Unmaking/Remaking Memory Work: Centering Community Narratives of Latinx Lived Experience

Paper title: ImaginX en Movimiento (IXeM): Building a *Rasquache* Digital Archive

Marisa Hicks-Alcaraz
Ph.D. Student, Claremont Graduate University

M.A., New York University
B.A., University of California, Los Angeles
Community college transfer student

Pronouns: She/They

Introduction

This paper is an ethnographic case study that provides critical reflections on the strategies employed by ImaginX en Movimiento (IXeM) that respond to particular constraints and opportunities pertaining to labor and cost, including operations, acquisition of equipment, funding, and collaborative initiatives for community engagement. This case study will posit labor and cost solutions against a background of scarce resources as well as forge new ideas for community-engaged and justice-based recuperation methods in academia.

In particular, this paper reflects on the way IXeM expresses a *rasquache* defiance that is situated within digital cultural studies and the larger movement of community-based archiving, as well as in the interrogation of traditional (Anglo, heteropatriarchal-centric) archival authority. Building from cultural theorists like Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Amalia Mesa-Bains, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, I’ve developed the term *digital rasquachismo* to frame IXeM’s strategies that decenter dominant paradigms.

Before I jump into this work, I’d like to address my positionality and inherent power and privilege in order to reconcile my social location with the work I’m doing with IXeM, establish the principles that guide this project, and craft my identity as a researcher, graduate student, and cultural worker.

I’m currently a PhD student in Cultural Studies at Claremont Graduate University, located on occupied Tongva land, also known as Los Angeles County, California. I am a U.S. citizen, middle-upper class, cis-gendered, mixed-race, and a woman. My mother is an immigrant from rural Mexico of Indigenous Tarahumara Rarámuri, European, and Arab descent and my father is a U.S. citizen and white settler of Anglo descent. I take responsibility for the structures that have afforded me unearned privileges by continuously reflecting on the role I play in reinforcing structures of oppression and by committing to dismantling such systems of domination in my research and cultural work by actively listening and collaborating with participants, and responding to community needs in a way that doesn’t inflict further harm or suffering. My work is anti-racist, anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-imperialist, anti-homophobic, anti-transphobic, anti-ableist, anti-violence, pro-Palestinian, pro-environment, and intersectional.
What & Who is IXeM?

The principles mentioned above are likewise driving forces in the archival praxis of IXeM. Founded in May of 2019, IXeM is a community-based audiovisual archive and archiving collective that aims to build a digital storytelling network that works in solidarity with Black, Indigenous, Palestinian, People of Color (BIPPOC) groups to be in control of our narratives. IXeM originated from wanting to carry out a participatory action research project for my dissertation that addressed the lack of access and erasure of Latinx moving images in university film collections, which had created major barriers both to my learning and teaching about this work, especially work made by the “marginalized within the marginalized” such as queer Latinxs, Latinas, Black Latinxs, Indigenous groups from Latin America, and Muslim Latinxs. But I also wanted the archive to be more than simply a dissertation or even a seed project. And as an intersectional feminist, I wanted my work to be collaborative. I, therefore, began by inviting friends and colleagues who I thought would be interested in forming a collective dedicated to creating greater community access, participation, and self-representation to join this endeavor.

Currently, we’re a small group of Latinx community technologists/media makers/artists/media educators/students/cultural workers. We currently volunteer our time to developing the archive and collective. We have full-time “day jobs” and/or are full-time students. As you can see, we each play many roles in our everyday lives, but being professionally trained archivists is not among those roles and we actively resist dominant archival practices that reinforce the oppression of historically ignored and erased communities.

A Short Genealogy of Rasquachismo

While rasquachismo has a long history in Mexican and Mexican American culture, the term was originally theorized by Chicano cultural critic Tómas Ybarra-Frausto in his 1991 pioneering essay, “Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility.” Ybarra-Frausto sees rasquachismo as “an attitude rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability” (1991, 156) that arises as a result of knowing how to survive through the use of everyday “movidas” or “strategies to move ahead in life” (2014, 220). Rasquachismo “makes do” by finding creative solutions to overwhelming obstacles in a context of severe socioeconomic inequalities. The concept, however, isn’t solely rooted in economic hardship. Rasquachismo is both a socio-economic imperative and a deliberate choice “to subvert and turn ruling paradigms upside down” (1991, 155).

In 1999, Chicana artist and critic Amalia Mesa-Bains expanded on Ybarra-Frausto’s notion of rasquachismo from a Chicana feminist perspective she calls domestican. The concept of la domestican resists the cultural identity imposed by Anglo Americans and the heteronormative gender restrictions assigned by Chicano culture while simultaneously affirming alternative cultural values.

Other scholars like performance theorist Diana Taylor and Chicana art critic Ella Maria Diaz note that while Ybarra-Frausto’s theorization of rasquachismo draws on Susan Sontag’s 1964 discussion of “camp” aesthetics, in which she associates camp with queerness, his genealogy avoids the term’s queer association. Taylor argues that Ybarra-Frausto’s essay “strategically assum[es] heteronormativity” and deliberately privilege the term’s embedded politics of the Chicano Movement, which “countered racism in part through a machismo that would not tolerate interrogation” (2003, 127).

In a 1997 essay, the borderlands scholar, poet, and performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña referred to both the utilitarian aspects of rasquache art in his definition of “technorazcuache art,” calling for “activist artists and theoreticians to find innovative, grassroots
applications for new technologies” in order “to link community centers, artistic collectives, and human rights organizations by means of the internet” (119). Going beyond the application of rasquachismo as a specific style of aesthetic expression, Gómez-Peña utilizes the term in relation to technology as a kind of praxis for creating change and fostering social justice for communities of color.

**Digital rasquachismo & IXeM**

Building from these previous theorizations, I define digital rasquachismo as a socio-political praxis in response to scarce resources that retools technology based in everyday lived experiences to create greater equity. Digital rasquachismo appropriates an attitude of “making do” as a means of finding creative solutions by using whatever tools are available to minimize barriers and maximizes access. Application of the term, however, is not rooted solely in economic necessity. Digital rasquachismo is driven by both a socio-economic imperative and a deliberate choice to imagine new uses of digital technologies to dismantle hegemonic paradigms that disproportionately subject BIPPOC groups to generational inequities.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, IXeM primarily held its meetings in the homes of its members. We would purchase/make food and drinks to share with each other. The meetings had a social component to them. They weren’t just about work, deliberately going against capitalistic labor models that don’t tend to focus on the wellbeing of its laborers. But when city shelter-in-place orders were given in March, we moved our meetings to Zoom and Google Meet like so many others. In the early months of the pandemic, we felt that it would be in the best interest of our members to use our meetings to checking-in with one another on an emotional level and to offer a space to process what we were experiencing and bearing witness to.

We became reactivated as a collective in May when we saw several institutions, that prior to the pandemic had little interest in documenting POC voices, rushing to collect material about people’s experiences with COVID-19. We were concerned that these institutions were putting themselves first, instead of people first, in the scramble. The priority of mainstream archival institutions is, after all, preservation of material and not people’s safety and wellbeing. In response, we launched our first project, the COVID Testimonios Project, to collect and document the testimonies of BIPPOC communities using a trauma-based approach so as to avoid inflicting further harm to all who participate. We hope that the testimonies will serves as “community memory banks,” which Gómez-Peña describes as sites for encounter, dialogue, and exchange and virtual bases of operation and action (1997).

We haven’t made a final decision about which platform we’ll be using as a database, but we’re exploring the possibility of following archives like Freewaves (www.freewaves.org) and Blvck Vrchives (www.blvckvrchives.com) in retooling Vimeo as an archival database because of its accessibility and low subscription fee. To mitigate the risk of content loss, we’ll be relying on donated hard drives (onto which digital copies will be stored), but more importantly, on the preservation practices of content owners. We intend to co-develop preservation practices with content owners to ensure collection sustainability. This approach returns power to the people and subverts the normative archivist-as-authority hierarchy. Rather than assume the role of custodians or even stewards, we position ourselves as community advocates and facilitators.

In addition to an archive, we’re developing a community archiving program which will consist of workshops, skill shares, talks, and screenings. For example, we’re supporting one of our partners in helping their youth document their neighborhoods in South LA through mobile podcasting and videomaking workshops. The decision to use mobile devices, which we’re
hoping to acquire through donations, is both out of socio-economic necessity and a political choice. On the one hand, neither organizations have the funds to purchase professional film and audio equipment. On the other hand, we’re making a collective and deliberate choice to use technology that the youth are more likely to be using in their day-to-day lives and can, therefore, build from their own knowledge and experiences. For those who don’t have previous familiarity, the minimalist design of mobile devices will potentially make both learning and teaching more accessible.

Another example of a programming event we’re currently developing is Home Movie Day. This event will center the lived experiences of Latinx and BIPPOC communities through two components: 1) a workshop during which participants will learn how to digitize their home movies and 2) a screening event of the digitized materials during which participants will have an opportunity to narrate their materials. A wide range of formats will be accepted to encourage greater participation, including 8mm, VHS, camcorder tapes, and cell phone footage. Some of the digitizing equipment has been donated to us and the rest has been purchased through a $3,000 Mellon Mays Graduate Initiative Grant. Included in our equipment is an 8mm film-to-digital converter we purchased for about $400 from B&H, a photo, video, and audio retail store. To teach ourselves how to digitize content, we are beginning with our personal collections. To watch the first 8mm home movie we digitized from one of our members’ family collection, see https://bit.ly/AnnaStar.

Prioritizing people over materials, our equipment acquisitions model goes against ruling paradigms that insist that technology of the highest quality and newest models are necessary for archival digitization efforts. The importance of our Home Movie Day lies in the dual objectives of supporting participants in digitally preserving their personal collections and creating a platform in which they can narrate their own stories, rather than having their stories told for them. Through such programs, we aim to create transformative acts of storytelling that counter false narratives, while shifting power to marginalized communities.

“Slow Archiving”

Last month, I attended a virtual panel titled, “Archiving Protests, Projecting Activists” organized in response to the wave of protests sparked by the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others. The panel was hosted by Bergis Jules, Project Director of Documenting the Now (www.docnow.io), who called for the practice of “slow archiving” during the closing remarks. Jules described “slow archiving” as the on-going act of building relationships with the archive’s participants, which involves taking the time to listen to them about what they really need and asking how archivists can support them. “Slow archiving” in many ways encapsulates our own archival process. We’re deliberately taking the time and energy to build long-term relationships and a network of care towards the communities we work with. Echoing the other panelists, it’s not just about the archive for us. Nor is it about collecting for the sake of having material. It’s about protecting the wellbeing of our participants. It’s about taking the time to carefully and ethically develop projects and programming that doesn’t cause psychological harm or retraumatization.

This is obviously going to mean that our projects will take longer to develop, but it’s a necessary part of the process if we’re to do the work of dismantling systems of harm towards marginalized groups. As Miriam Posner argues in her essay “What’s Next: The Radical Unrealized Potential of Digital Humanities,” critical digital humanities (and as IXeM argues about anti-colonial digital archiving specifically) is “not only about shifting the focus of projects
so that they feature marginalized communities more prominently; it is about ripping apart and rebuilding the machinery of the archive and database so that it does not reproduce the logic that got us here in the first place” (2016). In other words, it’s about creating new systems that will make stories and storytelling more equitable and create a more just society.

I’ll end by declaring our commitment to always evolve our goals and vision for the archive. We commit to always be in movimiento to meet the changing needs of the communities we work with.

Sources Cited


Gómez-Peña, Guillermo. “The Virtual Barrio @ The Other Frontier (or the Chicano interneta).” House of World Cultures. Posted October 12, 1998. https://archiv.hkw.de/forum/forum1/doc/text/e-gompen.html


