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The Interdisciplinary Project of Chicana History: Looking Back, Moving Forward

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these mothers' mutual loathing, "something like history and the future converted into flesh"?

Love is unsustainable in Yanique's stories, despite the noblest of intentions. Anton, the narrator of "Street Man," a St. Croix drug dealer, hides his crimes from his college girlfriend:

Yolanda is a good girl. And I done decide that a street man like me need a good sweet thing like her. It's a balance. She's not about 'keeping it real' and all that fake shit. She's not going to hold my gun for me. And I don't want her to. I is the thug in this.

The turning point occurs not in a drug war but, of all places, at a poetry slam, where Anton discovers that Yolanda has secrets which wholly displace him. In "Canoe Sickness," a son's confused love for his father—part intrigue, part revulsion—paralyzes him at key moments:

I thought about movement... I tried to imagine the smallest part of myself...the hair on my forearm. If I breathed heavily maybe the hair would move. Move, hair. Move, damn it! And one single hair shivered under my light breath.

Stasis is the antithesis of these stories, which begin with a thread of tension that lassoes our collar buttons and pulls us all the way through to a resolution. The most accomplished layering of tensions occurs in the novella "The International Shop of Coffins." The story is set in a shop that sells marvelously painted coffins, like those for children,

in shapes that a child's body would be happy to lie in—living or dead. One is shaped like a sneaker...There is also a lollipop one, the candy part painted in blue and green and

yellow swirls, the stick—where the child's legs would go—painted bone white.

A mundane interaction among the shop owner, a priest, and two teenage girls pretending to research a school project becomes the hub from which the spokes of each character's past and future radiate. In each chapter, we learn of the shop owner's failed romantic quest, the priest's transgressions, and the teenagers' budding sexuality—tragedies of the past and present that, in Yanique's sure hands, seem naturally to converge in a place resplendent with the ornaments of despair. ☞

Rebecca Meacham is the award-winning author of *Let's Do* (2004), a story collection. The fiction editor of the *Talking Writing* online magazine, she lives and teaches in Wisconsin.

Retrofitted Memory



Las Brown Berets by Melanie Cervantes, 20" x 26", 3-color handprint (2007)

¡Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement

By Maylei Blackwell

Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011,

286 pages, \$24.95, paperback

Reviewed by Miroslava Chávez-García

Until now, no one has published a history of the struggle of Chicanas in the Chicano movement—the mass political mobilization of Mexican American peoples in the Southwest US in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The glaring omission is somewhat perplexing, says author Maylei Blackwell, given that *Las Hijas de Cuahatemoc* (The Daughters of Cuahatemoc, the last emperor of the Aztecs), the first and leading feminist organization of the Chicano movement, emerged alongside other well-known organizations, such as the *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán* (MEChA), and that women served as the backbone of the student movement. The oversight is due, in part, she says, to the historical dominance of men in the fields of Chicana/o History and Studies, their implicit disinterest in issues of gender and sexuality, and their explicit marginalization of women in the movement. Blackwell suggests too that stereotypes of Chicanas as *malinchistas* (traitors), *vendidas* (sell-outs), and *agringadas* (white-women wannabes), as well as Chicana scholars' fear of confirming these negative images, has kept many away from this field of study. Thus, Blackwell's genealogy of Chicana feminists in the twentieth century is a breakthrough in our knowledge about these *mujeres* (women).

An interdisciplinary scholar trained in the History of Consciousness program at the University of California at Santa Cruz, Blackwell analyzes Chicanas' quest to bring gender and sexuality as well as race and class to the forefront of the Chicano movement. In documenting these women's significance, she is not simply retelling a story but also making a political statement: until now, they have been relegated to the margins of both the Chicano civil rights and women's liberation struggles. In fact, however, Chicana feminists built what Blackwell calls a complex "vision of liberation," which shaped US women of color consciousness and evolved into the larger US and third-



Brown Berets in formation

world women's movements of the 1970s and 1980s—which in turn influenced activists, artists, writers, and intellectuals. While Blackwell warns that her book is not a sweeping history of the movement but rather focuses on historicizing the origins of feminist consciousness and understanding gender and sexual politics during the Chicano movement, she nevertheless touches on and illuminates many unknown aspects of Chicanas' involvement in the movement.

Blackwell provides insight, for instance, into how Chicanas' personal struggles with the college experience cut short both political activism and educational attainment for many of them, thereby limiting the number of young women who participated in the movement at California State University, Long Beach, in particular. When they arrived at Long Beach, Blackwell finds, many of the women students realized they were in a foreign environment. As the daughters of poor, working class *Mexicanos*, they felt uncomfortable in their new surroundings and guilty for leaving their families behind. At the same time, they challenged their parents' cultural values about the proper role of daughters—which did not include living alone, away from the supervision of the family. They continued with their activism. Sadly, for many, the shift from the barrio to the campus and a commitment to student empowerment was too much to handle on their own, leading many of them to drop out of school.

To breathe life into her tale, Blackwell taps deeply personal oral histories of the Chicana feminist pioneer Anna NietoGomez, a leader of *Las Hijas de Cuahatemoc*, a feminist group founded in 1968, and its surviving members. (The group took its name from an early twentieth-century Mexican feminist civil and political organization that opposed the Porfirio Diaz dictatorship. Diaz ruled for 36 years, from 1876 until 1910, triggering the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, a bloody civil war that left thousands dead and the country in ruins.) She also interviews women from the East Los Angeles Chicana Welfare Rights Organization

and the *Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional* (Mexican National Feminist Commission). These oral histories—along with archival research into Chicana activists' journalism, poetry, scholarship, and organizational reports, among other sources—illuminate their struggles with patriarchal ideologies and practices, their internal debates and disagreements, and the short- and long-term impact of these challenges on their personal lives and collective experiences.

To make sense of this multilayered history, Blackwell employs a process she calls "retrofitted memory," in which she takes pieces of discarded and overlooked histories and refurbishes or retrofits them into the historical record. She likens herself to an underground disc jockey, spinning obscure tracks to produce fresh beats. In so doing, she contributes to a small yet growing body of literature focusing on women in the Chicano movement and in the larger civil rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s.

¡Chicana Power! is a corrective to accounts of the Chicano and US women's-rights movements that focus either on racial and ethnic struggles or on gender and sexuality. In contrast, this work pierces those fields and strings them along a broad continuum, across gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class—the site of intersectionality that today's women of color activists identify as paramount to the analysis and contextualization of their experiences.


Applying Michel Foucault's notion of the archaeology of knowledge, which interrogates the ways in which a story is constructed, what gets included, and what gets left out, *¡Chicana Power!* begins by examining the various ways in which scholars and other writers have obscured, silenced, and effectively erased Chicanas and Chicana activism from the history books. To fill this gaping hole, Blackwell turns her attention to Chicana college student activists, as they carved out a space for themselves. She is perhaps at her best as she uses oral histories to

render the passion and commitment of these young women to fight for what they believed was just, despite the resistance they encountered from both male and female comrades who espoused a Chicano-nationalist doctrine.

Next, Blackwell studies how the young Chicana feminists relied on the printed word to articulate their new ideas: they built an alternative print community, or what Blackwell calls a "subaltern counterpublic," which included women from diverse regions, generations, social classes, levels of education. This network, says Blackwell, enabled the early "anthologizing" of the experiences of women of color in general and Chicanas in particular.

Blackwell examines the most well-known episode of discord in the Chicana movement: the 1971 *Conferencia de Mujeres por La Raza* (the Conference of Women for the Mexican/Chicano People), held in Houston, in which a group of women participants declared that they did not want to be liberated and walked out in protest. Blackwell uses this episode to illustrate the contested nature of Chicana feminism and its relationship to the emergent masculinist cultural nationalism that pervaded the Chicano movement. While Chicanas supported equality between the sexes, they could not agree on how or where that would take place: within or outside of the movement. She notes that, in the long term, these internal fissures, dissensions, and complexities among Chicanas eventually dashed the dream of a national Chicana feminist movement.

Nevertheless, Blackwell shows, as she looks at their lives after they parted from the nationalist Chicano movement, these women were not defeated by the struggle but rather, empowered. In 1976, for instance, Anna NietoGomez fought for tenure at California State University, Northridge. Although she lost that fight, she stood up to the entrenched sexism in Chicano Studies. Many others formed influential coalitions with other third-world women and continued their activism by fighting for welfare rights, jobs, healthcare, and safe homes and communities.

At first glance, *¡Chicana Power!* may seem to be a narrow study of a miniscule number of young Mexican American women activists in California. Instead, it is an engaging and richly textured story of how historically conscious, Chicana feminists came together—against all odds—as leaders and rank-and-file members of a feminist organization. They challenged the prevailing ideology, which claimed to empower *la gente* (the Chicano people), yet overlooked half of the population: women. *¡Chicana Power!* reweaves and centers the histories of Mexicana, Chicana, and third-world feminists, creating a genealogy for present and future generations of activists. It is a testament to the legacies of Chicana feminists in general and Anna NietoGomez and *Las Hijas de Cuahatemoc* in particular. 

Miroslava Chávez-García is an associate professor at the University of California, Davis, and teaches in the Chicana/o Studies Department. She is the author of *Negotiating Conquest: Gender and Power in California, 1770s to 1880s* (2004) and *States of Delinquency: Youth, Race, and Science in California's Early Juvenile Justice System, 1850s to 1940s* (forthcoming 2012).