

RE-MEMBERING EMOTION: Bigotes and the Un-Blocking of Memories

Marie “Keta” Miranda

Cherríe Moraga, in *This Bridge Called My Back*, presents the concept of “theory in the flesh” as a means of knowledge production (1989, 23). Offering a critique of the binary opposition of mind/body, theory of the flesh expresses the condition where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land where we grew up, our sexual longings—fuse to create knowledge. The experience of one’s own body provides the subjective as well as intercorporeal ties with people, where common experience sets relations between and amongst them. As an ontological schema, Moraga’s intervention sets up the carnal experiences—the personal, flesh, the private, the intimate—illustrating how this informs new knowledge, privileging the body as a way of knowing. Theorizing through the body locates racialized and classed—as well as gendered—knowledges since theory is born of necessity. While this embodied theory is about knowledge creation, it is also a tool of political resistance. Moraga’s theory of the flesh is tied to the experience of being excluded and provides a call for new sites of solidarity (23).

As a collage of events from several periods of my political involvement, this essay reflects on the Chicana/o Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s as a student; through the process of being interviewed about my activism with the early Chicana feminist movement by Maylei Blackwell to the present as I make meaning of the past and understand the process of recuperating memory, working with the Ad Hoc Committee on Institutional Violence of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (MALCS). This essay considers

the mechanisms of silencing that occurred during the Chicano movement and it engages Blackwell's concept of "retrofitted memory" in order to illustrate how forgetting is an active process of erasure (2). Retrofitting memory—recovering what was long suppressed, forgotten—was a vital part of the process of *telling*—talking publicly about what happened. Similarly, The Latina Feminist Group in *Telling to Live* discusses the difficulty of making public the withheld secrets, "papelitos guardados" (2001). They explore similar experiences about isolation and the "process of resistance and recovery about the institutional as well as personal abuses" that they endured (13–14).

As I recovered the memories, what became significant was recovering the emotional tenor of the period; where we must consider how to write in the subjective emotion when writing history. The study of emotions in historical research provides subjects to speak to the atmosphere, the climate of the times. Generally, personal experience is not validated in academic and formal institutions. Yet, to reflect on experience is not merely to tell a story or anecdotes. Adding the memories of emotion as the tone and timbre of the early Chicana feminist intervention in the Chicano Movement and a reflection of my participation requires an understanding that memory is an active process of remembering and erasing (Flores 2002, xv). It explores mechanisms of silencing and the recovery of emotions as part of re-building history. I present the concept of emotional history as one aspect of Moraga's theory of the flesh. In order to retrieve memory, the recuperation process posed difficulties. Memory was blocked where an image was obstructing my memory. What occurred was a process of breaking through that image in order to recall the memory. Once the memories behind the image were released, the experience of fear, what I call the politics of fear, becomes a way to understand my participation in the events of early Chicana feminism. Retrieving the emotions of the times reinscribes the history of the subjective, the lived realities of what was under erasure (The Latina Feminist Group, 2).

As the history of Chicana feminism has begun to unfold, it is important to review the issues and reactions (Aquilar 1997; Del Castillo 1997). The reactions to early Chicana feminism were mixed: some supported women's efforts, some were willing to learn, and others refused it.¹ A leader in the social justice movement was Anna NietoGomez who, while attending California State University at Long Beach, was an activist for Mexican American students' rights and member of the United Mexican American Students (UMAS), later changed to el Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA). NietoGomez was one of the first women elected as president of a leading student organization. During this time she founded Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc, a feminist-centered Chicana newspaper and a women's group by the same name. Because of her stand on women's roles, sexism, and patriarchy in the movement, she was hung in effigy. Following graduation with a Master's degree, NietoGomez was hired at California State University, Northridge, where she developed and taught the first courses on the Chicana experience. Additionally, she founded the publication *Encuentro Femenil* in the spring of 1973, considered one of the first scholarly journals of the civil rights era. Issues covered a wide range including childcare, equal rights, political participation, economic and welfare rights. In spite of a record of leadership and publication, NietoGomez was denied tenure in 1976 (Blackwell, 197–205).

In *Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*, Blackwell speaks of her task of writing the oral history with members of Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc (2011). To weave the stories of Chicana feminism during the 1970s, she presents the concept of *retrofitting* in order to challenge the traditions and conventions of writing histories, so that the invisibility and erasure of this early form of Chicana feminism is reinscribed into history. Challenging narrow definitions of feminism, retrofitting the stories together—

from Los Angeles to Houston and back to Los Angeles—Blackwell challenges Euro-American feminists' historiography as well as heterosexual centrism as she recovers and unfolds the multiple forms of feminism.

Through the dialogic of interview and participation in the MALCS Ad Hoc Committee, I reflect on my own participation in the early Chicana feminists forms. I also bring parts together, once forgotten, repressed; yet always returning through a commitment to liberation and participation in social justice movements. I believe, each of us who participated in Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc, who attended the first Chicana conference in Houston, who raised issues of women's roles in our various organizations, who challenged phallogocentrism—I believe we, too, experienced this dynamic process of retrofitting memories. As Blackwell argues, “retrofitted memory is a radical act of remembering, becoming whole in ways that honor alternative, non-normative ways of being” (11). The radical act of remembering is enabled through dialogics of interlocation.

Through the methods of oral history, the flow of conversation enriches a dialogical relationship between researcher and researched, interviewer and interviewee, where through the process of interlocation, old forms of thought shift—what was left in the back of the mind, the back-burner, the residual, emerges for re-examination, reflection, rejuvenation. However, as previously indicated by Blackwell's story, I found that parts of my memory were blocked. As I began to tell my story, to speak with her, to talk, I realized there were hazy spaces: BLANKS in memory; I questioned myself: *Is this true? Did this happen?* Even other, more fearful questions about truth and memory emerged. And screen images appeared over those blanks; some kind of symbolic work, that stopped, blocked, memory.

Bigotes. I saw bigotes. Frowning, dismissing, discrediting. Like a police crime tape: do not cross, let sleeping dogs lie. Like a trauma patient, I tried to

remember, to reach this subconscious knowledge—to remember. The dates were confused. The events, not very clear.

When did this happen? What followed? Who was there? She was!?! Where?

Sometimes grasping for the word, the word that would evoke description. For so long, this part of my life, my story, had been gone. Re-collecting my story in the conversations with Blackwell, I felt frustration because I was unable to narrativize, to bring all the pieces together. Frustration as the bigotes loomed large, blocking memory that would connect the incidents of what happened.

A specific mode of consciousness that has a historical and social context of the times took another form. Facing that block, that image, the sign, was difficult. Enfleshment of memory was stirred, awakened by the queries of the researcher. I needed to go behind the image, the sign, break through the block in order to examine political practice, in order to consider how to address social power in progressive movements.²

Rescuing memory was a process of talking—the slow emergence of a personal narrative. As Moraga discusses, a theory of the flesh arises from “a politic born out of necessity” (xvi). The experience of one’s own body provides the subjective as well as intercorporeal ties with people, where common experience sets relations between and amongst people. A theory of the flesh offers alliance.

The Historical Relevance of Emotion

A few years ago, I read a letter that Anna NietoGomez received about her tenure process at Northridge. It is factual; it describes in an objective, neutral way the decision-making process of her (denial of) tenure. It was a formal letter. This was, is, the process of tenure review. Dry, institutional. What

struck me was that somehow it did not reach or touch my understanding of events. The process was that kind of mundane questioning: *Did you publish? Did you complete the requirements?* A list of check-off points that was not so much judgmental, but clinical, in its assessment.

The letter did not convey what was happening in the hallways, the talk outside the institutional formality. What the letter did not and could not address was that her tenure case was shaking our world. When NietoGomez came up for tenure at Northridge there was a revolution, possibly a counter-revolution. Something that an institutional report does not, cannot capture. Feminism ran high.

Feminism—would it, could it be a part of the Chicano Movement?

Feminism—its life—was at stake.

Could we, feminists, find a place, have a space in Chicanismo?

Feminism/women's liberation, in Chicano Studies, did it have a future?

It was a debate about the value of feminism to the Chicano Movement. This was what surrounded NietoGomez's tenure process. We were, then, in the middle of trying to define our form of feminism. Sometimes our definitions were Marxist or Maoist; sometimes it was simply about inclusion; and at other times about exclusive women's, better yet, MUJER ONLY spaces.

Stories circulated. The effigy at Long Beach remembered, retold, restated.

She had taken on the machos!

She was fighting back!

Other rumors: The guys had strong armed her, told her not to speak of rapes, domestic violence, child abuse, drug and alcohol abuse.

The message that we understood...not stated...was loud and clear: not to be critical of leadership. Not to speak of different kinds of leadership—of any kind of communitarian, collective, consensus building, voicing. The complaint was:

It takes too long, need to act now; move the agenda.

Too much talking, not enough walking: March Now!

No time for these vieja talk sessions...this consciousness-raising bullshit.

Silence!

A sterile description of a process. But nothing of the pain, of the not knowing what to do or where to turn. Confusion. Questioning ourselves. Is this, this feminism, so important? Is feminism necessary to our work? To revolution? Is this just an abstract college thing?

Rumors flew: Anna was cornered! She was weary. She was beat. Feminism fought and stopped.

In so many ways, the message was clear: do not think of leadership. Do not think of a different type of leadership—of transforming this social movement.

Silence!

Bigotes!

Emotional Habitus

Pierre Bourdieu refers to habitus as the lifestyle, values, dispositions, and expectation of particular social groups that are acquired through the activities and experiences of everyday life (1990, 53–65). In the preface of *This Bridge Called My Back*, commenting on the places where

we dwell, our thinking and behavior, Moraga explains how our thinking and behavior are aspects of culture that are anchored in the body or daily practices:

Sometimes for me “that deep place of knowledge” that Audre [Lorde] refers to seems like an endless reservoir of pain, where I must continually unravel the damage done to me. It is a calculated system of damage, intended to ensure our separation from other women, and therefore, most fearful. (xvi)

Moraga’s insight to bodily knowledge entails modes of thought where the contents of the habitus are the result of social structures objectifying subjects. In that habitus, social discourse has political implications that constrain praxis.

From 1971 to 1989, I dedicated my time to community organizing, and finally returned to the university in 1989. After my first year back, I heard there would be speakers on campus, Chicanas, talking about feminism! Chicana feminism? Had that survived in the academy? In Chicano Studies? Would they know about us? About Anna? It did not matter! There it was! My heart flipped through different emotions. Chicana feminism—had we even tied the two terms together? What had they discovered? How had it survived? What can they tell me, teach me, help me to understand what we were doing?

I went. I listened. With my heart racing, I listened in amazement. Not able to take it all in. I was joyous—restless. Then came the discussion.

*You’re not speaking to the people. Who can understand you?
This is all theory! Abstract!
It’s Anglo words; it’s not Chicano.*

I wanted to speak. I did not. I could not find the words. I was silent!

I wanted to go up to the presenters, to Emma Pérez and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano. Tell them I understood—I felt their meaning. Yes, this is what it was about! This is what we were trying to do: to speak, to write a feminism that was ours! This is what we fought for—this is what we had dreamed to speak, to theorize. What we lived!

The naysayers were still around—but Chicana feminism survived! I felt joy!

But as I continued to attend classes to get my B.A., I thought a lot about the campus event on Chicana feminism. As I continued to think about my silence, I was dumbfounded to realize that I had been silenced. What are the mechanisms of silencing? How had I been struck speechless? Memory is an interactive process of remembering and an active process of erasing. Maybe, the way in which Anna was demonized? The act of separating one's self from the demonized, the folk devil. A threat to the social order to the way things were. A threat to values and interests. It is an ideological battle. Moral entrepreneurs—either an individual, group or formal organization—seek ways to influence a group to adopt or maintain a norm—label the deviant, as folk devil, pariah:

On the Indian sub continent the word *pariah* comes from the Tamil word *parai*, literally meaning “to say or tell something.” In the olden days, paraiyar announced public messages. They would draw the attention of people around them by beating their animal skin drums and then make public announcements. They were mostly drawn from the lowest strata of society or caste. Hence the word *pariah* has become a general word for a low caste person. A cognate word exists

in Malayalam language that is used to say something without any pejorative connotation.³

Pariah—once employed “to say or tell something,” possibly to alert the public, to bring current events to the public, and to bring what was previously unknown, becomes a pejorative term.

*Censure! Making the teller an outcast, banishing, and excluding.
The politics of fear—to be banned from the tribe.*

I had to recognize that I had been silenced. And, that I complied with the naysayers, with the rush against feminism, when Anna was attacked. Somehow, I accepted this description, this definition of NietoGomez. How did that happen? How does it happen?

I had to recognize that I was being excluded, pushed out. I felt informal exclusion from the group. What was the basis for these feelings of exclusion? Probably, there was not a direct threat. But I felt fear. Whether intentional or unintentional, possibly a rationalization, I had to deal with my own understanding of feminism, women’s liberation.

The Politics of Fear

In the initial discussions of the Ad Hoc Committee of MALCS, we tried to define the experience of exclusion, or marginalization, of bullying that Chicana and queer folks face in Chicano Studies and the social movement organizations. As Antonia Castañeda has stated, institutional violence consists of the practices that violate personhood. Anna NietoGomez helped to clarify that institutional violence is:

[W]hen authorities of institutions, and organizations both formal and informal know or should have known that members or participants are bullied, harassed, and or are subject to physical and sexual violence, but do not believe they should be held accountable to institute deterrents and consequences to prevent, investigate and rectify the problem *to protect the interests of the institution or organization* and instead ignore, deny, shun, blame and or intimidate those who report incidents and protect the victimizer and thereby directly or indirectly encourage the repetition of hostile and violent behavior, sanction and perpetuate a hostile and unsafe environment.⁴ (emphasis in original)

Therefore, I think that as social movements address practices, there is a need to speak about the politics, the actions of institutional violence. There have been quite a few feature stories about the culture of fear since 9/11 (Furedi 2007). However, I want to introduce the idea of a politics of fear into the discussion of institutional violence.

Fear is usually expressed in a personalized and privatized way. For example, fear resonates as something that happened to a friend or a neighbor might also happen to oneself. Fear as a problem is understood in an abstract sense and is generally diffused. For example, to express the idea, "I am frightened," rarely focuses on something specific; it expresses a sense of powerlessness. Institutional violence, I believe, is about fear that is diffused and that enables a sense of powerlessness, a diminished sense of agency that leads people to turn themselves into passive subjects. Institutional violence is about pressure groups that make us scared about the people we love and about the experiences that we cherish.

When an organization is not motivated by inclusion, it is more likely to rely on fear—particularly the fear of being an outcast from the group’s circle or society—as a means of control over its members. In many ways this shifts the arrangements, the affection, and affiliation inside the group. The emotions of solidarity for liberation, social justice, and the deep affective ties of shared meanings and most significant identity are at stake. Thus, when exclusion becomes the mode of controlling and maintaining the group’s ideology, more individuals are prepared to sacrifice their individuality in exchange for the comfortable sense of belonging to the group. Creativity is stifled and the evolution of plans, aims, and missions are frustrated. Thus the monolithic group asserts itself “to protect the interests of the institution or organization and instead ignores, denies, shuns, blames and or intimidates those who report incidents,” and a minority of individuals—courageous enough to rebel against group constraints—are cast out.⁵ And FEAR takes over. Fear as a basic survival mechanism becomes a controlling factor in people’s lives and a controlling mechanism of the present and of the future. Throughout *Il Principe/The Prince*, Niccolo Machiavelli’s 1513 handbook, the use of fear is highlighted in politics: create a fear scenario. The aim of fear is power. The use of fear is to establish power, to maintain power.

Embodying Emotional History

Retrofitting memory, as Blackwell presents it, is a radical act. The act of retrofitting releases emotions, helping to expose the history, the past surfaces, exposing fear for what it is: a mechanism of power and abuse. The work of retrofitting memory is piecing together, and “becomes a radical act of becoming whole”; the researched reflect and see in new ways what is common, everyday, self-evident (Blackwell, 11). The process forces the routine to become unusual. The habitual comes under examination. The lapses of memory, triggered by images that block, begin to deteriorate. What emerges

is emotional history—not detached, institutional—that tries to get at the complexity of things past, “things said,” things done.⁶

Histories systematically narrativize, providing structure to stories, events. The collection, organization, and presentation determine patterns of cause and effect. When events and records are preserved, the documents and archive legitimate, becoming the authentic form for constituting the historical record. History as a written form becomes the primary force to determine the past and to understand the present. Yet narrative does not always fill the gaps. Histories are organized chronologically, territorially, thematically, and even culturally (Pérez 1999, 14–27).

Including mood and sentiments of events, the historical research of emotions becomes an archaeological project. Moraga's concept of theory of the flesh helps to understand that emotional memory connects to the psychological and the physical (23). As Blackwell observed, many of the women who she interviewed had a bodily experience with memory—rocking, cradling, attempting to comfort and to try to heal. Emotional memory within a psychophysiological framework is the work of conscious experience, where one is aware of both oneself and aware of the external world. Thus, emotions that speak to the history of the times are as valid as the project of history.

Fear attacks the body, where the body freezes in a paralysis. Where escape or avoidance is the behavioral act—looking for safety. However, when we look at institutional violence, and the politics of fear, a theory of the flesh can lead to action—the other response to fear, not to fly but to confront, to encourage, and to act. In the theorizing, Moraga provides a way to use the body to get outside traps—outside regulation, law, and policy. Outside of the

procedure of doing things—that trap us and immobilize us—to find ways of recovering emotional history and to discover how to address institutional violence. To paraphrase NietoGomez, it is then that we can be accountable to institute deterrents, to find ways of prevention, and to identify remedies to enhance our organizations and institutions. So that a history of physical, emotional, and psychological violence does not damage our bodies, we must not allow history to repeat itself.

Notes

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¹ The early debates on feminism took the form of feminists versus loyalists, see *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (1997), edited by Alma M. García, pp. 7, 71, 88, 90, 311.

² History of emotions research is providing challenging historiographical approaches to examining agency. Examining institutions that impact human behavior and emotions, such as family, law, religion, the military, and the state, researchers also examine how “emotions play in/contribute to the formation and dissolution of social groups, communities and movements.” From the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, accessed October 25, 2013. <http://www.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/en/research/history-of-emotions>.

³ *The Free Online Dictionary*. Accessed August 25, 2013. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/pariah>.

⁴ Anna NietoGomez, email message to MALCS Ad Hoc Committee, draft defining institutional violence, June 20, 2012 .

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Emma Pérez’s history of women presents case studies that analyze the relationship of discourse to power/knowledge. She reconstructs histories of the unspoken and unseen by deconstructing systems of thought whereby “‘things said’ are always an inscription upon the body.” See Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary* (1999), xvi.

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