

## BOOK REVIEW: Maylei Blackwell's *¡Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*

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*¡Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement.* By Maylei Blackwell. Austin: University of Texas Press, Chicana Matters Series, 2011. Pp. 312 pages. \$55.00 (cloth) \$24.95 (paper).

In *¡Chicana Power!*, Maylei Blackwell places the Chicana feminisms of the 1960s and 1970s into a larger context of Chicana and Mexicana resistance from the time of the revolution to the present. At many levels the book is a companion text to Alma M. García's *Chicana Feminist Thought* (1997) that so many have been waiting for. Here, finally, is a history of the Chicana feminist organization Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc and a narrative of the 1971 Conferencia de Mujeres por la Raza. Yet the text is much more. Rejecting monolithic conceptualizations of "the feminist movement," Blackwell uses oral histories and public and private archival sources to excavate, map, and analyze what she terms "multiple feminist insurgencies." The result is layered and vibrant, with the struggles, strategies, histories, and legacies of a generation of Chicana feminists reaching out to the reader from the pages of the text. While the narrative unfolds chronologically, it is not linear. Thus while Blackwell moves readers from the historical contexts out of which Chicana feminisms grew, to Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc and the 1971 conference, and then back into community histories, she also weaves multiple organizations and activists, stories, and fellow-historians into the tale.

The deep histories with which Blackwell opens the text prove critical to her project. If the reader is to understand multiple insurgencies in the late twentieth century, then the genealogies of such insurgencies must be mapped. And so readers learn of Lucy Parsons, a Tejana who helped organize the 1886 general strike; they are reminded of the legacies of Luisa Moreno, Josefina Fierro de Bright, and Emma Tenayuca. Women's leadership in El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Española and in LULAC are laid out, so that when Blackwell addresses the emergence of the Chicano Movement, the many strands and forms of feminism already present in Chicana/o communities are visible.

Blackwell's text comes to life when she turns to the histories of the women of Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc, the women of California State Long Beach, who, during the Chicano Movement, were central to the emergence of a Chicana print culture. Here, readers learn of the families of Anna NietoGomez, Sylvia Castillo, and Corinne Sánchez, and the varied experiences that brought young Chicanas to activism. Blackwell skillfully articulates how their struggles against sexist racism and the specific challenges that Chicanas faced in the university gave rise to Chicana spaces—counterpublics created through the production of newspapers, conferences, caucuses, and activism. Blackwell applies Nancy Fraser's concept of counterpublics to the print culture of Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc to argue that Chicanas, in the 1960s through the 1970s, created alternative spaces within the movement from which they could speak back, and through which they could form coalitions with women cross-regionally—and eventually nationally and internationally.

For Blackwell, then, the 1971 Conferencia de Mujeres por la Raza is central to the many discourses she addresses not only because it brought together activists from different regions but because of the hope it held for so many women. In *¡Chicana Power!*, the conference becomes a site for understanding

the different, conflicting, and overlapping ideologies of Chicana activists. Blackwell's archival work allows her to paint a fuller picture of the conference than has, to date, been available to students and scholars. While she looks at the various discourses that resulted in the now infamous walkout, she also addresses the successes of the conference, the workshops and resolutions, the disagreements about resolutions, and the work and revolutionary discourse that made possible some of the workshops. What emerges is a layered and complex discourse, where region, ideology, youth and dreams, as well as *vendida* logic, converged.

For Blackwell, the 1971 conference, as well as the history and activism of Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc, are part of a larger mosaic of Chicana feminisms, *feminista* activism, and discourse. Just as Chicana students moved from community to college and back to community, taking and shaping tools for change and empowerment with them as they moved, so conferences and newspapers gave rise to and were part of larger overlapping discourses and insurgencies that influence today's feminisms. The "Chicana poetic revolutions" born in the presses of the 1970s crossed over into the anthologies of the 1970s and 1980s and continue to date. Yet Blackwell is not a romantic, and so racist sexism and *vendida* logic are also addressed as part of this continuing legacy. Thus, Blackwell argues, the refusal of Cal State Northridge's Chicano Studies Department to tenure Anna NietoGomez does not stand as an aberration, but as an important strand of counter-feminism that continues to weave through academic and community spaces.

While Blackwell is very much a historian, she is also a Chicana feminist theorist, and as such, the theories she develops and utilizes throughout the text are as critical to her narrative as the histories she maps. Thus the concept of multiple feminist insurgencies is introduced as she maps the multiple

feminist insurgencies of the nineteenth century. The concept of retrofitted memory is introduced as she maps how Mexicanas, at the time of the revolution, reclaimed and mobilized the image of Cuauhtémoc—and how Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc later used retrofitted memory to claim a space for themselves in the Chicano Movement. The text is theoretically innovative, but because each new theory is introduced in the context of its application, it is also very accessible.

In her introduction, Blackwell uses the metaphor of a DJ to describe the task at hand, claiming that her role, as historian, is to “spin the historical record by sampling new voices and cutting and mixing the established soundscape to allow listeners to hear something different, even in grooves they thought they knew” (38). In this text, Blackwell spins skillfully, so much so, that scholars from various fields will find this book approachable, useful, and insightful. Upper division students will enjoy the historical narratives as well as the manner in which Blackwell carefully introduces complex theoretical tools. Established scholars in the field will appreciate the book for the way Blackwell is able to bring together so many different voices, insurgencies, and legacies in a manner which, until now, had not been accomplished.

### **Works Cited**

- Blackwell, Maylei. 2011. *Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*. Austin: University of Texas Press, Chicana Matters Series.
- García, Alma M., ed. 1997. *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*. New York: Routledge.