(other)work Anthology: Porque Sin Madres No Hay Revolución* (2019), and her work has appeared in academic journals, book anthologies, and as public scholarship in *Truth Out*, *The Feminist Wire*, and *Latino Rebels*.

for multiple subject positions—race, class, gender, and sexuality along with additional social factors such as immigration, language, religion, and nationality” (2008, 152). Indeed, Anzaldúa broke open a field of inquiry, thought, and experience that, despite the critiques leveled at her work, has not been decentered in Chicana feminist thought. Her work inspired the Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa, established in 2007.

While it is impossible to describe an entire body of thought in a short introduction, I hope these essays offer a glimpse into a discipline that has radically reshaped a mode of inquiry in the academy and has provided a model for community organizing that disrupts heteropatriarchal and inequitable power relations. Yet, as Leilani Clark’s powerful poem makes evident, these relations are slow to change—even fifty years later. We live in a time when Chicana/Latina communities continue to be marginalized and yet have been made central to national debates in our vilification. As Alejandra Elenes argues in this dossier, “A Chicana feminist project for the twenty-first century needs to expand existing categories to address the multiple ways that oppression is affecting our communities in national and international contexts.”

The Essays

Cherríe Moraga opens this dossier writing on the edge of extinction, as a Xicana writer and teacher who argues that “across the globe, indigenous values, worldviews, and ways of life are being systematically eroded and disappeared through pursuit of the single objective of profit, at great human cost and at nature’s ultimate expense.” Drawing from a public lecture she gave in February 2019 in Santa Barbara, California, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of El Plan de Santa Bárbara, Moraga makes a strong case for a politicized recognition of the Indigenous origins of Xicana communities that might serve to draw a road map to the decolonized sovereign educational plan that El Plan de Santa Bárbara envisioned fifty years ago.

She reminds us that *Aztlán*—the place of return of mythic and historical memory—was a decolonial impulse and poetic metaphor that allowed Xicanas to remember/reclaim Indigenous histories and identities, moving beyond nation-state ideologies mandated by colonial geopolitical borders. It helped energize a very real political movement that led to a “re-search” for a people.

In other words, it is of the essence to understand the importance of the “recovery of ourselves as ‘a pueblo’ . . . living with profound regard

for ‘place’” and to think of living in “a world of reciprocal relations with one another.”

For Moraga, this recovery is a revolutionary promise of a return—one that is evolving socially and politically. Fundamentally, Moraga asks the central question: How do we move away from solely being in a conversation with the West instead of with one another?

Dolores Delgado Bernal’s essay responds to this query by tracing the trajectory of Chicana feminist methodologies—as epistemology or what she has elsewhere termed “cultural intuition” (Delgado Bernal 1998). Chicana feminist epistemology names a system of knowing grounded in knowledge that arises from specific sociopolitical and cultural histories linked to a borderland sensibility. In her writing, she is fundamentally asking whose knowledge and realities are accepted as foundations of knowledge and what this means for researchers. Her work has shown that making a claim to an epistemological grounding is a crucial legitimizing force within and outside academia.

In her essay for this dossier, Delgado Bernal takes up three methodological interventions: *pláticas*, *convivencia*, and *movidas* (the latter concept is further explored in another essay in the dossier as well). She identifies and reviews scholarship that conceptualizes Chicana/Latina feminist pedagogies, those that “emanate from brown bodies, from the insights of living in the borderlands, from queer identities, from the idea of educación, and from tensions produced by the intersection of multiple subjectivities.” She demonstrates that these embodied experiences inform how Chicanas develop and enact research processes, questions, and analysis, and how political and ethical considerations are made.

Delgado Bernal shows the impact that these significant theoretical contributions to Chicana/Latina, feminist, and educational studies have made. In doing so she highlights the politics of citation—who is cited, who is excluded, whose genealogies are considered—as one means by which the “apartheid of knowledge” is maintained. However, Delgado Bernal is optimistic and argues that change in academia is inevitable; moreover, these Chicana feminist epistemic interventions are ruptures to normative ways of conducting research and teaching that allow us to “envision a decolonial futurity.”

The future of Chicana feminism is imagined in the creative work of Martha Gonzalez, Felicia Montes, and Leilani Clark. Through memories of her childhood, Martha Gonzalez theorizes *mañana*—a term that many who

grew up in Chicana/Latina families might already be familiar with—as a philosophy, discourse, and life skill. She argues that “maña magic” inhabits the brown body initially in a struggle to survive, but it is also verbalized, performed, and passed down generationally, which ultimately can be empowering.

Her essay gives us various examples of maña in practice. In one memorable example from her childhood, her mother left Gonzalez and her siblings in the care of religious elders—who believed they were providing valuable religious instruction—in order to get free babysitting that allowed the mother to obtain job training. Her mother’s quick wit and maña showed Gonzalez how to utilize limited resources. The theory builds on the legacy of Chicana feminist scholars whose work helps us understand how our bodies are read and move in the world. Essentially, maña is a drive to persist despite the obstacles one faces in a society we weren’t meant to survive. By utilizing the principles of maña in her research, teaching, and artistic practice as a musician, Gonzalez models maña praxis.

This intervention is also important because Gonzalez underscores how dichos (sayings) and everyday teachings passed down from Chicana/Latina mothers and caregivers subtly shape how we understand and negotiate the world. By centering our bodies and our first teachers, Gonzalez offers a way of understanding maña as a “space from which to imagine other relations and visions toward social justice”—one that radically reenvision multiple spaces, including the classroom and the prison, both systems that fail Chicana communities.

Speaking from a particular political moment marked by the turn of the millennium, Felicia Montes, the daughter of movimiento activists in Los Angeles, is influenced both by her upbringing and by the Zapatista uprising of the early 1990s. Through images and spoken word, Montes’s series offers a language and visual of a counterculture movement that attends to hybrid identities. She weaves together her own identities and sexualities to demonstrate what she terms “a modern-day Xicana.”

Montes also recognizes the predecessors, those who have shaped her work, whom she calls the “Xicana trinity”: Moraga, Anzaldúa, Castillo. Drawing from this literature in her poetry and art, Montes pushes the reader to continue to recognize that the personal is political and argues that she has been a “Chicana feminist since birth.” Drawing from hip-hop aesthetics, ancient traditions, and cross-border cultural exchanges, Montes plays on language, although those of us who have code-switched for our entire lives might not notice anything unusual. An example is when she

uses “*vestuario’d*”—adding the English-language past-tense ending to the Spanish word—to describe the regalia that one wears to dance in an Aztec *danza circulo*. In this way Xicanas cross and recross language—and cultural—boundaries to re-create a way of being that is decidedly Xicanx.

Finally, Montes’s work invokes memory. Even when so much has been lost culturally, she pushes us to see how memory can function to reclaim dignity and hope. And in the turn toward dignity, she asks who gets taken care of when one is doing activist work, reminding us of this when she demands, “Am I gonna take the time to save ME?”

This urgent question remains relevant in Leilani Clark’s poetry. In 2010, the state of Arizona passed legislation that both legalized racial profiling (SB 1070) and disbanded a Mexican American studies program in the Tucson Unified School District that had proven successful in terms of college acceptance rates, test scores, and critical self-empowerment for youth in the program (HB 2281). This legislation, which emerged amid a racially charged climate of fear-mongering and anti-immigrant hysteria, met with a strong response from educators, community members, and activists.

The movement that was born in opposition to the dismantling of the Mexican American studies program grew steadily and reached across the country. Many outside activists came to Tucson, which created a complicated and uneven landscape. It was in the schisms of the movement that this poem was born.

Leilani Clark’s words powerfully examine this political moment from the perspective of a young activist pushing back on a movement that continues to ignore the violence of heteropatriarchy on women. Clark highlights the contradictions of a struggle in which some movement voices, after fifty years, are still saying to women who have been victimized, ignored, and pushed aside, “We’ll get to the issue in time. After we’ve achieved revolution.” Clark reminds us to take off the “cloak of silence” and asks us to consider who continues to be replaceable, disposable, and let go.

The links between then and now are also highlighted in the interview with three prominent historians of Chicana feminism, Maylei Blackwell, María Cotera, and Dionne Espinoza, by filmmaker Linda Garcia Merchant. The conversation offers an intimate sharing of experience and innovative methodologies, with the participants constantly reminding us to ask whose history matters and whose always gets left out. Their process of excavating this particular genealogy in Chicana feminist historiography—the Chicano movement years—also helps us think about which materials are archived. Moreover, if materials are in fact archived, which archives are actually read?

In their edited volume *Chicana Movidas: New Narratives of Activism and Feminism in the Movement Era*, Espinoza, Cotera, and Blackwell (2018) develop the concept “movida” to exemplify their undercover, dissident technique for reading against the grain of dominant historiography. In their work together they develop a comadrazgo and model for collectively producing knowledge that “echoes the best practices of . . . Chicana feminists from the movimiento,” as Blackwell states in the interview.

They explain how an archive—for example, the Hijas de Cuauhtémoc print media—not only traces a Chicana feminist history but also helps with current organizing. As a case in point, they relate how contemporary activists at California State University, Long Beach are accessing these materials to better understand and organize at their institution. Essentially, this work underscores the importance of tracing and documenting Chicana movement history and is essential for generations yet to come.

The last three essays in the dossier contemplate three concepts that have been central to Chicana feminist thought: borderlands, Aztlán, and decoloniality. Alejandra Elenes reminds us that Anzaldúa’s words, “The U.S.-Mexico border *es una herida abierta*,” are as relevant today as they were when she wrote them over thirty years ago. Chicana feminist conceptualizations of the Borderlands as praxis and thought offer an alternative to white nationalist thinking, and as Elenes reminds us, countering such thinking continues to be an urgent matter.

Anzaldúa’s borderland thinking inspired Chicana thought and created significant foundations for a Chicana feminist architecture—one that theorizes about the social, economic, and political conditions of Chicana communities. The influence of Borderlands is significant for Chicana feminist theory, where concepts such as mestiza consciousness, Coatlicue state, and spirituality have developed a field of inquiry. Elenes explains how Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of Borderlands is both literal and metaphorical and emphasizes that certain parts of Anzaldúa’s theory have been taken into consideration while others, like spirituality, have been overlooked. She also points to the limitations and contradictions of Anzaldúa’s work, arguing that while her theories have been used to build queer theories, there has been a critique and call to disrupt the male/female binary implicit in her work.

In tracing Anzaldúa’s legacy and life work, Elenes highlights how Anzaldúa’s life experience continued to shape her work, which in itself defies the rigidity that is often associated with theory. Theory is alive and ever-evolving, as demonstrated in Anzaldúa’s move to nepantla as an

expansion of mestiza consciousness. Elenes reminds us of the *reto*—challenge—that Anzaldúa gave us, and she emphasizes that a Chicana feminist project for the twenty-first century needs to address the multiple ways in which oppression is affecting our communities in national and international contexts.

Susy Zepeda offers meditations on Aztlán, a concept that is seen as a territory, imaginary, homeland, and claim for belonging. Zepeda walks us through the possibilities for evolving the discipline from patriarchal male signification to a vision of Chicana studies that is rooted in indigeneity, Chicana feminisms, and Queer Theory.

Zepeda uses *susto*, or soul loss, to describe how racial hierarchy and de-Indianization have created a discipline that utilizes notions of mestizaje and a settler colonial Aztlán. The result is a field that reinforces colonial nation-states and has created a distance from knowing and working with one's ancestors and familial lineages. She argues that healing from *susto* can come from the tools and learning offered by traditional medicinal knowledge, a process that Zepeda terms "spirit praxis."

Spirit praxis is a pathway of doing spiritual *trabajo* to remember ancestral wisdom and *sabiduría Indígena*, Indigenous knowledge, that was left out of early Chicano studies or spoken of as folklore that was not rigorous or intellectual. Zepeda argues that by doing this work, the field can also unpack the notion of a singular Chicano identity and instead recognize the multilayered aspects of our identities, acknowledging that while the concept of Aztlán was foundational, it had its limitations.

Emma Pérez has been queering Chicana feminist thought and Chicana history for over twenty years. Her scholarship has radically introduced new ways of writing history that dismantle the dominant discourse. She introduced the "decolonial imaginary" as a way to remap and reanalyze Chicana social histories. In her essay for this dossier, Pérez challenges us to engage the will to feel as a mode that reasserts the value of the imaginary within the decolonial. As a deconstructive tool, the decolonial needs the imaginary to construct our daily lives, struggles, and desires, while the imaginary relies upon the phenomenology of experience, or the will to feel. Ultimately, can the will to feel transform us and our toxic world?

A Concluding Thought

As editor of this dossier, I hope that the intergenerational approach presented here may open up more conversations that look back as we look

forward, and that it will inspire more Chicana feminist praxis, theory, and resistance to be imagined, constructed, and implemented by new generations of Chicana feministas, writers, artists, and scholars. Chicana feminism has responded to the harshness of our conditions by utilizing the imaginary and by creating the language to better frame our conditions, which helps us to be at the forefront of our communities as we fight for a more dignified future.

Works Cited

- Caballero, Cecilia, Yvette Martínez-Vu, Judith Pérez-Torres, Michelle Téllez, and Christine Vega. 2017. "Our Labor Is Our Prayer, Our Mothering Is Our Offering: A Chicana M(other)work Framework for Collective Resistance." *Chicana/Latina Studies* 16, no. 2: 44–75.
- Castillo, Ana. 2019. Foreword to *The Chicana M(other)work Anthology: Porque Sin Madres No Hay Revolución*, edited by Cecilia Caballero, Yvette Martínez-Vu, Judith Pérez-Torres, Michelle Téllez, and Christine Vega, ix–xiii. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Davalos, Karen Mary. 2008. "Sin Vergüenza: Chicana Feminist Theorizing." *Feminist Studies* 34, nos. 1–2: 151–71.
- Delgado Bernal, Dolores. 1998. "Using a Chicana Feminist Epistemology in Educational Research." *Harvard Educational Review* 68, no. 4: 555–83.
- Espinoza, Dionne, María Eugenia Cotera, and Maylei Blackwell. 2018. *Chicana Movidas: New Narratives of Activism and Feminism in the Movement Era*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Facio, Elisa, and Irene Lara. 2014. *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women's Lives*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Medina, Lara, and Martha R. Gonzales. 2019. *Voices from the Ancestors: Xicanx and Latinx Spiritual Expressions and Healing Practices*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Moraga, Cherríe M., and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. 1981. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Watertown, MA: Persephone.
- Téllez, Michelle. 2011. "Mi Madre, Mi Hija y Yo: Chicana Mothering through Memory, Culture and Place." In *Latina/Chicana Mothering*, edited by Dorsia Smith Silva, 57–67. Toronto: Demeter.

