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Emily Ann Lederman

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The Dissertation Committee for Emily Ann Lederman certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

**Decolonizing the Archive in Contemporary American Indian
& Mexican American Literature**

Committee:

Ann Cvetkovich, Co-Supervisor

James H. Cox, Co-Supervisor

John Morán González

Julie A. Minich

Craig Campbell

**Decolonizing the Archive in Contemporary
American Indian
& Mexican American Literature**

By

Emily Ann Lederman, B.A.; M.A.

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Emily Ann Lederman, Ph.D.

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Supervisors: James H. Cox & Ann Cvetkovich

This dissertation examines twentieth and twenty-first century American Indian and Mexican American novels and short stories that decolonize the archive through Indigenous and queer archives and archival practices. Historical documents such as colonial maps and newspaper clippings appear within the pages of these texts, and characters engage with objects and ephemera to access and assemble histories of settler colonial violence, tribal politics and culture, and queer lineages. Beyond filling in the gaps of the colonial archive, these texts challenge the epistemologies and power structures that sustain a colonial conception of the archive. Disrupting understandings of an archive as an institutional repository that contains a stable and objective past, they further work of the interdisciplinary archival turn of the past two decades and emphasize the importance of understanding historical and contemporary sociopolitical realities through the lens of a decolonized archive.

My first chapter theorizes what I call “archival sovereignty,” demonstrating how American Indian texts such as LeAnne Howe’s *Miko Kings* (2007), as well as novels by Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, and N. Scott Momaday, repurpose materials of the colonial

archive within Indigenous epistemological frames. Exploring the limitations and possibilities of archival recovery, my second chapter reads queer archival practices in Felicia Luna Lemus's *Like Son* (2007) and considers the politics of recovering Indigenous histories in Mexican and Mexican American contexts. Bringing together the theoretical threads of my first two chapters, my third chapter explains how Indigenous and queer archival practices strengthen tribal community bonds in Greg Sarris's *Watermelon Nights* (1998), and contextualizes this novel within Sarris's tribal political career and the politics of tribal citizenship. In conclusion, I analyze Manuel Muñoz's "Lindo y Querido" (2007) and Benjamin Alire Sáenz's "He Has Gone to Be With the Women" (2012) to consider how those undocumented and disappeared in the official record are remembered through queer archival practices that underscore the affective and political necessity of reimagining the content and form of the archive.

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Introduction: “Documents Lie”: Privileging Indigenous and Queer Archival Practices

“Ezol smoothes the hem of her dress. ‘Documents lie,’ she says casually” (*Miko Kings* 28).

“As much as I would love to stumble upon diaries, journals, and letters written by queer vaqueras of the nineteenth century, I must challenge my own desire for the usual archival material and the usual way of seeing, as well as honor that which women scholars before me have uncovered. While I’ll not always find the voices of the subaltern, the women, the queers of color, I will have access to a world of documents rich with ideologies that enforce white, colonial heteronormativity...I am arguing for a decolonial queer gaze that allows for different possibilities and interpretations of what exists in the gaps and silences but is often not seen or heard.” (Emma Pérez, “Queering the Borderlands,” 129)

Foundational Arguments

The Choctaw time-traveling storyteller, theorist, mail clerk, and boarding school survivor, Ezol Day, challenges the authority of the colonial archive when she states, “documents lie.” Ezol is the guide and interpreter of a Choctaw archive in LeAnne Howe’s *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story* (2007), the handler of correspondence between past and present. In 2006, the novel’s protagonist, Lena Coulter, finds Ezol’s mail pouch buried in the wall of her late Choctaw grandmother’s house, containing a paper archive of the Miko Kings baseball team, and of events happening in Indian Territory in the years leading up to Oklahoma Statehood in 1907. Lena is drawn to the materials in the wall, which include journal entries, newspaper clippings, and a photograph. She “can’t stop thinking about the mail pouch, especially the photograph,” finding the pictured players “compelling, even handsome” (16). Her obsession with the team photograph is attributed to the fact that the image of the players does not fit within a settler colonial historical lens: “Although the image is nearly a hundred years old, it isn’t an Edward Curtis-style photograph, with the Indians portrayed as either noble savages or stoic warriors” (16). When Lena pursues research of the Miko Kings at the Oklahoma Historical Society, she searches “hundreds of pages of old

newspapers” but turns up little about “Indian Country,” other than descriptions of crime and death (20). *Miko Kings* confronts the destructive limitations of the colonial archive’s representation of American Indians, and suggests that the way out of a colonial historical lens is through the creation of a decolonized Choctaw archive. This archive, which I examine closely in my first chapter, includes the found mail pouch, documents from the colonial archive, some of which appear within the pages of the text itself, oral storytelling, and a Choctaw theoretical frame. Ezol appears one night to narrate the found documents and teach Lena Choctaw epistemologies of time and language, which allow Lena to learn a Choctaw-centric history of American Indian baseball and inter-tribal political organization. Ezol’s shape-shifting ability, her “genius,” is attributed to her own unique “lens,” an “eye tree” that grows over her eyes and allows her to see “multiple dimensions” at once, including both traumatic histories of Choctaw loss and hopeful histories of Choctaw survival and resurgence. Lena’s typed narrative of the *Miko Kings* history goes digital at the end of the novel, and the many excited responses she receives online emphasizes the community importance of a Choctaw-centered history. *Miko Kings* presents a decolonial archive that frames documents within tribally specific epistemologies.

My dissertation examines twentieth and twenty-first century American Indian and Mexican American novels and short stories that make both archival and historical interventions. Undergirding this project is the belief that American ethnic literature can serve as a point of access to, and record of, American histories, separate from documents written within a colonial gaze and housed in state institutions. American ethnic writers have a particular impetus to engage with histories in the Americas because American ethnic histories have often been excluded from, or misrepresented by, the colonial archive. In the above epigraph, Chicana/o author and critic Emma Pérez confronts the limitations of the

“world of documents” that privileges a colonial and heteronormative historical perspective, and calls for a “decolonial queer gaze” that will see beyond the historical narratives that emerge from the colonial archive. For the colonial archive has functioned as a source of evidence for narratives of manifest destiny and as justification for state-sanctioned violence. The texts that I examine throughout my dissertation cultivate a decolonial historical gaze through an engagement with archives and archival practices. As the colonial archive excludes, as Emma Pérez writes, “the voices of the subaltern, the women, the queers of color,” the novels and short stories I examine recover histories from these perspectives, including histories of Choctaw political resistance and baseball, queer cultural figures, the oppressive conditions of the Bracero Program, and the dislocation of the Waterplace Pomo tribe. These literary texts blur the border between the fictive and factual as they narrate events and peoples undocumented and unknown in the colonial record, like the queer vaquera Pérez brings to life in her novel *Forgetting the Alamo, Or, Blood Memory* (2009). They draw attention to the silences and misrepresentations of the colonial archive, revealing the subjective and constructed nature of this archive as they also imagine other kinds of archives that produce other historical possibilities.

Beyond “filling in the gaps” of the archive, these texts challenge the power structures of the colonial archive. By focusing on how histories are constructed, recorded, and accessed within these texts, I illustrate how they unsettle the epistemologies that sustain a colonial conception of the archive itself. For literature has the ability to simultaneously recount historical narrative and theorize what it means to represent the past. By narrating, or including within their pages, the materials of the colonial archive, such as the dispatches of missionary priests in N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* (1968), these texts are able to engage theoretically with this archive, “talking back” to it, and revealing the subjective nature

of colonial histories; in other words, the already blurred lines of the fictive and factual within the colonial record.

These texts present Indigenous and queer archival practices that challenge Western empiricism and linear historical narratives and provide other means of knowing history.¹ Answering scholar Dian Million's (Tanana Athabascan) call for critics to take seriously Indigenous ways of knowing in order to destabilize Western epistemologies, I critically evaluate the archive through an Indigenous lens and privilege the forms of accessing and preserving knowledge depicted and embodied by these literary texts ("Intense Dreaming"). Disrupting understandings of an archive as an institutional repository that contains a stable and objective past, my readings of these texts demonstrate the messy borders between past and present and the importance of understanding historical and contemporary sociopolitical realities through the lens of a decolonized archive. Throughout my dissertation I highlight the activist and practical potential of decolonizing the archive in the context of struggles for land rights, federal tribal recognition, and US citizenship.

Archives have been powerful tools of US colonialism. Archival practices of documentation, including missionary records, the mapping of land, and the collecting or theft of Indigenous artifacts and stories, are tools of settler colonialism, mobilized as justification for genocidal state practices, and underpinning beliefs in American Indian disappearance and the nonbelonging of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the Southwest.

¹ While I acknowledge the relevance of significant debates in Western discourse about the discipline of history, especially those questioning subjectivity, empirical knowledge, and historical truth, such as Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche's "The Use and Abuse of History" (1873), or Hayden White's "The Burden of History," (1966), I seek a decolonial lens that intentionally focuses on the theories that emerge from the ethnic American literature of this study, and from within the fields of American Indian and Mexican American studies.

The destruction of Indigenous archives was integral to the colonial project; as Diana Taylor has explained: “part of the colonizing project throughout the Americas consisted in discrediting autochthonous ways of preserving and communicating historical understanding” (34). Therefore to decolonize the archive requires both privileging Indigenous modes of preserving and accessing historical knowledge, *and* revealing the destructive nature of the colonial archive that continues to be employed to justify state violence, including land and resource acquisition and a militarized US-Mexico border.

Throughout this dissertation, when I refer to the “colonial archive,” I mean those county, state, and national archives, as well as museums and educational institutions, congressional records and public school textbooks, that continue to exclude the perspectives of American Indians and Mexican Americans, and continue to be in service of the Euro-American settler colonial state.² The colonial archive produces a history of dominance that excludes and obscures all kinds of state violence and renders it difficult for those who experience those violences to record them. Maria Cotera has explained an “invisibilizing feedback loop” that denies access and representation in the archive to the subaltern:

Disparate circuits of archival preservation suggest that archives both respond to and reflect the political and social dynamics of the culture they seek to preserve. Indeed, traditional archival methods often nourish an *invisibilizing feedback loop* in which one’s access to power determines one’s presence in the archive, and one’s presence in the

² Schools are one place where the fight for control of historical archives occurs. Recently there has been a conservative resistance to including ethnic histories of the Americas in curricula. For example, in 2010 Arizona passed HB 2281, a bill intended to end the teaching of ethnic studies in K-12 schools. See Sandra K. Soto’s and Miranda Joseph’s “Neoliberalism and the Battle over Ethnic Studies in Arizona.”

archive shapes historical knowledge, which, in turn, informs the system of valuation that structures the priorities that govern collecting and preservation in institutions. Those farther away from the mechanisms of power—women, the working class, ethnic and sexual minorities—are rarely represented in institutional archives. Consequently, their lives and interventions are rarely the subject of historical meaning-making. (“Invisibility” 785)

A way out of this loop is a turn to the “shaping of historical knowledge” in these bodies of ethnic American literature, which is complementary to revisions of material and digital archives like Cotera’s own decolonized Chicana feminist archive of “encuentro.”³

I use the term “archive” to emphasize that sites of historical access and preservation, knowledge production and transfer—be they material or ephemeral—mediate characters’ relationship to what has past. The authors of this study describe archival materials and practices that provide access to specific histories and/or a means of preserving those histories. For example, the protagonist in Felicia Luna Lemus’s *Like Son* (2007) inherits a collection of objects and letters that he uses to access a familial and cultural past. By describing archival objects, such as the photograph of the Miko Kings baseball team in *Miko Kings*, or Pomo woven baskets in Greg Sarris’s *Watermelon Nights* (1998), authors bring

³ The way out of this loop, Cotera theorizes, is to produce different kinds of archives using other knowledge systems. Cotera is creating a digital archive of the Chicana feminist movement, “Chicana por mi Raza,” that challenges linear and static conceptions of an archive. Like important grassroots archives such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the Chicana archive Cotera is forming includes personal collections, such as her mother’s (Martha Cotera’s) Spanish novels and packets of activist pamphlets, texts that “document the intellectual labor” of Chicana feminists (Cotera) and blur the lines between the intimate and the political. Her work redefines what counts as history and historical document in academia and dominant discourse, following Anzaldúa’s *autobistoria*, an ongoing, both personal and collective, writing of history that is self-reflective and unfixed.

Indigenous and queer archives into the written form, sanctioning these (often nonprint) means of preserving and accessing the past.

Describing archival objects and practices within storytelling and nonlinear narrative frames is a decolonial act. Historical narratives are often generated from the description of archival materials; by mobilizing literature to mirror this process, authors claim the authority to substantiate fictional narratives with (real or invented) archival evidence, and undermine the authority of the colonial archive by demonstrating the subjective nature of constructing histories. Literature also meets the archive in this study when authors intertwine narrative with images of archival materials, rendering visible the juxtaposition of narrative and archive that occurs in the other texts, and underscoring the productive interplay of document and narrative that produces histories.

The texts I analyze depict archives and archival practices that provide the means for characters to visualize or understand particular historical possibilities. I call collections of document, story, object, and ephemera “archives” throughout this dissertation in order to legitimize them as sources of historical knowledge and sites of knowledge production, and connect them to theoretical work of the interdisciplinary “archival turn” of the past two decades. These collections are uniquely powerful because they occur outside of institutions; as feminist and queer archivists have asserted, calling personal collections and ephemera “archives” “remains a powerful authorizing act” (Eichhorn 15). Yet thanks to the important work happening in archive theory, the lines between institutional archive, grassroots or activist archive, and collections or practices not previously considered archival have blurred. For example, Chicana feminists such as Cotera have bridged grassroots and institutional archives by bringing the methodology of activist collections into academic settings.

Therefore, not all institutional archives are colonial.⁴ By focusing on literary representations of archives and archival practices, I demonstrate how contemporary fiction is in conversation with the exciting work of the archival turn.

I subscribe to a poststructuralist understanding of history as always plural, rather than a belief in a dominant “History” or metanarrative of the past. There are at once many histories possible, many versions of past events. As Thomas King (Cherokee) contends, “stories create change,” and the archival methods we use to access and preserve (hi)stories can change historical perspective, and consequently perceptions of the present and future as well. Decolonizing the archive means revising both its content and form to counter the erasures of histories of women and people of color. Simply put, decolonial archives produce decolonized histories. The texts of this study accomplish this work through what I call Indigenous or queer archival practices.

I use the terms “Indigenous” and “queer” to describe the content, methodologies, impact, and underpinning epistemologies that enable decolonial archives and archival practices in these texts. Indigenous cultures have long histories of relying on forms of

⁴ American Indian scholars such as Amanda J. Cobb (Chickasaw) have described how museums are beginning to decolonize their collections because of pressure from American Indian cultural movements. In addition, initiatives like the “Refusing to Forget” project, which seeks to preserve a history of state-sanctioned racialized violence that occurred on the Texas-Mexico border between 1910-1920 (and is led by Trinidad O. Gonzales of South Texas College, John Morán González of the University of Texas at Austin, Sonia Hernández of Texas A&M at College Station, Benjamin Johnson of Loyola University in Chicago, and Monica Muñoz Martínez of Brown University), have worked to decolonize museums and give voice to the collective historical knowledge of marginalized communities.

knowledge transfer and historical preservation that are unrecognizable within a Western academic paradigm. Inextricable from decolonizing the archive of American history is Indigenizing the archive, so that it serves pre-colonial histories and honors forms of recording and accessing the past that have their roots in pre-colonial practices, such as the material and spiritual archival practice of Pomo basket weaving that I consider in my third chapter. When I use the term “Indigenous,” I am describing archives and archival practices that are rooted in the knowledge systems and methodologies of American Indian communities. Indigenous modes of archiving are also a turn to different ways of understanding time and history. Whenever I can, I use the tribally specific terms or concepts, rather than the overarching “Indigenous,” following the call of critics like Craig Womack (Creek) to attune to the tribally specific.⁵ These tribally specific beliefs and practices are neither static nor fixed, in other words relegated to the “traditional,” but instead dynamic and responsive. For tribal cultures are strong through change and responsive to the contemporary sociopolitical moment. For example, the basket weaving described in my third chapter includes the design of new patterns to respond to the contemporary moment.

To Indigenize the archive is in part to de-authorize the written document as the definitive record of what has past. The archives I analyze throughout this dissertation encompass spiritual practices, material cultures, oral storytelling, and performance, realizing Diana Taylor’s concept of the interdependent “archive and repertoire.” Equalizing these other forms of remembrance alongside the written allows for historical possibilities

⁵ While there are strategic motives for considering Indigenous or American Indian peoples as a sociopolitical group (see Sean Kicummah Teuton’s *Red Land, Red Power* (2008), Dian Million’s *Therapeutic Nations: Healing an Age of Indigenous Human Rights* (2013), or Robert Warrior, Jace Weaver, and Craig Womack’s *American Indian Literary Nationalism* (2006)), a tribally specific approach recognizes that each tribe has its own unique culture and history.

previously thought impossible, and helps reshape the form of an archive. As Christopher B. Teuton (Cherokee) explains in his study of the “textual continuum” in American Indian literature, the “privileging of writing as recorded speech has led to the perception that context-dependent forms of signification, such as Native American oral and graphic traditions, are less culturally advanced,” and thereby “blinded scholars to the ways oral and graphic traditions function in interdependent ways in the expression of Indigenous knowledge” (xv).⁶ I actively avoid the oral—written binary throughout this dissertation, and instead see written components of these archives as working together with the repertoire. Part of a “textual continuum,” which is not without precedent in American Indian cultures, these novels themselves are Indigenous modes of archiving that unite text, material, and storytelling. As Craig Womack has argued, “the idea...of books as a valid means of passing on vital cultural information is an ancient one, consistent with the oral tradition itself” (*Red* 15).⁷ The books of this study are thus themselves an archive of historical knowledge, but their narratives emphasize the interplay of document, object, and oral storytelling to decentralize the written.

In addition, I argue that repurposing the materials of the colonial archive is also an Indigenous archival process, an act of what I call “archival sovereignty.” Gerald Vizenor (White Earth Nation of Minnesota) has theorized the construction of a manifest destiny narrative as a colonial projection in the “literature of dominance” (*Manifest* 2). Vizenor not

⁶ Teuton focuses on Mesoamerican writings, Diné sandpainting, and Haudenosaunee wampum belts.

⁷ American Indian scholars such as Craig Womack and Lisa Brooks have argued against the oral—written binary that defined discussions of oral storytelling in Native Studies for some time, explaining that books have a textual precedent in many native cultures—although the epistemological framework of literate knowledge might be different, the act of writing down and passing stories this way is not simply a Western one.

only identifies this false but very powerful and destructive narrative, but also locates American Indian presence and resistance, what he terms “survivance,” within these dominant texts. Despite the misrepresentations and obfuscations, there is tribal presence that haunts colonial documentation. Therefore, these shadows in the colonial archive can be useful if situated in a decolonial framework. For example, *Miko Kings* repurposes a still from the 1909 short film called *His Last Game*, which depicts a Choctaw pitcher just before he is executed, as proof of Choctaw baseball history. The novel points out the falsity of this colonial representation by narrating the actors from the film critiquing the inaccuracy of the female braids they are told to wear.⁸ The Choctaw pitcher in Howe’s narrative represents hope (in fact he is named Hope Little Leader) and lives to tell the tale of the Miko Kings. Howe’s narrative thereby transforms the message of this image (and film) from one of American Indian disappearance to American Indian survivance.

Archival sovereignty is best applicable in an American Indian context since American Indians are both silenced and hyper-visible within the colonial archive, and thus working with the colonial archive’s misrepresentations becomes an important part of decolonizing the archive. I also choose the term sovereignty because of the work it does in marking the complex politics of tribal struggles for self-determination within the context of US colonialism.⁹ For sovereignty points both to a history of tribal autonomy longer than the

⁸ In drawing attention to such misrepresentations, the novel also stresses their lasting impact. The very fact that Howe must draw from *His Last Game* to tell her own story of Indian baseball proves the ongoing power of the colonial archive.

⁹ The term has been both contested and claimed within American Indian studies. Indigenous peoples in the Americas were historically recognized as sovereign nations by colonial administrations and later by settler governments. Sovereignty can therefore emphasize the fact that American Indian tribes are “distinct political entities with executive, legislative, and judicial powers” (Castellanos, Nájera, and Aldama 10). Yet since not all tribes are officially “recognized” by settler governments,

colonial gaze, and to the necessity of working across borders, including with Euro-American structures of power. The archives I describe in this dissertation are at once autonomous and in negotiation with the US colonial archive. My use of the term is both theoretical and metaphorical, following the usage by scholars like Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee), and therefore does not realize the literal legal definition of the term.¹⁰ Yet I also find the term productive because it helps underline the very real legal stakes of archival practices in the US, which my third chapter addresses through an archive of genealogy charts prepared for federal tribal recognition.

The Indigenous archival practices I read in these texts allow ongoing, intimate, and community engagements with archival materials, practices in which the material, spiritual, and historical overlap. For example, I read Pomo basket weaving, beading, and the repurposing of clothing in *Watermelon Nights* as Indigenous archival practices that allow a tribal community to address the impact of colonialism. The practice involves a continuous material and spiritual engagement with a Pomo past, the formation of community bonds, and the development of new basket patterns that represent new ideological frameworks for addressing the contemporary moment. These affectively driven archival practices unsettle conceptions of an objective institutional archive and stable, linear history. Recent scholarship in both affect and queer studies explicitly rejects a discourse of moving on or healing, critiquing the “memorialization” of the past as effacing structural violence and persistent

tribal sovereignty cannot be dependent on external recognition, as I examine further in my analysis of Greg Sarris’s novel and activist work in my third chapter. I follow Jace Weaver’s (Cherokee) formulation of sovereignty as both useful within colonial power structures and independent of their powers of bestowal.

¹⁰ See for example: “Stolen From Our Bodies: First Nations Two Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic” (2004).

trauma.¹¹ The texts that I examine throughout this dissertation reject such closure in favor of messy relationships to the past facilitated by Indigenous and queer archives that are able to mark the ongoing suffering of historical trauma and current structural injustices. Characters in these texts, including the protagonists of *Miko Kings* and *Like Son*, are haunted by the archive, by both what it includes and excludes. Writers and critics working in areas constituted by archives of historical trauma and state sanctioned violence, such as African American studies, Holocaust studies, and American Indian studies, among others, have described the gaps, silences, or “ghosts” of the archive as indicative of violent histories that resist representation or knowability.¹² The Indigenous and queer archival practices I read throughout this dissertation address a colonial past that will not be put to rest and is not always knowable. An unsettled past is a key hinge point on which I bring together “Indigenous” and “queer” contexts.

Bridging the fields of queer theory and Native Studies, I place the archival theories that emerge from these texts in conversation with recent work in queer temporalities and affect studies. I employ “queer” to refer to the methodologies and content of archives that destabilize gender binaries, the heteronormative and the homonormative, and linear time. I call archival practices that are intimate, that necessitate a physical and emotional closeness to the material, “queer” in order to emphasize the subversive political and affective possibilities of an extremely subjective approach to archiving. For example, in Lemus’s *Like Son*, the

¹¹ For example, see the work of Heather Love and J. Jack Halberstam.

¹² For example, in her foundational study of “postmemory” and Holocaust archives, Marianne Hirsch describes “the gaps around which our archives are constructed” and explains that “the challenge is not to fill the space with projections that would allow these gaps to be screened or disguised” (248). Also see Saidiya Hartmann’s *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2008), and Avery F. Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008).

protagonist engages in queer archival practices when he wishes to possess and “consume” a disintegrating photo in order to make contact with a queer historical figure (31). This archival practice is queer because it is driven by affective necessity, rather than an attempt to objectively preserve a stable past. Queer archives emphasize affective relationships between past, present, and future. The active process of archiving in these texts makes possible the ongoing negotiation of relations—between past and present, individual and community—made available by these archives, relations that confront and evade structures of colonial violence. While my third chapter elucidates the possibilities of Indigenous and queer archival practices working together, not all the queer archives of this dissertation employ Indigenous archival practices, and nor are the Indigenous archival practices necessarily queer.¹³ A turn to the past through these archives is also about looking forward, fueling practical political organizing and creating imagined futures grounded in tribally and culturally specific and nonheteronormative histories.

Indigenous and queer archives enable the following interrelated political and affective possibilities: by providing access to tribally and culturally specific historical narratives, these archives contribute to struggles for tribal sovereignty and support community activism; engaging everyday items of material culture and inherited objects outside of institutions, they allow an intimate curation that helps individuals and communities address a felt history and recover familial and queer histories; through their use of Indigenous knowledge systems, they provide a means for engaging nonlinearly with an

¹³ Although Lisa Tatonetti has proposed an Indigenous center in queer theory that renders all Indigenous theoretical lenses queer; see her work on “indigenizing queer” in *The Queerness of Native American Literature*.

unsettled, unstable, and persistent past that requires archival practices that are at once material and epistemological.

Critical Contexts

Literary Genealogies of Resistance

I follow a comparative ethnic studies approach throughout this dissertation as I bring together American Indian and Mexican American texts, attuning to the specificity of distinct contexts while also seeking points of coalition.¹⁴ As bodies of literature that must address the exclusions and misrepresentations of colonial American historical discourse merely to claim a space within *American* literature, American Indian and Mexican American literatures have always been invested in how histories are told and in pre-colonial histories of the Americas. Yet bringing these bodies of literature together on the basis of their claims to Indigenous histories is problematic, given the appropriation of Indigenous culture and spirituality in Mexican American studies and the historic complicity of Mexican populations in colonial violence against Indigenous communities.¹⁵ As Rafael Pérez-Torres has argued, it is crucial “to cast a critical eye on the recasting of Chicano subjectivity as Indigenous,” because the “unproblematic claim by Chicanos to Indigenous ancestry...helps erase a troubling part of

¹⁴ I use “Mexican American” when referring to this body of literature in order to find symmetry with “American Indian,” and because it is the terminology my institution employs. Otherwise, I use Chicana/o when referring to specific authors or identities (unless individuals identify differently). And I use “Chicana” or “Chicano” when I address gendered movements or groups.

¹⁵ See the special issue of *Studies in American Indian Literature (SAIL)*: “Indigenous Intersections in Literature: American Indians and Chicanos/Chicanas” (2003-2004). In addition, in the collection *Comparative Indigenities of the Americas: Toward a Hemispheric Approach* (2012), George Hartley gives a brief overview of an American Indian critical response to such appropriation (in which he almost exclusively cites Chicana/o critics).

the Chicano past in relation to Native peoples” (14). Mexican American authors and critics meditate on the complexity of a mestizo Chicana/o identity. For example, Pérez-Torres has argued that this identity is figured by dislocation, given its contradictory inheritances of colonized and colonizer.¹⁶ Reading these bodies of literature with an archival lens can address the contradictions and points of contact within their comparative Indigenities. For examining archives in these texts compels a focus on how histories are formed, in modes of accessing, building, and sustaining historical knowledge, including knowledge of Indigenous origin. Archives are an alliance building hinge on which I bring together these fields, since both bodies of literature illustrate decolonial archival practices. At the same time, as explained in my second chapter, the knowledge produced by these archives can provide a helpful point of departure from such an alliance, since the histories and realities of colonialism vary greatly in these two contexts.

Placing these bodies of literature in conversation illuminates how Indigeneity has been divergently understood and mobilized within American Indian, Mexican American, and Mexican contexts. US, Mexican, and tribal governments have historically defined Indigeneity differently, and such variance continues today. While the celebration of Indigenous origin was interwoven with Chicano nationalism in the US, the Mexican postrevolutionary *Indigenismo* movement of the 1920s celebrated cultural Indigeneity at the Mexican national level while effacing the existence of actual Indigenous populations and denying them rights.¹⁷

¹⁶ Rudolfo Anaya’s novel *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) addresses the duality of Chicana/o identity, embodying both colonized and colonizers.

¹⁷ See Tace Hedrick’s *Mestizo Modernisms: Race, Nation, and Identity in Latin American Culture, 1900–1940* (2003) and James H. Cox’s *The Red Land to the South: American Indian Writers and Indigenous Mexico* (2012).

The queer archival recovery project outlined in my second chapter addresses contradictory histories of Indigeneity by accessing an unsettled Chicana/o past.

Archival recovery is central to Chicana/o cultural nationalism and conceptions of Indigeneity, as recovering the pre-Colombian Aztec homeland of Aztlán as both historical place and symbol of Chicana/o Indigenous origin grounded the movement.¹⁸ While the recovery of Aztlán drew from Aztec mythology, it also emerged from rewriting the Aztec migration story, and thereby combines, as Sheila Marie Contreras writes, “myth, history, and geography in a continuum that enables nationalism consciousness” (72). The development of the concept of Aztlán can therefore be read as an archival practice that decolonizes the history of Chicana/os in the Americas, helping Chicana/os critique a long history of Euro-American colonialism, fight for human rights, and embrace a mestizo identity. Yet the concept of Aztlán, and more generally the romanticization of Indigenous origin in Chicano nationalist texts, has also obscured contemporary sociopolitical struggles of Indigenous peoples in the Americas, and privileged heteronormative, male, and able-bodied Chicano citizens.¹⁹

Confronting the masculinist rhetoric of Chicano nationalism, the Chicana/o feminist movement opened up space for nonheteronormative Chicana/o identities in part by proposing personal, spiritual, and feminized modes of engaging with pre-colonial history. The work of Chicana/o feminist and queer scholars has been largely influential to this project. Critics such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Sonia Saldivar-Hull, and Sandra K. Soto, among others, challenge the structures of power that support a limiting Chicana/o

¹⁸ *El Plan de Spiritual de Aztlán* was adopted at the First National Chicano Liberation Youth Conference in 1969.

¹⁹ See Julie Avril Minich’s *Accessible Citizenships: Disability, Nation, and the Cultural Politics of Greater Mexico* (2014).

history within the US. An emphasis on bridging the personal and the political through embodiment and materiality in Chicana feminism has had important archival implications. For example, Anzaldúa invents a new historical genre that is cyclical and crosses borders of literature, memoir, theory, and history. She proposes *autobistoria* as personal essay that theorizes, and creating a “personal and collective history using fictive elements” (578). Scholars such as Ana Louise Keating, Maria Cotera, and Maylei Blackwell have charted erasure within institutional archives, and theorized other forms of archiving that speak to Chicana/o feminist connections.²⁰ For example, Blackwell has worked to recover Chicana feminist “genealogies of resistance” within the Chicano Movement. I propose that the texts of this study form a genealogy of resistance by reflecting and furthering these important decolonial revisions of the archive.

Rather than charting Indigenous histories, the Chicana/o texts of this study are interested in recovering queer individuals and queer histories. Notably, all my focal Mexican American contain gay or trans characters. The works of Lemus, Muñoz, and Sáenz counter the masculinist, exclusionary nationalist identity purported by the early Chicano Movement, as well as the romanticized Indigeneity that haunts both this movement and Chicana feminism. These Chicana/o texts engage with historical representation and archival materials in order to address a complex, mestizo cultural identity in the US, and gender and sexual identities that have been excluded by a colonial US archival lens *and* by movements within Chicana/o studies. Published between 2007 and 2012, roughly thirty years after the height of the Chicano Movement, these texts both build on and respond to the legacies of Chicano

²⁰ Blackwell’s archival theory outlines and embraces an activist archival practice of retrofitted memory that “creates new forms of consciousness customized to embodied material realities, political visions, and creative desires for societal transformations” (2).

nationalism and the legacies of foundational Chicana/o feminists like Anzaldúa and Moraga.²¹ These texts queer Chicana/o histories and underline what is at stake in historical representation.

Many of the Mexican American texts published during the Chicano Movement engage with archival materials to confront and subvert the colonial archive.²² For example, in Ron Arias's *The Road to Tamañunchale* (1975), Fausto, in a world of his own creation that is entangled with his experience of dying, leads a group of undocumented immigrants disguised as drunken Marines across the US-Mexico border with the help of an Andean flute-playing shepherd. When Fausto is stopped at the border, he gets himself across by reciting documents from American historical discourse that he has memorized. Presenting Fausto as both peddler of books and undocumented bodies, Arias unites the colonial archive with an undocumented and oppressed labor force. Sandra Cisneros's collection of short stories *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) depicts documents like newspaper clippings ("My Tocaya") and prayers and *milagros* ("Little Miracles, Kept Promises"), building a decolonial archive of Mexican American presence. More recently, Salvador Plascencia's metafictional *The People of*

²¹ Ramon Saldivar describes a newer generation of Chicana/o writers who look back at this time period with new historical perspective. For these writers, "born for the most part in the 1960s and 1970s, the heroic era of the fight for civil rights is not a memory but a matter of history" ("Historical Fantasy" 596n1). Lemus and Muñoz definitely fit into this category, though Sáenz is about 20 years older.

²² I could also begin with the text that many consider a catalyst for the Chicano movement, Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales's "Yo soy Joaquin/I am Joaquin" (1967), because this epic poem embodies a historical document as it situates Chicano identity within a history of pre-Colombian culture, and charts the colonial project. In addition, Mexican American literature has a long history before the Chicano Movement of writing back against a manifest destiny gaze, evidenced by recovered texts like *Cabarello: A Historical Novel*, which was written during the 1930s and 1940s and describes the changes faced by a nineteenth-century Mexican landowner.

Paper (2005) explicitly addresses questions of representation and structures of power by satirizing authorial control over representation.

Additionally, Mexican American texts also engage with archival representation by including images and documents within their pages. An interplay of document, narrative, and ephemera is central to experimental texts like Norma Elia Cantú's "fictional autobioethnography," *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995) and Sheila and Sandra Ortiz Taylor's collaboration *Imaginary Parents* (1996), both of which contain a combination of text and photograph and posit a nonlinear temporality.

Published between 1998 and 2007, the American Indian anchor texts of this study also both build on and respond to foundational American Indian and Mexican American literary movements of the mid to late twentieth century. Kenneth Lincoln identified the period following N. Scott Momaday's 1969 Pulitzer Prize for *House Made of Dawn* as the Native American Renaissance, a label that has continued to prove useful to name a proliferation of Native American texts that began during the 1960s and continue today. Many novels of the Native American Literary Renaissance shift nonlinearly between time periods, describing missionaries, battles, boarding schools, epidemics, and forced relocation. They decolonize the colonial archive by confronting its destructive and limiting nature and emphasizing Indigenous modes of accessing and preserving these histories.

Here, I give examples of a handful of authors and texts from the latter half of the twentieth century into the twenty-first that demonstrate such decolonial work (though there are many earlier American Indian writers who are beyond the scope of this introduction).²³ Momaday's *The Way to Rainey Mountain* (1969) combines poetry, history, and memoir to describe Kiowa culture and history, as well as his own process of learning this material.

²³ See, for example, early American Indian writers like William Apess (Pequot) and Zitkala-Sa (Sioux).

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), which I provide a reading of in my first chapter, situates the colonial archive within an Indigenous framework. In addition, Silko's explosive *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) is itself an archive that maps transnational sociopolitical forces, both archiving colonial violences and proposing the possibility of other presents and futures made possible through this knowledge, including an empowering coalition of the Indigenous and poor. Published the same year, Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus* subversively appropriates Christopher Columbus into a Native trickster narrative. David Treuer's (Leech Lake Ojibwe) *The Translation of Dr. Apelles* (2006) satirizes the romanticization of Indigeneity in the archive. Louise Erdrich's (Turtle Mountain Ojibwe) novels chart the development of the colonial record and its destructive results through missionary dispatches, land titles, and birth certificates. I look closely at her *Last Report of the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001) in my first chapter.

The Archival Turn

At its most basic, I find the archive a helpful intervention into discussions of ethnic American literature because an archival practice necessarily emphasizes how the story of the past is constructed, whether that be by the nation with colonial documents, or by Lena the lonely granddaughter narrating documents from the wall of her Choctaw grandmother's home. Rather than rely on the idea that representation is progress, that including the voices of authors and people of color will disrupt structural violences in the Americas, my dissertation underscores the need to also revise those structures of power in which people can supposedly "speak." In other words, as Pérez explains in my epigraph, we have to look at different ways of knowing history, not the usual archives, in order to truly refute the damaging progress narratives that emerge from the colonial archive.

The archival turn of the past two decades, what Ann Stoler defines as the “move from archive-as-source to archive-as-subject,” distrusts the archive’s role as mere source of stored knowledge (“Colonial Archives” 93).²⁴ Placing critical discourse of the archival turn in conversation with American Indian and Mexican American literature reveals the subjective nature of the colonial archive and the ongoing importance of accessing, understanding, and recording the past from tribally and culturally specific perspectives. This project is influenced by the work of theorists and archivists in feminist and queer studies who have proposed the political and affective importance of new ways of thinking about archives and archiving. Kate Eichhorn’s recent work on feminist archives is particularly instructive when considering why there has been such a turn toward the archive across disciplines. Eichhorn emphasizes that the turn to the past through archive is really about contemporary sociopolitical realities: “Rather than simply reflecting a desire to understand the past, the current archival turn reflects a desire to take control of the present through a reorientation to the past” (7). She argues that the archival turn can be viewed as a response to the development of neoliberalism in the United States since the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s:²⁵

²⁴ Foucault’s outlining of the discursive formations that organize knowledge has been theoretically generative for reinterpreting the role, function, and possibilities of an archive. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Michel Foucault terms the “systems that establish statements as events...and things” *archive* (128).

²⁵ I subscribe to David Harvey’s definition of “neoliberalism”: “a theory of political economic practices that proposes the human well being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade” (2). My use of the term is also highly influenced by the expansive work of Lisa Duggan and David Eng.

[Neoliberalism has] profoundly eroded our sense of political agency, which compelled us to look for new ways of manipulating the present through a turn to the past...Where history has been pushed into the past and the future supplanted by the sheer demands of the present, what could be more hopeful than the realization that time is not simply marching forward and that we might imagine a way outside our oppressive present *through* a radical repudiation of “progress”? (6,8)

A turn to the archive from an Indigenous lens is a repudiation of colonial progress narratives, as well as a demonstration of how the colonial archive itself was predicated on the violence of manifest destiny narratives.

By depicting decolonial archives, the texts I examine underline how the formation of the colonial US archive is in fact dependent on the exclusion of subaltern voices. Jacques Derrida’s lecture “Archive Fever” (1996) established a foundation for rethinking the role of archives. His claim that the archive “produces as much as it records the event” situated the archive as a subjective producer of knowledge that is as much about the present moment and projected future as it is about the past (17). The forms of archive I read in these texts are producers of their own historical truths. In addition, Derrida describes the limits of the archive not as faults necessitating expansion, but as integral to the very concept of an archive. For the archive “always works...against itself,” its existence dependent on preserving some things which necessitates leaving out others, for there can be “no archive without an outside...” (11, 14). In other words, the archive operates on exclusion, and therefore what is excluded also fits into the archive paradigm.

Derrida’s formulation of the archive is useful to identify as a critical beginning of reconsidering the meaning of the archive, yet it is too simplistic to say that Derrida’s lecture initiated the archival turn. Stoler avoids rooting the critical movement in Derrida’s text and

instead emphasizes the “larger arc and longer durée” of the archival turn (44). Given the bodies of literature that I am studying, the archival turn could begin when Indigenous peoples first challenged their representation in colonial records, or even first reconsidered their own methodologies for recording and accessing history, and so I agree with Stoler’s desire to look beyond Derrida as the foundation of this critique, even as I find his archive theory a helpful reconceptualization of the archive in current academic discourse.

The theoretical work of the archival turn has gained particular traction in feminist and queer studies, partly because of related work in feminist, gay, lesbian, and queer material culture that has produced innovative collections and installments of alternative archives in conjunction with activist movements. The archival turn is marked by a growing interest in grassroots, activist, performative, and digital archiving. These alternative modes of archiving have lent themselves to new activist and affective possibilities. Drawing on the foundational work of affect and archive scholars such as Ann Cvetkovich, Dian Million, and Diana Taylor, this project is grounded in the belief that modes of archiving that take place outside of institutional archives have particular affective resonance and political possibility, especially for historically oppressed communities.

Rather than Derrida’s vision of an archive built merely on exclusion, the colonial archive I refer to renders American Indians hyper-visible, appropriating and misrepresenting American Indian culture as part of legacies of genocidal practices within the Americas. In fact, the US colonial archive is predicated on recording American Indians and American Indian culture separate from the people themselves. Juana Maria Rodríguez has explained how American Indians occupy a vapid positionality at the center of the colonial archive: “Through anthropology, law, photography, and exhibition practices, Native Americans have served as the quintessential dead subjects of the official archives of ‘Americanness’” (226).

American Indian scholars, including Gerald Vizenor, Thomas King, Lisa Brooks, and Shari M. Huhndorf, among others, have grappled with the hyper-visibility of American Indians within a colonial archive (and dominant culture) that documents Indigenous peoples, “separate from the people themselves” (Sarris 53). The colonial archive houses the subjective writings of missionaries, explorers, and anthropologists, as well as American Indian artifacts and human remains that were stolen and continue to be held despite tribal intervention.²⁶ For example, Thomas King has discussed the destructive power of photographer Edward Curtis’s work. Curtis’s twenty-volume *The North American Indian* (1907) attempted to catalog, through a combination of image and narrative, what he perceived to be traditional American Indians on their way to extinction. King writes: “Curtis was looking for the literary Indian, the dying Indian, the imaginative construct. And to make sure he would find what he wanted to find, he took along boxes of “Indian” paraphernalia—wigs, blankets, painted backdrops, clothing—in case he ran into Indians who did not look as the Indian was supposed to look” (34). Here, King reveals the construction that went into the colonial archiving of Indians, and that represents a particular projected view of what the colonizer expected. As he writes in his groundbreaking historical and philosophical text *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*: “History may well be a series of stories we tell about the past, but the stories are not just any stories. They’re not chosen by chance” (2). Colonial

26 *The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act* (NAGPRA) of 1990 requires federal agencies and institutions that are funded federally to return “cultural items” to “Native American lineal descendants, Indian tribes, Native Hawaiian organizations.” The burden of proof lies with American Indians who must prove lineage despite a colonial system that has disrupted, to say the least, such lineages. See Joy Hendry’s *Reclaiming Culture: Indigenous People and Self-Representation* (2005) and Tamara L. Bray’s anthropological edited collection: *The Future of the Past : archaeologists, Native Americans, and repatriation* (2001).

progress narratives sought to relegate American Indians to the past and thus justify the genocidal practices of settler colonialism.

Anthropological archival practice in the US worked in tandem with genocide in the Americas, precluding American Indian perspective in the colonial archive. In his study of renowned Pomo basketweaver and medicine woman Mabel McKay, Greg Sarris has connected the violences of the colonial archive to the continuous silencing of Indigenous people and epistemologies in academic settings that purport to offer Indigenous knowledge: “while museums exhibit basketry and universities offer courses entitled ‘Prehistoric Peoples of California,’ enabling the larger dominant culture access to the Pomo world, these same museums and universities inhibit, or at best render incomplete, an understanding of this world and of the history that diminishes it. Yet Mabel still talks” (52). Sarris calls for a reorientation of the academic discourse so that Mabel McKay’s voice can be set within an Indigenous-centered context—a context that I argue decolonized archives can create.

In her thoughts on why the archive is an attractive method and place for activists, Eichhorn has written that the archive “opens up the possibility of being in time and in history differently” (8). Scholarship in queer temporalities has outlined “queer time” as existing outside of linear progress narratives and the historical archive. I find it useful to put “queer time” in dialogue with American Indian conceptions of temporality because Indigenous temporalities are informed by both tribally specific knowledge systems and the sociopolitical importance of stepping out of colonial progress narratives or “straight time.”²⁷

²⁷ José Esteban Muñoz’s conception of a queer utopia underscores the need to “step out of” an oppressive linear time that serves capitalism and heteronormativity: “To see queerness as horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describes as straight time is stepped out of or interrupted” (*Cruising Utopia* 32).

For example, Howe's theory of *tribalography* draws on Choctaw epistemologies to emphasize the centrality of American Indian culture within the United States. She explains that tribalography is the ability of stories to create change and "author tribes," building a sense of nationhood while also "bringing things together," "symbiotically connecting one thing to another" (*Clearing* 29, 40). These connections enable a multidimensional temporality, as I explain in my first chapter, and they are made possible in part through material collections. Scholarship in queer theory is generally useful to this project because it disrupts boundaries between past, present, and future; knowledge and the body; and the material and the spiritual.

American Indian scholarship has addressed the difficulty of understanding Indigenous epistemologies within traditional Western academic paradigms. Sarris's work on Mabel McKay emphasizes how she is often misunderstood. He notes that the problem is partly the compartmentalization of the material, the spiritual, and the intellectual within Western education, and, I would add, its archives:

Often Indian people fear and avoid Mabel because of her reputed power as an 'old-time doctor and Dreamer.' If she is not feared by scholars, she is, as I have noted before, inscrutable to them and maddening in her replies which turn scientific discourse about her world on its head. Her seemingly mystifying response must have something to do with the fact that she has become a spectacle in a context (i.e., museum, lecture hall) that is not only somewhat incongruous to her world but also diminishes it to mere artifacts and snippets of disconnected information, so that a basket specialist can talk about design as separate from dream and an anthropologist about shamanism as separate from the craft of basketry. (52)

Throughout his study, Sarris emphasizes the necessity of seeing Pomo baskets as *living*, as containing the historical, religious, and political, rather than as simply artifact. As I will argue in my third chapter, the baskets themselves are an Indigenous archive, uniting knowledge production and material practice.

Considering archives and archival practices through an Indigenous lens allows us to attempt to look around and beyond Western epistemologies to see a long history of people organizing historical knowledge and accessing the past through Indigenous knowledge systems in which the lines between material culture, affect, spirituality and history are not neatly demarcated, and nor does time always progress linearly; and therefore the Indigenous modes of archiving I read in these texts can inform recent work of the archival turn that also jumps these borders.

A focus on archival practices underscores how these texts draw connections between specific histories and present-day psychological and material suffering. The archives in this study fulfill the need for an engagement with the past that takes place outside of the colonial archive and allows characters and communities to address the persistence of historical trauma in their lives. I find the term “trauma” effective for marking the structural violences suffered by marginalized groups within the US. When I refer to “historical trauma” throughout this dissertation, I mean violences suffered communally by an oppressed group, violences that often have points of continuity with neoliberal state practices today. The impact of structural violence and historical trauma on both individuals and tribal communities is taken up by all of the texts of this study. In her foundational study of trauma archives and lesbian public cultures, Ann Cvetkovich reveals how trauma can be understood as “connected to the textures of everyday experience” (3-4). Indigenous and queer archival practices attend to structural violence and the “everyday” impact of trauma. All of the texts

in this study illustrate the closely intertwined political and affective outcomes of decolonizing the archive through practices that ground histories in an intimate materiality that may have healing impact.

Chapter Organization: Sovereignty, Recovery, and Activism

Each of my chapters defines Indigenous and/or queer archival practices and introduces a necessary component of decolonizing the archive. My first chapter outlines the process of claiming archival sovereignty to de-authorize the colonial archive, building a theory of Indigenous archiving that combines a found archive, Indigenous epistemologies, and oral storytelling. Also depicting the interplay of an inherited material archive and immaterial archival practices, my second chapter considers how archival recovery contributes to decolonizing the archive. This recovery occurs through queer archival practices that consider representations of Indigeneity in a Mexican and Mexican American context. Bringing together the theoretical threads of the first two chapters, my third chapter describes an activist archive that strengthens tribal community bonds and tribal sovereignty through both Indigenous and queer archival practices. Seeking stronger coalitions between the two bodies of literature I analyze, my substantive conclusion considers two Mexican American short stories.

In my first chapter, “Archival Sovereignty: Claiming a Tribally Specific Past through the Eye Tree,” I outline how American Indian texts challenge the materials and epistemologies of the colonial archive. Placing colonial archival materials within the framework of tribal knowledge systems such as oral storytelling and Indigenous temporalities enables the documents to do different work. By repurposing the materials of colonial archives so that they tell tribally specific histories, these texts demonstrate the

subjective, constructed nature of dominant historical narratives and reveal other historical possibilities. Novels such as my anchor text *Miko Kings*, as well as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and Louise Erdrich's *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), undermine the power structures of the colonial archive by situating missionary records, newspaper clippings, maps, and other documents within nonlinear narratives that center tribally specific histories in the Americas and call attention to the misrepresentations and omissions of colonial historical archives.

My second chapter, "Archival Recovery: Ashes, Altars, & Queer Saints," takes up the word "recovery" to address the affective and political possibilities and contradictions of "recovering" histories through queer archival practice. The term recovery is useful for describing archival projects that hinge on the intentionality of unearthing something expected from the past that has been absent from colonial archives. Archival recovery projects therefore often shed as much light on the present moment as on the past, because what is sought is in service of an emotional or political need. What happens, then, when what is found is unexpected and/or incomplete? This chapter addresses in detail a queer recovery project that stems from an inherited archive. In my anchor text, Felicia Luna Lemus's *Like Son* (2007), the trans protagonist pursues the recovery of the real queer historical figure Nahui Olin and a queer familial lineage through physical rituals with inherited archival materials. The recovery of Olin as a failed and somewhat dangerous historical figure speaks to recent work in queer theory that refuses a past that is marshaled in service of the present. The historical narratives that emerge from these archival practices do not ultimately serve the affective needs of the protagonist, and this failure is related to the politics of Mexican and Mexican-American claims to Indigeneity. I argue that *Like Son* invites critique of the appropriation of Indigeneity within Chicana/o feminism. While I

connect the novel to a group of Chicana/o texts that use decolonial archival practices, including Norma Elia Cantú's "fictional autobioethnography," *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995), and Sheila and Sandra Ortiz Taylor's collaboration *Imaginary Parents* (1996), as well as the theoretical work of Moraga, I also consider how Lemus's work pushes back against a Chicana/o critical and literary legacy of Indigenous romanticization, even as it engages substantially with the legacies of Chicana feminism. This chapter asks whether (and how) we can pick and choose our inheritances, and suggests that queer archival practices are useful for simultaneously drawing from and rejecting powerful legacies.

Building on practices of archival sovereignty and queer archival recovery, my third chapter, "Activism & the Archive: Stitching Together Tribal Community," examines what I call a "stitching" archive in Greg Sarris's *Watermelon Nights* (1998). I argue that the novel depicts Indigenous and queer archival practices to navigate the complex politics of community building and tribal belonging. While all my chapters are interested in the affective and political impact of decolonial archives, this chapter is especially focused on the real world, community applications of tribally specific archives. I contextualize *Watermelon Nights* within Sarris's own tribal political career and the politics of tribal citizenship. The novel presents a Pomo community that must fight within a colonial context for sovereign rights and heal through recovered knowledge systems and tribal narratives. In Sarris's novel, a tribally specific archive of Pomo baskets, beadwork, and stories helps the tribal community address historical trauma. Simultaneously, an official paper archive of genealogical records is compiled as part of an application for federal tribal recognition that will grant the tribe sovereignty and land rights. I demonstrate how these dual archives are marshaled to both document a racially and sexually diverse, divisive tribal community, and fight for tribal sovereignty and community healing. This chapter engages an Indigenous specific affect

theory (drawing heavily from Dian Million's work) that views healing as collective, ongoing, and situated within the context of structural violences and the felt relationship of colonialism (Million). I argue that Pomo specific archival practices address historical trauma and the continued affective and material impact of colonialism by uniting historical knowledge with material practice.

My conclusion, "Seeking Alliances in the Archive: Undocumented Bodies in Manuel Muñoz's 'Lindo y Querido' (2007) and Benjamin Alire Sáenz's 'He Has Gone to Be With the Women' (2012)" returns to Mexican American texts to examine how those undocumented and disappeared in the official record are remembered through queer archival practices that respond to both the affective need for such archives and the political necessity of representing those actively silenced within the US.

Coda: Positionality & Ethnic Archives

As a white scholar working in American Indian and Latina/o literatures, I am aware of my own complicity in the continuing inequity within academia, in which most academics writing about literature are white. I do not wish to position myself as a critic speaking for, or to, these bodies of ethnic American literature. Instead I am invested in learning from these texts and expanding the readership and understanding of their work through a comparative ethnic studies approach and critical pedagogy. I was first drawn to these literatures as an educator working in low-income urban schools with predominantly Latino/a student populations. I saw firsthand the importance of including underrepresented histories and literary voices in curriculum at every opportunity, but most urgently for students of color at risk of never seeing their cultural histories included on syllabi, or learning them only through a colonialist lens. The authors I write about work against these injustices (through both

literary and historical frameworks), and I hope that in my own small way I can help expose readers to these texts, as well as emphasize the important theoretical lenses they offer, lenses that travel beyond their specific cultural contexts to reshape the way we think about the personal, communal, and political impact of accessing and preserving histories.

My interest in archives has its roots in my own family's complicated and traumatic immigrant histories. One side of my family is Irish and Italian Catholic, the other Polish and Russian Jewish. I realize now that I was involved in my own intimate archival practices before I knew the language of archives, or even the word archive. As a child and then young adult, I was always trying to assemble the histories of my family, to reconcile the contradictory stories, the heavy silences and rage, with the material objects stashed in my parents' basement, brought out again and again to tell stories that always changed and were never complete. For example, the faded and unfocused photograph—the only one—of my grandmother and her siblings, barefoot in the dirt in front of a doorway in Northern Ireland. The doorway led to a house that was bombed, whether it was their own or the next-door neighbor's is uncertain, but those bombings drove them to come to the US. Sometimes the story is told that they were bombed because they were Catholics, and other times it's explained they were both Catholics and part of the I.R.A. The unwillingness or inability of my relatives to fully narrate this recent history used to leave me extremely frustrated. For them, "moving on" seemed hinged on certain obfuscation, but faded photographs, immigration documents, rings, handkerchiefs, recipes, and other ephemera were carefully preserved. What has become clear is that there is great anger and pain associated with the recent past, that these histories are held "close," and that that leads to an inability or unwillingness to pursue the facts. So rather than learn the so-called truth, what I've learned over the years is the importance of acknowledging violent and oppressive histories, the need

to sometimes ground their reality in the material, and the relief of accepting the silence and disorder of the story as part of the history itself, rather than relentlessly searching for something concrete that doesn't actually exist. The ongoing need to address an unsettled past without resolving it or "setting it straight," and the political need to neither forget nor memorialize, echoes the archival theories I read in the fiction throughout this dissertation.

On the one hand, my family archives are intimate, and on the other hand they are deeply intertwined with histories of state-organized oppression and religious violence. Distrusting state and authoritative histories is a given in my family, and goes hand in hand with an urgency to narrate personal histories. Telling histories through story and object has been presented to me all my life as a means for countering oppression and avoiding the horrors of the past. My Jewish relatives fled religious violence and genocidal practices in Poland and Russia. The material objects they brought with them, or secured soon after, also serve as a family archive that enables certain stories. I like to think of these objects as anchors that give family members the license to initiate these stories, which they can come back to again and again as long as the object is there. For example, when my grandfather gave me his father's ring, he told me the story of his father fleeing a pogrom as a teenager and seeing members of his community beheaded by Russian soldiers. The intimate, familial relationship marked by this ring is caught up in this violent story, in the religious oppression my grandfather wants me to remember. I'm not even sure if the ring came from Russia, but now this particular story is the narrative of the ring, as the ring is a point of access to this particular past. Passing along the ring emphasizes the necessity of remembering this story, of honoring my relative's perspective of a historical event that has shaped my family. The closeness, the materiality of an object worn on the body like a ring, allows an ongoing engagement with a historical narrative that continues to impact my family today. Throughout

this dissertation, I read these intimate engagements with inherited or found materials as queer archival practices that allow characters to address unsettled pasts. Therefore, while I am removed from the texts I write about due to my privileged status as a white individual and an academic in the US, I find points of connection through my family members' archives, and through their experiences living within contexts in which the official history was untrustworthy, since it was tied to ethnic violence and community erasure.

**Chapter One: Archival Sovereignty: Claiming a Tribally Specific Past
through the Eye Tree**

“What [her eyes] perceive remains subjective for, as she has told me many times, ‘reality is manifest from what we see and how we speak of it’” (219).

Introduction

Above, Lena, the protagonist of Howe’s *Miko Kings*, considers the ability of the time-travelling storyteller Ezol Day to perceive a tribally specific “reality.” Within the novel, understanding a Choctaw reality is dependant on speaking and visualizing a Choctaw past. The novel engages a vocabulary of sight to address characters’ ability or inability to perceive certain historical possibilities. The “Eye Tree” is an image that visually represents the novel’s archival theory, appearing on a page as a found archival document, a drawing made by Ezol when she was a young girl at boarding school. This drawing indicates Ezol’s multi-dimensional sight, which allows her to see multiple versions of the past, through and beyond colonial representation of Choctaws. In this chapter, I argue that a Choctaw archive repurposes the materials of the colonial archive by framing them within Choctaw temporal and language systems, and thereby enables the visualizing and speaking of decolonized histories.

Within the narrative, Lena’s ability to comprehend a Choctaw “reality” requires learning Choctaw epistemologies, listening to Choctaw storytelling, and finally sharing—speaking—a Choctaw history. These steps are facilitated by the found archive, Ezol’s storytelling, and Lena’s own writing. The archive found in the wall is Lena’s first contact with a tribally specific history, and it materially represents a history absent and

misrepresented in the colonial archive. Lena requires the help of a Choctaw storyteller to understand this found archive and begin to rebuild historical possibilities through an Indigenous archival practice that merges storytelling, theory, and the material. The act of storytelling is central in both Howe's work and American Indian literature, and much has been written on the importance of Indigenous storytelling as method. In this chapter I situate storytelling as part of a larger strategy of American Indian writers asserting control over Indigenous representation that includes the assembling of object and document within a theoretical and storytelling framework.

Like other texts of the Native American Literary Renaissance, *Miko Kings* asserts control over the representation of historical events, reclaiming lost or silenced histories while simultaneously grappling with the records of the colonial archive. Howe's text directly confronts and reframes documents of the colonial archive in order to tell an Indian baseball story, subversively playing with romanticized notions of the "All-American Pastime" to reveal the actual American Indian presence and political resistance at their center.

The building of the *Miko Kings* archive is also embodied by the novel's form, which intersperses narrative and document. Howe's novel is thus a useful anchor text through which to explore the process of decolonizing the archive in literature, since it explicitly theorizes *and* models the construction of an Indigenous archive. My reading of the novel furthers conversation of the archival turn from a tribally specific perspective, by offering Choctaw specific ways of understanding historical preservation, access, temporality, and the interactive role of storyteller and archive, reinvigorating the role of an archive, its content and function, through Indigenous epistemologies.

This chapter argues that American Indian texts practice archival sovereignty by calling out the limitations and violences of US colonial archives and framing repurposed

colonial archival documents within Indigenous narratives and epistemologies.

Demonstrating the constructed nature of colonial historical narratives, these texts tell tribally specific histories with the help of materials from the colonial archive. As I explain in the Introduction, sovereignty is an important political and cultural term in American Indian studies, used to refer to the functioning of Indigenous tribes as semi-autonomous nations “exercis[ing] governmental authority over their internal affairs,” as well as practices of self-definition, community organization, and activism (Garrouette 88). The use of the term has also been contested by critics, most notably by Gerald Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnwake Mohawk) who argues that sovereignty is a Euro-American concept. Others have argued for its utility, and its existence as a pre-colonial Indigenous concept; for example, Craig Womack explains: “Sovereignty is inherent as an intellectual idea in Native cultures, a political practice, and a theme of oral traditions; and the concept, as the practice, predates European contact” (Womack 51). By combining this term with “archival” I emphasize the necessity of Indigenous peoples exercising sovereignty over archival representation. As I explain in the Introduction, my use of the term does not follow the straight legal definition of sovereignty, but nevertheless emphasizes the practical stakes of decolonizing the archive in the context of US legal structures.²⁸

Before focusing on *Miko Kings*, I situate this anchor text within a group of contemporary American Indian novels that exercise archival sovereignty. Many of the texts of the Native American Literary Renaissance engage with the materials of colonial US archives to highlight their complicity in the genocide and oppression of American Indian peoples. I begin this chapter by grounding archival sovereignty in the work of three well-read

²⁸ Similarly, Robert Warrior (Osage) has introduced the concept of “intellectual sovereignty” as occurring alongside, and complementary to, Indigenous struggles for land rights and autonomy.

authors of the Renaissance, Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, and Louise Erdrich, before turning to *Miko Kings*, which has received far less critical attention.

Archival Sovereignty in Foundational American Indian Fiction

In Leslie Marmon Silko's (Laguna Pueblo) celebrated novel *Ceremony* (1977), the Navajo healer Betonie derives his powers in part from an Indigenous archival practice. Tayo, a World War II veteran from the Laguna reservation, suffers from debilitating illness and trauma that his grandmother recognizes as beyond her scope to treat. Tayo's suffering is caused by "new evils" launched in the world, including global war and the atomic bomb, and these evils require specific healing practices. Tayo's Uncle Robert takes him above the city of Gallup, NM to the home of Betonie who "looks down on it all" from his hogan in the foothills. Betonie explains that he has chosen this location to live because it allows him to keep track of the town and its poor treatment of American Indians. For Betonie, the town sits within a Native-centered world; he notes that "it is the town down there which is out of place" (109). Betonie's healing abilities are rooted in an Indigenous framing of the world. Inside Betonie's hogan, Tayo is struck by the collection of objects he sees. Calendars, newspapers, phone books, and shopping bags lie alongside Indigenous ritual tools:

[Tayo] could see bundles of newspapers, their edges curled stiff and brown, barricading piles of telephone books...Hard shrunken skin pouches and black leather purses trimmed with hammered silver buttons were things he could understand. They were a medicine man's paraphernalia, laid beside the painted gourd rattles and deer-hoof clackers of the ceremony. But with this old man it did not end there; under the medicine bags and bundles of rawhide on the walls, he saw layers of old calendars...(110-11)

Betonie explains that “they [he and his predecessor] have been gathering these things for a long time—hundreds of years” (111). By situating an archive of items that organize the communication, economy, and temporality of the Euro-American world—newspapers, phone books, shopping bags, and calendars—within the Indigenous framework of his medicine, Betonie asserts control over this world and thereby begins to heal those hurt by its impact. Betonie’s archival methodology is a material practice that renders visual and tangible *Ceremony*’s theoretical premise that Indigenous epistemologies have the power to reshape the “white world,” and that colonization itself is a result of Native ‘witchery.’

In N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* (1968), the documents of a missionary priest illustrate a destructive colonial anxiety toward Indigenous spirituality and community, and demonstrate the disconnect between Christianity and the epistemologies of the Jemez Pueblo. In 1945, the priest Father Olguin reads the 1874 journal entries and 1888 letter of his predecessor Fray Nicolás. Nicolás’s entries mark a disillusionment with his Christian God and a sense of isolation within the Jemez community. The priest’s anxiety towards Native spirituality is apparent throughout his entries, and connected to the figure of Francisco, grandfather of the protagonist Abel. The novel suggests that Francisco may be Nicolás’s son, and also hints at the priest’s potentially abusive, or at least obsessive, relationship with the boy through the priest’s journaling: “He was so fair a child & I did like to play cross with him & touch him after to make him laugh. Did I tell you once he fell in the river & was no more than 6 or 7 & I made him take off his clothes & stand naked by the fire & he was shaking & ashamed...” (46). Nicolás eventually feels he has failed in regard to Francisco, since Francisco continues the traditions of his people and in fact serves as a role model for Abel’s reconnection to Indigenous culture.

Through multiple layers of missionary documentation, Momaday's novel explores the unraveling faith and psychic state of a Christian missionary who is failing to properly convert his American Indian community (45). Father Olguin notes that the 1888 letter shows that "something of [the handwriting's] former control was lost," implying a decline in his predecessor's physical and/or mental health that parallels the failures noted in the letter. Father Olguin's own precarious position in the Jemez Pueblo is contextualized through this older record. Momaday thereby depicts materials of the colonial archive to highlight the weaknesses of these records, their subjectivities, and underscore how they actually evidence the survival of tribal culture in the face of Christian conversion.

Conflating the official with the personal, these missionary documents serve to support the survivance of tribal community in the face of Christian conversion. They are framed within the novel's nonlinear, cyclical narrative; ending at the dawn in which it begins, the novel privileges an Indigenous temporality that is connected to the cycles of the natural world. Divorcing the missionary records from linear US colonial narratives reveals them to be records of an individual's failures within a tribal community and a tribal temporality, rather than a definitive record of the tribe's past.

Louise Erdrich's *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001) also presents the dispatches of a missionary priest and subverts the dominance of a Christian missionary record. Early in Erdrich's 1988 novel *Tracks* (third in her *Love Medicine* trilogy), the trickster figure Nanapush, also a key character in *Last Report*, recalls the "storm of government papers," a phenomenon that worked in conjunction with widespread disease to kill his people, serving non-Native land and resource acquisition (1). This destructive potential of the colonial archive is highlighted in *Last Report*, a novel that is also invested in how such archives can be undone. Throughout *Last Report*, which moves nonlinearly between the early

twentieth century and 1996, Erdrich presents the written reports of a missionary priest, Father Damien, addressed to the Pope, as well as his remembrances of life on the fictional reservation as told to (and recorded by) the visiting priest Father Jude, sent by the Vatican in 1996 to investigate a potential sainthood. In the last section of the text, titled “End Notes,” Erdrich includes the transcript of a fax sent to Father Damien from the Vatican, which implies that the archive of letters accidentally ended up in the hands of the writer Louise Erdrich. This admission sets up the novel as the true *last report* on Little No Horse, one that is informed by the priest’s seized archival records, and ultimately framed within an Ojibwe narrative.

Father Damien’s trans identity also subverts the missionary archive. Actually a biological woman, Agnes, disguised as a priest, Father Damien witnesses miracles that do not easily fit within a Christian framework, and the novel suggests that his trans positionality may render him particularly receptive to understanding Ojibwe epistemologies.²⁹ The fact that the priest is trans is a reality that cannot be represented by the institutional US archive, in fact it is a state that is illustrated to be inexpressible in the priest’s own language. In a chapter entitled “The Recognition,” Father Damien and the Ojibwe trickster figure Nanapush play chess in 1923. Nanapush asks the priest if he is a “man priest or a woman priest” in order to distract him and win the game (230). Father Damien, who had believed nobody knew his secret, is devastated before he realizes that the answer is not “of like importance to Nanapush,” who has words in his language for such gender categories: “So you’re not a woman-acting man, you’re a man-acting woman. We don’t get so many of those

²⁹ Tatonetti has examined how queer or two-spirit individuals are often positioned as intermediaries or spiritual leaders in American Indian literature, and how authors, including Erdrich, may draw this idea from “tribal histories or anthropological accounts that situate those who inhabited alternate gender roles in some Native nations as shamans, spiritual leaders...and namers” (90).

lately. Between us, Margaret and me, we couldn't think of more than a couple" (232). Nanapush understands Father Damien as acting in accordance with what his spirits ask him to do, and this Ojibwe framework helps the priest understand his own transgendered state outside of Christian Euro-American culture. As Lisa Tatonetti has explained, conceptions of gender and sexuality in American Indian tribes "differed significantly from those of the Spanish, French, and Anglo conquistadores, explorers, missionaries, travelers, settlers, and early anthropologists whose documentations of encounter provide much of the written records" of early American history (ix-x). Erdrich's text calls attention to the misunderstandings and omissions of this colonial historical record by capturing the complexity of a missionary's multilayered and deceptive positionality.

Most importantly, Father Damien sees clearly the damage his own mission creates within the tribal community. He tells the priest Father Jude why he stayed on at the reservation even though he felt conversion was wrong:

By then I was so knit into the fabric of the damage that to pull myself out would have left a great rift, a hole that would have been filled by...well, others perhaps less in sympathy. I'll name no names. And I believe even now that the void left in the passing of sacred traditional knowledge was filled, quite simply, with the quick ease of alcohol. So I was forced by the end to clean up after the effects of what I had helped to destroy... (239)

Through Father Damien's assessment of the spiritual, emotional, and physical damage caused by missionaries in Indigenous communities, Erdrich overturns progress narratives of Christian conversion. She reclaims the colonial archival document of the missionary record by presenting a priest who is not what he seems, and has full understanding of his truly destructive role.

Finally, *Last Report* showcases the fabrication of documents to undermine any perceived accuracy of the colonial archive. It is the deliberate lie on a birth certificate that results in Father Damien's escape from condemnation by the Vatican, showcasing the value of official documents for personal gain, and undermining their validity in the archive. The novel proposes that the records that truly matter, and that can be marshaled to morally evaluate characters, are not in fact those of the priest but instead an Indigenous framework that allows for a more complete remembering: "We Anishinaabeg are the keepers of the names of the earth... Even the chimookomanag [white people] who are trying to destroy us, are depending on us to remember. Mi'sago'i [that's all—signals end of story]." Erdrich's novel emphasizes the need for Indigenous forms of remembrance (like her own novel) that can both encompass and critique the records of Christian missionaries.

Restoring the Miko Kings

Howe's *Miko Kings* assembles a Choctaw archive and archival framework that also encompasses the colonial archive. The novel's first chapter is called "Restoration," as Lena is having her grandmother's home restored when the mailbag is found in the wall. Embarking on a restoration project of a different order, Lena uses this found archive to reconstruct a story of the Miko Kings baseball team and inter-tribal political organization, as well as her own familial history. At the novel's end, Lena creates a participatory digital archive of Choctaw history that generates online conversation about Choctaw history.

The narrative swings from the conversations between Lena and Ezol in 2006, to 1969, to events surrounding the team around the turn of the century. In 1904, the Miko Kings are owned by Henri Day, Ezol's uncle. The baseball field, presented in dominant American culture as of quintessentially white American creation, is a site of American Indian

political organization in the novel. Henri hopes to build a league of Indian baseball teams that will “demonstrate that the people from different tribes can own something together...the country’s first inter-tribal business, an alliance that will spread across the whole US. Maybe even the whole continent” (112). Henri helps fight allotment by using the baseball games as settings and fronts for meetings of the Four Mothers Society, whose faint archival presence parallels those of Indian baseball history: “The organization began around 1895 and lasted through 1915, roughly the same time as the heyday of Indian Territory baseball. Both the baseball teams and the Four Mothers Society disappear from historical documents after the First World War begins” (126). Notice Howe’s choice of “disappear” here, which implies a mysterious absence rather than an actual nonexistence. Howe consistently deprivileges the colonial archive by underscoring its exclusions. By describing and historicizing this under-researched, inter-tribal, and still surviving organization of Indian resistance in her novel, Howe creates a historical record that refutes a narrative of the ‘vanishing American Indian.’³⁰ Due to its connection to both this political organization and Choctaw spirituality, Choctaw baseball is of immense cultural and community importance in the novel.³¹

³⁰ See Brian W. Dippie’s analysis of the concept of naturalized American Indian disappearance in *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (1982).

³¹ The game of baseball itself has both psychological and social import which Lena begins to understand at the novel’s end: “I also think I understand why Henri Day was in such a hurry to build an Indian baseball league. He wanted Indians from the Five Civilized Tribes to begin investing in themselves. To hold something in common, even if it was just baseball” (186). Baseball also speaks to a history of intra-tribal organization that pre-dates the arrival of Europeans; Lena is able to find traces of in archeological reports that describe “old ballfields along river bottoms and next to mound sites” (127).

After returning from spending her childhood and early adult years in boarding school at the Good Land Indian Orphanage, Ezol closely follows the team and works in the post office.³² Hope Little Leader is the team's star pitcher, master of the up-down windup through which he communes with the Choctaw sun god *Hashtali*.³³ He is in love with Justina Maurepas, a Black-Indian activist and once his teacher at the Hampton Normal School for Blacks and Indians.³⁴ In 1969, Justina is interviewed by an historian about the violent activism of her youth in New Orleans, when she was known as Black Juice and accused of bombing a Storyville brothel during the 1900 race riots. The historian later sends his notes and an important newspaper clipping to Lena, helping to collectively build the archive. Also in 1969, Hope is dying in a nursing home in Ada and weaving baseball stories to his queer Indian nurse. He is visited by a Choctaw warrior on his deathbed who helps him "shape-shift" and return to 1907 to face the Seventh Cavalrymen from the pitcher's mound.

Miko Kings contains the story of Hope's spiritual and physical destruction, but also includes the possibility of a different story, one that illustrates the triumph of hope, and is envisioned through a Choctaw archive. Howe's narrative contains two versions of the Miko Kings important championship game against the Seventh Cavalrymen, a game that is symbolic of American Indian resistance to the colonial impositions of statehood and allotment. The novel suggests that Ezol and Lena's partnership allows a victorious version of

³² Goodland Indian Orphanage was originally Goodland Mission, founded in 1848 in Oklahoma by the Presbyterian Church (Hogue).

³³ Hope's name probably references the important Choctaw Little Leader who spoke against removal (Reeves 222).

³⁴ Lena researches and describes the school in the novel, demonstrating the novel's own role in recovering histories: "Hampton was originally founded in 1868 as a Normal school to educate newly-freed blacks during Reconstruction. In 1877, the school...began a program to educate Indians" (125).

the game to occur, as the women heal past destruction through their construction of a Choctaw archive. As Lena and Ezol discuss the Miko Kings baseball team and its relationship to Lena's own family lineage, as well as to Choctaw theory, language, spirituality, and politics, Lena begins to write the team's story, and also begins to reimagine her relationship to a Choctaw past, as well as embrace her present-day tribal identity with pride, thus accomplishing in her own life what a Choctaw archive might achieve in the greater community.

LeAnne Howe's Shape-Shifting

“Indian Women Don't Document Change; They Make Change” (Howe paraphrasing Rayna Green (Cherokee))

The tribally specific knowledge systems Howe theorizes throughout her body of work provides a foundation for the Indigenous archival practices I read in this novel. Howe's work features strong Indian women change-makers. Her novels focus on both the individual struggles of contemporary American Indian women in a variety of powerful positions—an executive at a securities investment firm, a journalist in the Middle East, a tribal leader, an actor, to name a few—and the Choctaw tribe's communal history and politics. By reckoning with and addressing their tribal pasts, Howe's characters empower themselves and their communities. Howe's first novel *Shell Shaker* (2001) tells parallel stories of a Choctaw family in 1991 and their ancestors in the mid-eighteenth century. *Shell Shaker* narrates Choctaw resistance to colonialism and addresses contemporary political and economic problems within the tribe. The novel presents money laundering and casino corruption as driven by an evil force that originated during colonialism, and that must be

dealt with within a Choctaw framework of ceremonial burial in order to help the tribe move forward.

Like *Miko Kings*, *Shell Shaker* directly challenges the colonial archive's representation of American Indian histories. The character Auda Billy, an academic who becomes the assistant tribal chairman and then a murder suspect, produces a history book as part of her own decolonial project: "Later, in 1976, she entered graduate school, to correct the tribe's eighteenth-century record. This work would become her progeny—a history book" (85). In 1747, the Choctaw character Nitakechi in *Shell Shaker* critiques the writing of the local priest, the formation of the record that Auda must "correct":

I told you the Blackrobe was not sick, just scratching with his feather brush. He calls it *ecrive*. It's like body tattooing, or like the drawing we make on our deer hides...*Filanchi okla* doesn't understand our meanings. We don't understand his *ecrive*. You know what I think, *Filanchi okla* must *ecrive* every day because he cannot remember anything. He does not know where he is so he scratches to remember where he has been. (175)

Nitakechi's interpretation of the priest's documentation suggests that the priest's record is driven by a lack of knowledge of his current position and a detachment from the Choctaw community, and therefore his writings are informed by weakness and isolation. Nitakechi deprivileges the colonial record as *the* written account of what has come to pass, by naming comparative Choctaw forms of recording. While not explicitly about a Choctaw-specific archive, Howe's first novel is invested in undermining the colonial historical lens. Both *Shell Shaker* and *Miko Kings* focus on the importance of understanding Choctaw history through a decolonized lens in order to empower the Choctaw community in the present.

As exemplified by her wide-ranging work in theatre, film, poetry, and fiction, Howe is a believer in the power of Choctaw epistemologies to work in any form, both written and oral.³⁵ A theorist of performance, Howe is also the author of five plays, including the important *Indian Radio Days* that satirically confronts stereotypes about American Indians and was co-written with the late activist, writer, and musician Roxy Gordan (Choctaw and Assiniboine). Howe has told the story of writing the play collectively on a front porch in Dallas after she came home from working at a brokerage firm in the summer of 1988. She often expresses her belief in work created from community and collaboration: “As an American Indian this is how I believe our stories are supposed to be created. From the collective” (D’Aponte 102). Her theory of *tribalography* emphasizes this gathering together: “Native stories, no matter what form they take (novel, poem, drama, memoir, film, history) seem to pull all the elements together of the storyteller’s tribe, meaning the people, the land, multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and future milieu” (31). Howe’s novels embrace the multiple elements of her tribal knowledge, functioning as story, history, and theory.

³⁵ Howe has published many essays and chapters, including work in Choctaw histories, as well as a collection of poetry, *Evidence of Red* (2005). She recently published a memoir, *Choctalking On Other Realities* (2013) that combines essay, theory, and storytelling, (reminiscent of Anzalúda’s *autobistoria*), and covers her adventures traveling abroad and attempting to connect across cultures. Howe also recently co-edited the collection of movie reviews, *Seeing Red: Pixeled Skins* (2013), which revises stereotypes from the past in film representation of American Indians, “suggest[ing] ways we can see American Indians and Indigenous peoples more clearly in the twenty-first century” (xviii).

The Novel as Archive

“With the creation of Oklahoma, with the privatization of tribal lands, everything changes. Indians will be written out of Oklahoma’s picture. And history” (23).

The materiality of *Miko Kings* models an interplay of narrative and document in order to provide an Indigenous archive that counters the “writing out” Howe describes above (See Figures A, B, C). The text opens with a map of Indian Territory that is narrated by an epigraph on its facing page. The next page states simply: “A book,” while its facing image depicts an open journal cover engraved “Ezol.” Following this format, there are then the words “The film,” and a still image from the 1909 film *His Last Game*. Opening the novel to these itemized images, the reader thereby mimics Lena’s own discovery of the archive in the mail pouch. Finally there are the words “The story,” facing the beginning of the novel’s Prelude and full text. These labels indicate a distinction between the different forms that the novel engages. There are the representations of actual materials, i.e. an image of “The book,” that make up the found archive within the novel itself, and importantly these pictured objects are positioned outside of “The story,” as items that exist outside of the narration. While they may initially stand alone, or outside, it is the narrative’s context that enables them to work as a Choctaw archive, mirroring the work of Ezol’s storytelling. In fact, in the middle of the novel another collection of documents appears that complements the narration and underlines the integration of document and story.

The novel’s opening map of Indian Territory grounds the story in a place, depicting areas labeled Chickasaw, Creek, Cherokee, and Choctaw that border one another, with US territories on the periphery. Colonial mapmaking excluded Indigenous trade routes and operated alongside a paper trail of false or coerced treaties and corporate contracts that resulted in American Indian land loss. Critics such as Lisa Brooks have confronted the

misleading archive of colonial mapping by providing new Indigenous maps that help reveal historical relations between tribes.³⁶ The map in *Miko Kings* is a colonial document that marks the division of land and the imposition of federal control. Yet its appearance at the novel's beginning also sets up the possibility of re-narrating the space. Though the map foreshadows the coming statehood as a colonial document, it also locates readers in Indian Country, and not Oklahoma. Significantly, the date of Oklahoma statehood (November 16th, 1907) is never quite reached in the novel; the early twentieth century sections of the novel hover just before, in October of 1907. Through the image of the map, the *Miko Kings* story situates itself in an Indian space, albeit one that is in interaction with the colonial project.

On the facing page of the map lies an epigraph that repeats throughout Howe's text and recalls the ghostly aspect of the Choctaw archive, the unacknowledged influence of American Indian baseball: "And here too is the echo of baseball's childhood memory in *Anompa Sipokeni*, Old Talking Places. Indian Territory." Since an echo is an involuntary reaction to something already said, the "echo" speaks to remembering a history that will echo and create a reaction in the present. "Old Talking Places. Indian Territory" may refer to a place in memory and in location where Choctaw baseball (and culture) is central. "Old Talking Places" also locates the story and its setting within its telling (or talking), not

³⁶ Lisa Brooks has written of the importance of place in recording Native histories in the Americas. She has created place-based historical narratives of the Northeastern U.S. in her text *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the North-East*. She names her text an *awikbigan*, a term she explains originally referred to "birchbark, messages, maps and scrolls," but came to "encompass books and letters" (xxi). Brooks's *awikbigan* creates Native "place-worlds" (drawing on anthropologist Keith Basso's terminology) by combining map-making with narrative. These place-worlds become an archive that recenters Native histories, reorienting the historical perspective from a Native-colonial contact structure to a Native relationality by depicting inter-tribal trade routes and borders.

allowing it to be simply defined by the map's colonial divisions of place. As Ezol's Choctaw theories propose, the telling itself may impact the story's setting.

In addition to challenging colonial conceptions of space, *Miko Kings* claims archival sovereignty by addressing and revising the representations of Choctaws in film. The still of the 1909 film *His Last Game* depicts an American Indian man standing near home plate and gesturing angrily. This is a film that Howe credits as a catalyst for directors' and producers' fascination with displaying American Indians—and thereby a starting point for generations of pop cultural misrepresentation of American Indians (xiv *Seeing Red*). It is also America's first moving picture about baseball, and it concerns a Choctaw pitcher named Bill Going, star of the team "Choctaws," who is targeted by gamblers that bribe him to throw a big game. He refuses, and when one of the men draws a pistol Bill accidentally shoots him as he attempts to push the gun away. When the sheriff arrests Bill and puts him in front of a firing squad, the chief of the tribe steps in so that Bill can still pitch the game. The Sheriff then sends away a request for a reprieve, seemingly contingent on Bill's winning of the game. The Choctaw team wins but the rider with the reprieve comes minutes late, after the Sheriff has ordered Bill shot despite the chief's protest and claim that he can hear the approaching rider through the ground. By referencing this film, Howe draws attention to both the history of colonial representation of Choctaws and colonial violence. A metaphorical reading of the film underlines the American Indian death that results from a colonial control of time, laying the groundwork for the novel's investment in Choctaw temporality.

As I describe in the Introduction, the Prelude of Howe's novel enters the image from the film to narrate its misrepresentations by describing the filming circumstances of *His Last Game* and the actors' experiences. The history of the Miko Kings that Lena learns has overlaps with *His Last Game*, most strikingly the threat of a thrown game, and therefore

Howe positions the novel as a retelling of this limiting yet repurposed visual document. In the novel's Prelude, Hope plays the starring role in the film and has been given fake braids to wear that are woven in a Choctaw female weave. He is upset by the inaccurate portrayal and almost leaves, but is persuaded to stay by the filmmaker. The filmmaker lacks knowledge of American Indian culture but has the means to create a lasting record of the team.

His Last Game serves as an example of a record of Indian baseball within an American archive—one that is problematic—but a record nonetheless.³⁷ As the title suggests, this 1909 film is part of a narrative of American Indian disappearance: it is interested in the *last* game. The film is indicative of inaccurate representations of Choctaws that assume their inevitable absence and the permanence of Euro-American institutions. In the novel, the turn-of-the-century newspapers of the time also inaccurately represent the team: “Henri Day, Miko Kings’ owner, was shocked when the *Chicago Tribune* published a semi-fictitious story about the team that pitted ‘the red man against the white man’” (Howe 9).

Yet significantly, Howe and Lena use these representations—Lena reads the newspaper clippings and sends away for a copy of the film; Howe includes the still in her novel—to craft a Choctaw archive of the Miko Kings. With the help of a time-traveling Choctaw storyteller and theorist, Lena can read beyond the colonial archive and rebuild from the loss that this film encapsulates, and thereby create a counter archive. The novel presents these included materials as windows into a history, but never the history itself.

³⁷ In her documentary of Choctaw stickball, *Playing Pastime American Indians, Softball and Survival* (2006), co-produced, with Jim Fortier, Howe affirms the long history of Choctaws and baseball, explaining that “even in 1909 Choctaws were known as great ball players.” The film charts the important role of softball leagues in today’s tribal cultures, as well as describes the importance of ball games in American Indian diplomacy.

The text also contains images of pages from Ezol's journal that complement her oral narrative, including her first journal entries that are written on the text of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Evangeline" (1847). It is possible that early on in her boarding school experience Ezol did not have blank paper on which to write, so she chose this text. Without a blank space, or the privilege, to tell her own story, Ezol critically engages with the text by writing her own story alongside it, a rebellious act against an enforced Euro-American curriculum. Ezol's choice of text for her journal is relevant given the story's relationship to Choctaw history. "Evangeline" is in conversation with Ezol's own situation, as it tells a story of exile from family and home and the oppression of a cultural group in the Americas. Sent to boarding school against her will and isolated from her family, Ezol too is in exile and her stories are representations of the violence directed at her people. The tragic lovers in "Evangeline" embody their people's (the Acadians) suffering, just as the baseball team in *Miko Kings*, its victories and losses, is representative of the story of the Choctaw Nation. By writing beside "Evangeline," Ezol asserts the necessity of writing her own story of exile, and that of her people. Notably, she does not obstruct the text, but writes in the margins, which visually shows her marginalization as a young American Indian woman, but also allows for both stories to exist side by side, and thereby create an intertextual dialogue.

In addition, Ezol's dead twin sister was named Evangeline, which underlines Ezol's pairing with this character. At Ezol's suggestion, Justina names her daughter Evangeline, which also becomes the name of her great-granddaughter, continuing this connection to exile, an exile that was given voice in Longfellow's text, thereby underscoring Howe's own task of writing the Choctaw story alongside an American historical and literary archive. An excerpt from "Evangeline" appears later within Ezol's journal, recorded as the text Ezol chooses to read to comfort Justina after she experiences Ku Klux Klan terrorism (Howe

171-172). Longfellow's text is thus claimed as a narrative that responds to Ezol and Justina's own stories of oppression, but one that is importantly placed within a larger Choctaw framework; in other words, Ezol's Choctaw history is now the meta narrative. From the beginning of her storytelling, then, Ezol reaches out from a Choctaw center to make connections between groups marginalized in colonial American history.

These materials within the text render the novel itself an archive of Choctaw history, a literary work, and "the story" itself which takes control of these documents by framing them within a Choctaw-specific narration, modeling a Choctaw theoretical framework.

Howe's theory of storytelling, and her own storytelling through her novels, essays, and plays disrupt boundaries between 'document' and 'story':

So far, I have consciously used "story," "history," "theory" as interchangeable words because the difference in their usage is artificially constructed to privilege writing over speaking. All histories are stories that have been written down. The story you get depends on the point of view of the writer. At some point histories are contextualized as "fact," a theoretically loaded word. Facts change, but stories continually bring us into being. (31)

The point which Howe refers to, when histories are contextualized, is perhaps the point when they enter (literally and figuratively) certain institutional archives. An archive found in the home, however, that contains information about an unknown Choctaw baseball team, offers possibilities to use storytelling and document together to bring forth a history long suppressed within the colonial archive, and essentially changing the "facts."

Ezol and Lena's partnership reveals continuity between speaker and writer. As Ezol speaks, Lena writes, transforming the spoken words of the storyteller into text that she will later disperse. Midway through their partnership, Lena realizes that she is not writing "but

merely taking dictation,” and begins to view herself as a “translator”: “medium, intermediary, stenographer, and servant to the story” (24). Lena is creating a record, but she has removed herself from constructing the story itself, surrendering to the power of Ezol’s oral storytelling. Teuton’s “textual continuum” applies well to Howe’s depiction of the document, the storyteller, and the writer working together. Intervening in a long-standing critical discussion of the relationship between the oral and the written in American Indian Studies, Teuton has encouraged critics to move beyond the oral-written binary, to “reframe[s] Native American signification in relation to three fundamental cultural processes: the *oral impulse*, the *graphic impulse*, and the *critical impulse*,” and to see a text as an ongoing process (29). The archive is the entity in this novel that produces interaction between these impulses, bringing forth a storyteller, and encouraging the continuance of the story through Lena’s writing and eventual digitization of the archive.

Howe’s novel both expresses a distrust in documents—as Ezol says, “documents lie”—and presents them as helpful within a larger Choctaw storytelling and theoretical framework. Diana Taylor draws a distinction between the archive, which includes “materials supposedly resistant to change,” and the repertoire, which “enacts embodied memory...acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (19-20). She posits that the archive and the repertoire work together, “in a constant state of interaction” and are not, in fact, a binary, but that the repertoire “expands the traditional archive” (23, 26). Taylor’s framing of the written archive and the performative repertoire undermines the power of colonial archives and Western epistemologies while also accounting for the use of written records alongside, and in interaction with, other forms of remembrance and history. Taylor’s repertoire is a means for transmitting cultural memory, speaking to Ezol’s transmission of tribally specific knowledge alongside the history. Ezol does not merely tell the story, she

also teaches Lena Choctaw epistemologies so that Lena can fully interpret the materials she has found.

Ezol is curator of the found archive. Throughout her life she worked as a postal clerk, fittingly handling communication across time and space, and acted as a male gravedigger in the film *His Last Game*, emphasizing her role of digging up what has been buried by the colonial archive.³⁸ She is identified as a *nukfoki*, and Howe has described *nuk* or *nok* as “a mysterious prefix that when combined with other words represents a form of creation” and “has to do with the power of speech, breath and mind” (*Clearing* 30). A *nukfoki* is a teacher or “the beginning of action” (30). Ezol’s storytelling and teaching are in fact a catalyst that determines the powerful decolonizing impact of Lena’s found archive.

An Archive in the Home

“It was then that Ezol appeared. Perhaps my need to know brought her across time and space. Her spirit entered the house and placed the team’s history on my shoulder” (22).

As a young woman, Lena suppressed her Choctaw identity; she wanted to forget “all things Okie,” including her American Indian background, aware that she could pass as “Italian, Mexican or French” (Howe 18). Lena’s mother died in childbirth and her Sac and Fox father, a trucker, was often away when she was a child, and when home he was exhausted. Lena spent summers with her grandmother, who taught her a few Choctaw words, but her mother’s death scarred their relationship: “She just couldn’t get over the fact that I’d grown in her daughter’s body, and the shell of her gave way in order that I might live—nothing could change that between the two of us” (18). Lena’s lack of a strong

³⁸ Ezol can be read as queer, as she disrupts all kinds of binaries in her many roles in the novel (past and present, assimilation and resistance, male and female).

connection to a relative renders her particularly disconnected in Ada. The archive she finds thereby takes on extra significance, because it stands in for the family and community connection Lena has lost. The novel implies that Lena emotionally needs to learn this Choctaw history, and that the history needs to be told for its larger Choctaw community importance.

Lena has returned to Ada from Amman, Jordan in defeat. Events related to the so-called ‘War on Terror’ drive her return: she has lost her friend and sometimes lover, a Palestinian photographer, to a terrorist bombing.³⁹ Her plans to write a series of travel guides about the Middle East had been thwarted by September 11th, and she notes that she has had to be careful to project herself as Arab, as opposed to American, since the US invasion of Iraq. She grows tired of being called upon within an expatriate community to explain the actions of the United States, a country of which she had “her own problems with...especially its treatment of American Indians” (20).

Yet what actually prompts her return to Oklahoma is a sacred moment she experiences that joins Islamic and Choctaw spirituality (exemplifying this novel’s interest in drawing cultural connections outwardly from a Choctaw center). Lena is spiritually called back to her home to fulfill a different kind of journalism, to write a history of her people. Her receptivity to the Miko Kings archive is fittingly driven by a confluence of global violence and personal struggles, just as the archive addresses a history of US settler colonial violence and reveals Lena’s own familial story:

³⁹ This character does not get description in the novel, but the fact that Howe depicts a partnership between two diasporic individuals, an American Indian and a Palestinian, draws attention to the interconnected violences the novel is interested in—US settler colonialism and Israeli settler colonialism, 9/11 and global terrorism.

Then, in early April, I heard a strange voice at dusk during the *Salaat*...instead of ‘*Allahu Akbar*’ I heard ‘*The time has come to return home.*’ The next morning at sunrise it was the same. *The time has come to return home.* Without warning, I began to sob. So, I hadn’t purged all my Native connections after all. Even though I’d put ten thousand miles between me and Oklahoma, the land of my ancestors had tracked me down and was speaking. At age forty-seven, I clung to it like a lamp against the darkness (20).

This moment establishes that despite her attempts to “purge” her Native identity and the temporal and spatial distance between herself and her “Native connections,” Lena remains emotionally and spiritually connected to her people and their history. Importantly, she names the speaker here as the “land of her ancestors,” emphasizing both Indigenous land rights and her relationship to her people’s past. Lena’s unexpected “sobbing” may indicate the grief she suffers from her recent loss, but it also marks the weight of her Indigenous connections. Through the found archive Lena is able to connect with a part of her identity that she has repressed, which involves confronting unsettled historical trauma suffered by the team, her tribe, and her own family.

An archive buried in the home contains affective possibilities that institutional archives do not possess. There are, obviously, no time limits or behavioral rules when engaging with the material. Lena’s emotional response to this found archive is driven by an emotional need to see beyond the representation of American Indians in the colonial archive.⁴⁰ The affective power of these materials are in part due to their proximity in her

⁴⁰ Ann Cvetkovich has described the “emotional need for history” that motivates grassroots archives, and their necessity in “challeng[ing] what counts as national history and how that history is told” (251).

home, and their unique power to tell new stories about her people. The found archive has such an affective pull for Lena that it is almost possessive. My second chapter will look closely at the affective possibilities of an inherited archive and queer archival practice. Lena's intimate interaction with her found archive can be read as queer; like Frank in *Like Son*, she is attracted to the photographed historical figures, and desires to (and does) make contact with figures from the past through this archive. Once she finds the mail pouch, she is unable to turn away from working with its materials: "Soon after the discovery, the contents of the leather pouch began to haunt me" (Howe 15). These materials thereby represent a story that *haunts* because it requires something be done. Avery Gordon has taken 'haunting' as a useful term, and she explains the word's political possibility; its specters indicate a "something-to-be-done," rather than something to be put to rest (xvi).⁴¹ In Howe's novel, the mail pouch, and then Ezol's appearance, represent an unsettled Choctaw history that needs addressing. Therefore, Lena's affective relationship to the archive, her state of obsession, is driven by both her own isolation and the history's larger sociopolitical necessity—its need to be told. *Miko Kings* demonstrates how the larger political possibilities of archival sovereignty are intimately connected to the personal transformations that happen when learning or relearning culturally or tribally specific histories.

Acquiring Choctaw Sight

In some respects, the archive of the Miko Kings is an archive of trauma. Both the potential loss and hope contained in the Miko Kings archive is embodied by the Miko

⁴¹ I view Gordon's conceptualization of haunting as relevant to how contemporary ethnic American novels and short stories present archival materials and ghost-like figures that hold unsettled histories, effectively haunting dominant conceptions of American history.

Kings's pitcher Hope Little Leader. In one of two versions in the novel of the October 5th, 1907 championship game against the Seventh Cavalrymen, Hope's confidence fails and he gives in to defeat, accepting money to throw the game and isolating himself forever from his baseball community. Destruction spirals outward from this loss. Three members of the Miko Kings sever Hope's hands. He is then known no longer as Hope, and is instead called "No Hands." The fact that Hope is rendered "No Hands" by his own teammates represents a form of justice separate from the dominant American system that symbolically unites a loss of Choctaw spiritual strength through baseball—as Hope can no longer commune with *Hashtali* through pitching—with the ability to record a story (39). For Hope then wanders the country alone selling pencils, thus providing others with the means to record in writing, while he is unable to write any histories. The loss of his former name marks his inability to lead his team or record his story as the end of hope.

Hope's doubt, the possibility of lost hope, is connected to the colonial project that sought to eliminate tribal cultures. After criticizing his lack of activism, Hope's lover Justina Maurepas, a Black-Indian activist and once his teacher at the Hampton Normal School for Blacks and Indians, leaves town just prior to the championship game.⁴² Hope connects his lover's doubt to what he perceives as his past failure to watch over his sisters when they died at boarding school: "Then he thinks about how he couldn't protect his sisters like his mother had asked him to do. Maybe Justina was right, maybe he was weak" (Howe 194). The destruction of his family by federal Indian boarding school policy has rendered Hope vulnerable to self-hatred. The Miko Kings' best hitter Blip Bleen blames Hope's decision on

⁴² Lena researches and describes the school in the novel: "Hampton was originally founded in 1868 as a Normal school to educate newly-freed blacks during Reconstruction. In 1877, the school...began a program to educate Indians" (125).

his school experience: “Hope’s the kind that needs someone to tell him what to do. Damn boarding schools. Some kids come out not able to think for themselves” (196).⁴³ Hope’s oppressive schooling causes him to doubt himself and his teammates, and the Miko Kings lose. Following the lost game, a fire kills Ezol and destroys Henri Day’s records, erasing most of the Miko Kings archive. This destruction fittingly occurs just prior to Oklahoma statehood, which will further marginalize the American Indian community. Ezol describes the trunk of the eye tree burning, the limbs detaching as she dies. The team’s loss, the destruction of the team’s records, and the coming loss of further American Indian sovereignty are thereby connected to a loss of this powerful vision. Yet the novel suggests that Lena can rebuild this record, and even potentially alter this history within the context of Choctaw knowledge systems.

Ezol’s presence helps Lena re-remember a Choctaw specific past and fills an absence created by the death and unavailability of Lena’s family members. Seeing a resemblance between Ezol and her late grandmother, Lena notes that her vision may be clouded by loneliness, implying both that she seeks a Choctaw grandmother’s guidance, and that she lacks the ability to envision a tribally specific past. As Howe explains in “The Story of America” a Choctaw relative’s stories can provide a necessary understanding of what has past, a perspective not accessible through colonial historical narratives. In fact, Lena’s isolation from her family is described in a language of sight. Lena has “never been able to *visualize*” her Choctaw mother who died just after she was born (Howe 17). Acquiring an ability to see beyond colonial histories through Ezol and the Miko Kings archive eventually

⁴³ See Ruth Spack and Amelia V. Katanski for work on boarding school education. Also see Ward Churchill’s *“Kill the Indian, Save the Man: the Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools”* (2004).

allows Lena to rebuild her own family history, which turns out to be intimately connected to the Miko Kings.

Serving as a recovering force, Ezol embodies cultural memory and teaches Lena that she already possesses a Choctaw specific past that she has forgotten. Jace Weaver (Cherokee) has defended Momaday's use of the phrases "racial memory" and "memory in the blood" against Arnold Krupat's accusations that these are racist notions (7). Weaver argues that such memory can refer to "cultural codes that are learned and go towards shaping one's identity" and that these can exist "beyond conscious remembering, so deeply engrained and psychologically embedded that one can describe it as being 'in the blood'" (7). Lena's relationship to Choctaw ways of knowing exists within this place of unconscious memory. After listening to Ezol tell a Choctaw history, Lena remembers a Choctaw healing ceremony she attended as a child: "Something she says triggers an incident I had completely forgotten" (Howe 42). Lena has trouble recalling the memory and needs Ezol's encouragement: "'Call it to you!' she snaps. 'Call the memory to you, Lena! Who was the ceremony for? You must know'" (42). Lena has blinded herself to this memory because she doubts the power of the *alikchi* (traditional healer), but once she begins to learn from Ezol and accept Choctaw epistemologies, she can recall her memories. Diana Taylor has described cultural memory as living within the archive and embodied knowledge (recalling 'memory in the blood') that is transmitted through story, and Lena's use of the Choctaw archive also relies on the physical presence of a Choctaw storyteller (82, 85, 89). Ezol suggests that rebuilding historical understanding itself is a tribally specific strength: "Choctaws and Chickasaws are renowned for their ability to rebuild" (34). The reconstruction of the Miko Kings's history parallels the rebuilding of Lena's Choctaw identity, and may in fact depend on it. The novel implies that

Lena must reposition herself within a Choctaw context in order to understand the archive and tell this history.

A Choctaw Archival Theory

Ezol's theories are presented visually in her eye tree drawing. While at boarding school in the late 1880s she produces an image of a tree surrounded by seven eyes on separate branches gazing in different directions. The drawing, labeled "eye tree," appears on one of the novel's pages (135).⁴⁴ I interpret the seven eyes of the eye tree as depicting a growing ability to see multiple visions, or possible histories, at once, transcending linear time. Ezol is a visionary, and her special abilities, her genius, allows her to see multiple "dimensions" across time (36). What she shares with Lena is not merely the history of the Miko Kings but the theory of how to access histories outside of a colonial framework. The dimensions she sees can be read as distinct historical possibilities, separate from one another, such as the Miko Kings victory over the Seventh Cavalrymen, as well as their loss. What happens in the past is driven by what history Lena is able to access and assemble through her archive. *Miko Kings* implies that since archives mediate historical knowledge, building a tribally specific, decolonized archive effectively *creates* a previously unknown past. The novel asks readers to suspend an understanding of a fixed past and the linear progression of time in order to fully understand the powerful possibilities of the Miko Kings archive.

⁴⁴ Howe's choice to include seven branches in this drawing connects the eye tree to both Choctaw spirituality and political action. Seven is a sacred number for Choctaws and other tribes, and seven Choctaw grandmothers participated at the Dancing Rabbit Creek Treaty removal negotiations in 1829. Therefore, the sight depicted by the eye tree is associated with Choctaw-specific and inter-tribal spirituality, as well as intertwined with a past that includes both stories of colonialism and suffering, and stories of national sovereignty and political power (Reeves 222).

Ezol's image of the eye tree suggests a theory alive and growing, rather than static, speaking to the vitality and mutability of a Choctaw worldview. In addition, the branches represent a theory that expands outward from a Choctaw center to encompass many other knowledge systems. Ezol begins the theorization of her eye tree while a young girl at the Good Land Indian Orphanage, representing the ability of a powerful Choctaw worldview to emerge even within oppressive Euro-American structures such as the boarding school. Unlike Hope, whose boarding school experience renders him insecure and vulnerable to corruption, Ezol's unique vision seems to allow her to avoid cultural oppression at boarding school, even though she suffers emotionally. It may be that her extreme intellectual abilities distract her and allow her to retreat within, as the eye tree sometimes causes her to be "immune to her surroundings" (141). The young Ezol is identified as a genius by her teachers, and begins to develop Choctaw theories while quickly mastering French, physics and other Euro-dominated subjects. Howe refutes colonial discourse of assimilation and manifest destiny by situating Choctaw theory as a step beyond Euro-American knowledge, thereby undermining the assimilation—resistance binary.

Ezol teaches Lena Choctaw words that contain multiple "dimensions," visually represented by the many eyes surrounding the tree (36). How events are told, according to Ezol, changes their meaning. Ezol explains that a Choctaw archive is partly built through the use of Choctaw words. Ezol argues that Choctaw verbs "have a much broader application, which shades the meaning in ways that English verbs cannot" (37). For example, Ezol explains the word *okchamali*, the Choctaw word for both blue and green: "Its roots appear in the Choctaw word *okchanya*, meaning 'alive.' Now where did our people originate? Answer: a world of blue sky and green swamplands, a watery place. So perhaps *okchamali* relates to 'place' as 'alive'" (38). Terms like *okchamali* can evoke a sense of life, place, and time at once.

Further rooting her theory in the Choctaw language, Ezol explains that Choctaw verbs do not evoke fixed tenses but function as tools like numbers: “The laws of physics do not distinguish between past and present. Neither does the Choctaw language, at least not in the way that English does. Choctaw verbs have a much broader application, which shades the meaning in ways that English verbs cannot” (37). In an interview with Kirstin L. Squint, Howe further explains the power of Choctaw language: “We can look at verbs and verb tenses, especially in Choctaw, as a way of moving the mountain through the act of speaking. That speech act is as powerful as number theory to nuclear physics” (219). Here Howe emphasizes the power of words, of the “speech act,” to cause social change (219). She implies that continued knowledge of Choctaw language may allow a Choctaw specific view, but she does not limit understanding to those, like Lena, who speak mostly English, as long as they are receptive to the differences between the languages. Choctaw verbs can create dimensions that English verbs cannot, and therefore contain a space for Choctaw experience outside of white, colonial definition. Ezol states: “We have evidence in our language that our people experienced different dimensions through our use of particles and verbs which attend to specific movements in and out of spacetime” (39). In other words, even a general understanding of Choctaw language allows a tribally specific way of experiencing the world that rejects dominant American structures like linear temporality, necessitating an archive that seeks continuous connection across temporal boundaries, and fostering a reality that can never be understood along a linear colonial narrative.

Control over time is deeply political in *Miko Kings*, as linear temporality lends itself to a colonial progress narrative of American Indian disappearance. Ezol’s theories privilege a Choctaw way of knowing the world that undercuts a colonial ordering of history: “I questioned why we should expect our ancestors to synchronize their time with our modern

clocks, which are set by the political whims of English speakers” (39). Baseball is also recast by the novel as functioning within Choctaw temporalities. Ezol explains how baseball relies on nonlinear temporality; it is “*past time*,” as it runs counterclockwise and has “no time limit” (44). It is significant that the stories in the novel never reach the date of Oklahoma statehood, November 16th, 1907, but rather examine its destructive aftermath and explore its possible nonexistence through a Miko Kings victory. In addition, the date of the championship baseball game is just prior to the first celebrated Columbus Day, which both underlines the stakes of the baseball game in fighting colonial power as well as subverts this date by not allowing it to exist in the narrative.

Ezol’s theories of temporality are personally helpful as well, for they allow her to assert a tribally specific framework over the oppression she experiences under colonization and approaching statehood. For example, Ezol seeks control over time while she is unwillingly kept at boarding school; she labels her journal entries by the number of days she has been at the school, drawing attention to a linear passage of time that confines her. Yet she also sees the possibility of escaping such a time frame. In one early entry Ezol considers the ability to reorder time; she recounts both a biblical story from Joshua, in which “the sun stood still,” and a Choctaw aunt’s story of a healer who cut “the wind in half” (139). Ezol declares that “time is at the mercy of the speaker,” presenting a syncretic sacred understanding of time’s relativity (139). Trust in tribally specific theories allow Ezol to decolonize her own mind, even while she is at a school dedicated to eradicating Indigenous ways of knowing.

In her boarding school journal, Ezol explores the ability of numbers to split and “remain unaccounted for” (140). The number patterns she investigates perform a temporality that is relational and creates “intersections” rather than isolates. Ezol’s theory of

temporal relativity offers a way for Lena to approach the found archive. The *Miko Kings* archival materials may represent historical events across time, but the meaning, timing, and perhaps content, of these events can change through a Choctaw archival assembly.

The archive that Ezol and Lena are forming creates connections across time periods, not proceeding chronologically but rather relying on an Indigenous archival practice that branches outward and destabilizes colonial narratives considered permanent. According to Ezol, events are dependent on the telling of their histories. Rather than a record, a Choctaw archive is constantly in the state of creation. Ezol states: “What the Choctaws spoke of, they saw. Experienced,” refuting the idea that truth exists to be “discovered,” and privileging an archive that is narrated by Choctaw words (37).

This emphasis on relationality rather than historical truth echoes recent critical work in queer temporalities that proposes other forms of time, which in turn changes perceptions of history. For example, Carolyn Dinshaw describes experiences of time that are “not regulated by “clock” time or by a conceptualization of the present as singular and fleeting; experiences not narrowed by the idea that time moves steadily forward, that it is scarce, that we live on only one temporal plane” (“Theorizing” 185). Ezol’s multidimensional historical lens captures this experience of multiple temporal planes, and roots them in vital, longstanding Indigenous knowledge systems. Time within the framework of *Miko Kings* also rejects the uncovering of a singular Choctaw past as the result and goal of a Choctaw archival practice, and instead emphasizes the development of a temporal framework that makes possible experiences of the past outside of the colonial historical lens, experiences of time that the novel suggests have significant community impact, changing the way Choctaws understand their own present, and perhaps future.

Within this Choctaw temporal frame, it is Ezol and Lena's assembling of the story of the Miko Kings that makes the team's victory possible in the pivotal game against the Seventh Cavalrymen. A Choctaw archive then doesn't preserve and access the past, but rather it intervenes in the past, and makes possible realities unrepresented by colonial narratives. The novel embodies Choctaw temporality by progressing nonlinearly and providing a second version of this pivotal game after the archive is assembled. While some readers of Howe's novel will accept the second victorious version of the baseball game, others may be troubled by the audacity of this potential win against a team representing the violent Seventh Cavalry, given the great losses suffered by American Indians at the hands of the Cavalry.⁴⁵ Yet I argue that this victory does not in fact negate those violences, but rather a Choctaw archive, like Ezol's eye tree, asks us to see many different historical possibilities at once, including tribal loss and trauma, and enduring Choctaw victories.

On the one hand, I read Ezol's eye tree sight and the second version of the game as symbolic of the community strength that can come from learning tribally specific histories through Indigenous archives. Simply learning about Choctaw baseball and Choctaw epistemologies has the potential to strengthen a sense of community and Choctaw nationhood, which, arguably, is itself an influential victory over colonialism.

Yet I don't want to read the Miko Kings victory as *only* symbolic. For, if as Dian Million has advocated, scholars take seriously Indigenous epistemologies, then we need to account for a Choctaw understanding of engaging with and preserving the past when addressing a novel that engages a Choctaw history. Drawing from Indigenous knowledge systems, many American Indian critics have theorized the real world impact of storytelling.

⁴⁵ The 7th U.S. Cavalry committed the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890.

Howe posits that stories “bring into being,” that they can in fact “make change” (*Choctalking* 31). Thomas King describes the power of native stories and storytelling to “create action” in the world. Lisa Brooks writes about the power of stories to gather her people back together after the ramifications of a loss of land rights. As I explain in my third chapter, Greg Sarris’s *Watermelon Nights* suggests that telling the right stories will help a tribal community heal. *Miko Kings* extends these theories of powerful stories to material archives. As a means to mediate, access, and preserve histories, archives are lenses that enable particular historical narratives to be produced. After all, that is what decolonial archives can do—especially for Indigenous or queer histories that have been traditionally absent from a national understanding of the past. If we cannot see particular histories through colonial forms of archiving, then creating new forms of archiving creates new understandings of history. Maylei Blackwell makes a similar argument about the role of Chicana feminist archives. She contends that working “gaps, interstices, silences, and crevices of the uneven narratives of domination” actually “creat[es] spaces for new historical subjects to emerge” (2).

The Indigenous archive in Howe’s novel allows readers to access little known histories of American Indian baseball and organized resistance to colonialism. In addition, the format of this archive reveals the possibilities that emerge when linear time is deprivileged. Assembling Choctaw archives may then “bring into being” multiple new historical possibilities. In one of the only other thorough readings of this novel, Carter Meland employs quantum physics to argue that the eye tree illustrates different “world lines” that move forward from each possible event:

Ezol sees decoherence; she sees all the world lines that branch out of each quantum event, and she can trace them from each root event through all the branches that

grow from them. She travels down these other world lines, much like Native medicine people and their ‘journeys to other dimensions’ (Miko 36), and like those medicine people, she intervenes in the lives of those that live there. (35)

He goes on to explain that in the novel Ezol’s presentation of another world line will change Lena’s present: “After Ezol leaves her, I think Lena steps out into a fully intact Choctaw nation, not one whittled away by Oklahoma Sooners and Boomers and federal allotment” (36). Meland also suggests that even if readers believe that allotment and Oklahoma statehood still happened after the Miko Kings game, the new knowledge of the Four Mothers Society’s resistance provided by the novel will transform their perception of the world: “The Choctaw did not merely die in the box of federal policy; they fought for what was right, even if they lost...In choosing one over the other we may not actually be moving between world lines as Ezol does, but we are choosing to see the world in a different way—and the choice should change us” (37). I agree with this reading of the novel’s impact, and I add that beyond reorienting our minds, Howe actually changes the historical record, which in turn accounts for more historical Choctaw victory and political resistance than previously was thought possible.

I read the eye tree as an archive itself, a methodology for mediating the past supported by Choctaw temporalities and language systems. Combining the eye tree lens with the repurposed materials of the colonial archive allows this novel to exercise archival sovereignty. Regardless of whether the Miko Kings can “win” through the creation of this Choctaw archive, it is imperative to embrace this way of *seeing out* of the colonial archive as an imaginative activism that has real impact in the present. In the tradition of King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), the positioning of American Indians as champions upsets colonial narratives of manifest destiny and strengthens Choctaw community in the present.

After the reconstruction of the archive, Lena finds that there are “dozens of posts” on the Miko Kings blog “about their historic 1907 win over Fort Sill’s Cavalrymen” (220). These online reactions confirm that victorious American Indian histories are influential in the present-day, and that a decolonized, relational, and accessible archive can have great impact.

In fact, embedded in the Miko Kings archive is the promise of creating more decolonized archives, for the eye tree contains the potential to transfer its vision from one person to the next, allowing a Choctaw archive to spread outward. Howe associates the power of this transfer with water and Choctaw spirituality. For Ezol’s sight is connected to cataracts by an aging Justina: “[Ezol] claimed that tree branches grew over her eyes. Now at my advanced age, I have cataracts and know just how she felt” (80). When Lena analyzes the eye tree drawing, she returns to the term cataract: “When I look up ‘cataract’ in the dictionary I find it means floodgate (of heaven). A large waterfall or any strong flood or rush of water; a deluge” (185). This notion of a flood implies that Ezol has an abundance of sight, which points to her ability to see different time periods at once and her status as a visionary. In addition, the heavenly “strong flood” evokes an opening, an obliteration of current structures of containment and the many Euro-American stories about American Indians. Ezol’s flood of sight is reminiscent of the dam bursting in “an awful rush” in *Green Grass, Running Water*, which allows the world to return to an Indigenous beginning (454).⁴⁶ Like grassroots archives, a Choctaw archive is not limited by institutional norms and can be built by all who understand the story (hence the expansion of blog posts after Lena posts the story). Once told, Ezol’s story spreads outward, encouraging Choctaw resistance and victory,

⁴⁶ In King’s novel, the dam’s burst accompanies the revising of colonial and Judeo-Christian narratives through storytelling, beginning what James H. Cox has called “a process of liberation from the narrative or textual colonization of Native America” (67).

and marking such liberation. According to the theory presented by this text, a Choctaw archive is expansive, and while beginning in a tribally specific place it can gather connections across peoples. Throughout the novel, Howe connects the Miko Kings history to African-American activism, the War on Terror, Muslim spirituality, and queer modes of being.⁴⁷ Transcending the nation even as it is Choctaw-specific, the story of the Miko Kings forges alliances with other marginalized peoples who would also benefit from a decolonizing archival practice.

⁴⁷ The Miko Kings story is also connected to the discrimination of queer individuals, as one of the elderly Hope's male American Indian nurses, Kerwin, is put on disciplinary leave for wearing a dress, leading to Hope's neglect (and speeding his death) because other nurses treat the American Indian welfare patients last. Hope's discrimination as an American Indian is thereby linked to the discrimination of a queer individual. Reading his friend's gender identity through a Choctaw lens, Hope calls Kerwin *Oboyo Holba*, explaining that in a Choctaw past *Oboyo Holba* was "a respected person...givers who had multiple kinds of powers inside them" (Howe 89) ("Oboyo Holba" is translated as "like a woman but not" (Haag 335, 343)).

Chapter Two: Archival Recovery: Ashes, Altars, & Queer Saints

“I wanted to consume and claim forever as
mine any part of her that might be slipping away” (31).

“Nahui was a projection, a false promise, a desert mirage, an ancient myth
she herself appropriated” (257).

Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that Felicia Luna Lemus’s second novel *Like Son* (2007) depicts the recovery of both the real historical figure Nahui Olin and the protagonist’s familial lineage through queer archival practices that enable a critique of the appropriation of Indigeneity within Chicana/o feminism. Paralleling *Miko Kings*, this novel depicts an inherited material archive that has great affective power and is complemented by immaterial practices, which in this case include performance, dreams, and ritual. Unlike *Miko Kings*, Lemus’s novel does not propose a culturally specific epistemological frame in which to situate the archive. The protagonist’s relationship to his cultural and familial legacies remains ambivalent and tenuous as he enacts a queer recovery project to address an unsettled and dangerous past.

The term “recovery” has been used in archival studies to refer to projects that expand the archive by unearthing forgotten or lost histories. “Recovery” implies that there is something intended to be uncovered, and therefore recovery projects often have a goal in mind: to recover a particular, already envisioned past. The recovery of an Indigenous background or origin is intertwined with foundational Chicana/o feminist theory.⁴⁸ As I explain in the Introduction, an underlying question of this dissertation is how to draw

⁴⁸ See Sheila Marie Contreras’s *Blood Lines: Myth, Indigenismo, and Chicana/o Literature* (2008).

alliances between the decolonial archives and archival practices I read in American Indian literature and those in Mexican American literature. American Indian scholars have criticized the appropriation of Indigeneity in Chicana/o studies and cited it as disruptive to alliance building.⁴⁹ A reading of the archival practices in Lemus's novel helps address this issue by highlighting the practices of accepting and/or evading inherited legacies. The novel complicates the gendered inheritances of Chicana/o feminism, as the trans protagonist charts a queer familial lineage from himself (as *like son*), to his father, and then to his grandmother and Olin. In addition, *Like Son* presents an archival recovery project that does not fulfill the affective and political intentions that motivate it.

I also employ the term “recovery” because of its somewhat problematic therapeutic valence. Recovery implies moving on from suffering or addiction. In an archival sense, recovery can mean mobilizing the past to help facilitate leaving it behind; to learn from it in order to move forward. As I explain in the Introduction, recent scholarship in affect and queer studies departs from a discourse of historical closure, critiquing the “memorialization” of the past as effacing ongoing structural violence and persistent trauma.⁵⁰ The recovery project in *Like Son* is queer because it refuses such closure and instead proposes a ritualistic approach to recovering the past that fuses the material and the spiritual.

Considering the political and affective stakes of the queer archival recovery project in *Like Son*, this chapter poses the following questions: What makes an archival practice queer? What happens when what is uncovered is not what is expected or hoped for? Can we choose what inheritances to accept? How do border-crossing familial objects decolonize the archive, and represent lived experience and Indigenous cultural histories in Greater Mexico? The

⁴⁹ See George Hartley's “Indigeneity, Nation-States, and Colonialist Identity” in *Comparative Indigeneities of the Americas: Towards a Hemispheric Approach* (2012).

⁵⁰ See J. Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011).

queer archive assembled in *Like Son* addresses race and gender performance, queer histories, and representations of Indigeneity in Mexican and Mexican American culture, and ultimately serves as both a destructive and grounding force for the novel's protagonist. At the end of this chapter I apply a queer archival lens to a group of Chicana/o texts and determine how to situate this novel within a Chicana/o literary legacy.

Queer Archives & Archival Practices

In *Like Son*, the trans protagonist Frank Guerrero Cruz inherits the following collection of documents and ephemera from his father: a retablo, a dedicated book of poems, a worry stone from Mexico, a collection of love letters held in a safety deposit box, and his father's "blind man glasses," cane, and suits (16).⁵¹ This chapter reads Frank's collection as a queer archive that recovers the historical Mexican artist, writer, and muse Nahui Olin, and allows Frank to navigate less tangible inheritances, including a destructive romantic legacy and a complex Mexican-American identity. I refer to this collection as an archive because Frank's ritualistic engagement with these materials informs his understanding of both the past and present, and allows him to envision a future that is at once indebted to and free of his cultural and familial past. I call the archive in *Like Son*

⁵¹ The term 'retablo' refers to devotional paintings that traditionally appear behind the Catholic altar on metal or wood. Small, portable retablos are considered a folk art and greatly range in style. The retablo, usually a small drawing of a Catholic patron saint, is displayed and prayed to for specific requests. Small, portable retablos are considered a folk art and greatly range in style. The retablo, usually a small drawing of a Catholic patron saint, is displayed and prayed to for specific requests. Objects that carry devotional images have a long colonial history in Greater Mexico, as images of saints were used to encourage belief in the new religion of Christianity. Scholars have also noted that the sacred nature of material objects was already a part of Indigenous belief systems and therefore the creation of retablos can be syncretic actions (Taylor).

“queer” in reference to both its content and function. This archive contains the unresolved story of a dangerous sexual relationship between Frank’s grandmother, Consuela, and Olin, whose presence in the institutional archive is faint and incomplete. I read Frank’s intense physical and emotional relationship to the archive—his intimate curation—as a queer archival practice driven by affective necessity, rather than an attempt to document or preserve a stable past. Ann Cvetkovich has described queer archives as “composed of material practices that challenge traditional conceptions of history and understand the quest for history as a psychic need rather than a science” (268). Lemus makes apparent the protagonist’s desire for a familial and queer history, and the archival materials he inherits give him comfort in times of grief and loneliness but also indoctrinate him into a dangerous and powerful family cycle of heartbreak.

Having suffered an emotionally and sexually abusive childhood, Frank is isolated from his family, and except for a brief reconnection with his dying father, Francisco, he has nobody to tell him about his family’s past. Like Lena in *Miko Kings*, Frank’s isolated state makes an archive passed within the family especially important.⁵² Frank’s isolation may have

⁵² In Lemus’s first novel, *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* (2003), the protagonist Leticia navigates between her grandmother’s house and a queer community in Los Angeles, and also faces familial isolation. Neither novel focuses on the characters’ “coming out,” but rather their attempt to navigate difficult familial and cultural relations as queer Mexican-American young adults. In an interview with *Bookslut*, Lemus explains that in *Like Son* she wanted to write a story about a trans character that did not follow a “coming out” narrative: “For me, trans-characters are part of the world, and trans-people are part of the world. I really, truly just wanted to write a story where I have a protagonist that can be transgendered, like Frank is, where it wouldn’t be about his transgenderism, where it would be about his life. It’s just a story about a person who is transgendered, and the fact that he was born a baby girl and now goes through the world as a man, of course that’s going to influence the way he sees and perceives things and the way he moves through the world and his interactions, but I wanted it to be first and foremost about the person. I think there’s value in coming-out stories and coming-

to do with transgendered identity, which has, implicitly, removed him from his previous role within his family. His abusive mother has disowned him, but it's clear their relationship was broken before he chose a male gender identity. She failed to support him after he told her he was sexually abused by his stepfather—an anesthesiologist who drugged and raped him when he was a child—and she worked to end Frank's relationship with Francisco when he was a child. In addition, Frank is also isolated from an extended family because of his mother's conscious attempt to live a lifestyle of individualism and wealth away from her Chicana/o community.

In the beginning of the novel, Frank receives a phone call that signals both his family's renewed importance in his life and its imminent silencing; his father, Francisco, who he has not seen in fifteen years, calls to reconnect and tell him he is dying. Frank cares for his dying father, becoming physically and emotionally close to him as he administers care and listens to stories of his father's failed love affairs. Once his father is gone, Frank has only the materials his father has left him as points of familial and cultural connection, and they carry significant weight.

When Frank turns 23, Francisco, close to death, gifts him with the retablo, a book of Nahui Olin's poems that contains a handwritten dedication to Frank's grandmother, and the key to a safety deposit box. In the box, which he is instructed to open upon his father's

of-age stories, but that just wasn't what I was interested in doing." She goes on to say that she was paid a "huge compliment" when someone called Like Son "post-trans." It's somewhat revolutionary that Lemus's novels are attune to the specificity of transgendered contexts without needing to center their story around the fact of queer identity. In Lemus's "post-punk" world, queer people always exist—thus the coming out is not the story—but they may lack certain privilege, ease of mobility, and ties to history because of their sexual identities.

death, Frank finds a bundle of love letters belonging to his long, bitterly separated parents. After Francisco's death, he also inherits a worry stone taken from Mexico by his grandmother when she goes to the United States pregnant with Francisco. This object is intended to remind the child of his home, providing a physical link to Mexico. Frank believes he hears his dead father telling him to take his "blind-man glasses," suits, cane, and briefcase, which Frank takes as a sign that Francisco accepts his gender change (Francisco's sight was so poor that he did not recognize his child's gender transition) (74). The inheritance of these objects therefore not only represents Frank's ability to function as a "like son" but also his father's approval of this role. After reading through the love letters at the bank, Frank leaves them in the deposit box, and later drops them at his estranged mother's door. Leaving behind this notably heteronormative portion of the inherited archive, Frank takes the retablo, book of poems, and his father's things with him on a cross-country move from Los Angeles to New York.

This archive serves as a point of connection to stories obscured by colonial histories and estranged family. These are stories that Frank desires, that help him to situate himself as a queer Mexican American within his family's immigrant story, but they are also sad stories that serve as warnings about who he does not wish to become. The problem of needing to both embrace and reject familial and cultural connections in order to move forward as a queer individual is present in both of Lemus's novels. The main character of her first novel, *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* (2003), Leticia, must negotiate her position within her family's present and past as she resists fixed gender and sexual identities. Leticia engages in a close relationship with a La Llorona figure who is both a protector and a threat. Their tumultuous but ultimately healing relationship parallels Frank's relationship to Olin, which helps him navigate his familial past but also renders him vulnerable to harm. Both of

Lemus's novels present a nonlinear temporality as a means for characters to address complex and hurtful family legacies. In her queer formalist reading of Lemus's first novel, Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano posits that Leticia "uses maternally inflected generational discourse to show not only the key role that her Mexican, working-class family plays in her survival, sensibility, and sexuality but also her need to loosen its constraints" (75). In *Like Son*, an engagement with archival materials allows this queer temporality. I suggest that Frank engages with his familial and cultural past through an archive in order to understand its central role in his life, as well as to break away. Frank is able to transcend some of his familial isolation and become aware of his place in a "[f]amily cycle" of passionate and violent love affairs and loss, caused in part by oppressive US conditions, through his manipulation of the archive (9).

Frank's choice of a male name indicates the difficulty he has engaging with, and freeing himself from, his family's past. He explains that he chose his male name in part to honor his father Francisco:

Frank. Born Francisca. The three of us: Father, the Son-to-be, and Nahui, the Holiest of Ghosts. A most unusual trinity...I chose my own name, both in honor of my father and for its function as a verb. (112)

Frank subversively rewrites the Catholic trinity, positioning himself in relation to the influence of his father and his queer saint. By joining together his father, himself, and a queer female historical figure, Frank is finding his own, chosen source of spiritual origin in the form of a queer relationality, one that includes his father's physical and emotional baggage.⁵³

⁵³ For example, when he dons his father's old-fashioned suits he embodies his father's particular masculine identity as well, one that Frank understands was crafted in response to racism, as a performance of respectability. Frank remembers that, as a small child, he had asked his father why he always dressed formally, and his father's response was: "Don't let anyone ever call you a lazy wetback" (15). Yet Frank recuperates his father's performance, calling it "passive resistance of a most

On the one hand, Frank's intense feelings for the retablo, and his queer desire for Olin across time—which partly figures his relationship with his lover Nathalie—place him within the destructive love affairs that his father and grandmother experienced. Nathalie “had the stare...the sort of eyes my father had tried to warn me about...Nathalie had Nahui's stare” (98). On the other hand, the inherited archive helps Frank learn his family's history and better understand himself and his own vulnerabilities, and thus the archive aids him in attempting to disentangle himself from harmful family legacies.

A Retablo

The most powerful item in Frank's archive is a black and white image of Olin that has been pasted onto cardboard to form a “makeshift retablo” (29). The retablo is said to have been created by Frank's Mexican grandmother, and it subversively positions the queer artist as her patron saint. To make, carry, or place in the home a particular retablo often indicates a personal relationship with a particular saint. Kay Turner's study of women's altars describes a female-gendered practice of creating homemade materials in order to pray for patron saints at home altars. Over the course of two decades Turner studied Mexican-American home altars, describing how they serve as a place of power exchange. Touched deeply and rendered vulnerable by the photograph's stare—“punctured,” the novel tells us—Frank develops an intimate relationship with the retablo that is figured by worship and violence (106).⁵⁴ The retablo provides him comfort in times of grief, serving as a witness to Frank's suffering and crying “sepia tears” that soothe his pain. At times the object also gives him a clarity of “vision” that allows him to better understand the past. Frank sometimes loses his dignified form,” explaining how he has come to understand his father's choice after experiencing years of bullying for his own queer identity (16).

⁵⁴ Recalls Roland Barthes's ‘punctum.’

bearings and “wakes up” to find the retablo sitting in front of him as a guide. Eventually he also attributes violent acts that he and his family experience to the photograph’s powers.

In the photograph, Olin’s hair is chopped above the ears, and her neck and shoulders are bare. She stares directly at the camera with fierce eyes, moist eyelashes, closed mouth and defiant chin. One of her cheekbones is lit, the other in shadows, giving her skin two shades.⁵⁵ The iconic portrait—which inspired the author to write this novel and serves as its cover image—is one of the renowned American photographer Edward Weston’s “heroic heads,” photographs of the group of avant-garde Mexican artists and intellectuals with whom Weston socialized (*Nahui Olin, 1924*). In addition to the shading, Olin’s cropped hair is meant to emphasize her Indigenous identity—or at least portray Weston’s *idea* of an Indian.⁵⁶ The portrait of Olin was completed in 1923, and first exhibited in Weston’s show at the Aztec Land Gallery in Mexico City in 1924 (See Figure D).

Frank’s initial reaction to the photograph demonstrates its great affective resonance:

But, to my deep horror, she was disintegrating. Like a mirror unsilvering, specks of black—photographic paper and developing chemicals turning cannibalistic to devour their own image—showed through the left side of her face and on her shoulders. I resisted the intense urge to lick each and every one of those freckles. Honestly, I wanted to taste past her skin. I wanted to find a way into her soul. I wanted to consume and claim forever as mine any part of her that might be slipping away. (31)

⁵⁵ The shading suggests a reference to Nahui Olin’s mestiza identity, or perhaps the juxtaposition of her upper class status and rebellious position within an avant garde that celebrated *Indigenismo*. Weston was drawn to what he perceived as Olin’s “indianness.”

⁵⁶ The last section of this chapter contextualizes the photograph within the *Indigenismo* movement in Mexico.

Here Frank collapses object and subject: the image is not an “it” but a “she,” a manifestation of Olin herself. Beyond desiring to know the queer historical figure, Frank desires contact with her archival representation. Frank’s use of the term “mirror” suggests that he may see something of himself in this image of Olin. In fact, her image allows him to engage with stories of his familial past and situate himself within a queer, border-crossing and complex Chicana/o lineage. His reaction to the fading photograph is so intense that he wishes to physically consume Olin, to touch her image as a means to “taste past her skin,” engaging erotically with her physicality but also perhaps recovering a repressed history. To “lick” her freckles would be to ingest the dust of the archive and thereby likely to contribute to the erasure of the object.⁵⁷ This extreme act of archival recovery, predicated on the material’s disintegration, is an extremely individualized and intimate kind of recovery. More than mere contact with an archival object, it constitutes a desire to consume the remnants of a queer historical figure. Since Frank wants to claim any “part of her that might be slipping away” as his own, his desire seems, in part, driven by the ephemeral, vulnerable nature of this archival material, which well represents the enigmatic figure of Olin, whose presence in the textual archive is faint and incomplete. In other words, part of the attraction to Olin and her image is her and/or its inability to be contained, to fit social or archival norms; Frank is drawn to the very failure of the archival material to contain, to fully represent, this dynamic figure. And, he may also wish to stop the progression of its demise and recover Olin’s story through his own consumption.

⁵⁷ Dust has been a productive term for noting the particular nebulous and (and, at times, physically sickening) material leftovers of history encountered in the archive. Carolyn Steedman—in *Dust: the Archive and Cultural History* (2002)—explores the materiality and temporality of historical (state) archives.

While Nahui Olin is central in Frank's archive, her place in the colonial archive is weak. In Weston's *Daybooks*, a collection of his extensively edited journals, he mentions Olin's disapproval of this photograph: "Nahui is a bit 'enojado'—annoyed—that I should display such a revealing portrait of her, though I had her permission before hanging" [sic] (97). This moment in the journal highlights both Weston's talent of taking revealing portraiture that often registers an emotional intensity and an underlying power struggle between subject and photographer. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's description of this photograph actually refers to a "face-off" between Weston and Olin: "...the image is a powerful expression of the photographer's piercing eye, a confrontational face-off between two equally strong personalities." Given the fierceness of Olin's eyes in the photograph, it is hard to imagine her losing this or any "face-off." However, it was Weston who ultimately had control over her image and its display.⁵⁸

As one of the most recognized American photographers and an exemplar of the modernist movement of photographic art, Weston's influence seems everywhere in the archive, while Olin's work is barely present.⁵⁹ Olin's image and story are filtered through Weston's lens. While her presence is powerful in both his writings and images, there is little reference to her own artistic work. These traces of Olin in Weston's archive are indicative of

⁵⁸ What is revealed in the photograph is importantly not Olin's nudity (she is cropped below her bare shoulders), but rather a particularly intense emotional state. In fact, Weston notes in the same journal entry that at the exhibition she asked him to do nudes of her, so what she is annoyed about is not physical, but rather the representation of an emotional struggle.

⁵⁹ Weston's body of work is part of a Euro-American colonial archive and manifests a colonial gaze toward Mexico, and especially toward the Indigenous populations (and perceived Indigenous individuals) of Greater Mexico. Examining Weston's photographs and writings, David P. Peeler has eloquently argued that Weston positions himself as "perched" above the Mexicans he photographs.

how critically unrecognized her own work is in comparison to the power of her image.⁶⁰ Weston portrays her as attractively enigmatic, and does not give specific description of her work. In his *Daybooks*, he notes that the French-American painter Jean Charlot knew Olin well, and defined her as “genius as opposed to talent.” Weston goes on to explain: “At times brilliant in the extreme both in writing and painting, she is again commonplace, without discrimination, discounting her own best work, insisting on her worst” (101). In Weston’s description Olin embraces her own failure, which may indicate a relationship between her enigmatic genius and her potential archival failure. Olin’s inability to be pinned down, her “dynamite” as Frank calls it, indicates a certain dynamic absence fueled perhaps by resistance to the colonial Euro-American male gaze that makes her a difficult figure for the traditional archive.

Queer artists and theorists have recuperated failure as a queer mode of being and way to “escape punishing norms,” a perhaps hopeful resistance despite the “despair” that failure may bring (Halberstam 3). As a queer woman who embraced her sexuality, Olin’s obscurity in the archive can be read as a rebellious resistance to norms of social success: “Communist. Radical feminist. Fucked whomever she wanted to. Here, there, and everywhere. Scandalized her barrio. And then slipped into obscurity by middle age. Few people even realized she published a fourth book, *Energia cosmica (Cosmic Energy)*, at age forty-three” (109). Frank’s lover Nathalie implies it is Olin’s fierceness and sexuality that have left her out of the archive. She contrasts the popularity of Frida Kahlo with Olin’s obscurity: “that poor little injured bird, that martyr mild wild girl—unlike her, Nahui was the real

⁶⁰ There has been some recent work that recovers Nahui Olin’s art and writing. For example, Adriana Malvido’s 1993 biography *Nahui Olin, La mujer del sol* (in Spanish) and Tatiana Flores’s 2008 article “Strategic Modernists.”

thing...Far easier and safer was it to try and pretend Nahui never existed at all” (109).⁶¹

Nathalie and Frank want to situate Olin as an anti-martyr figure, a force that has been left out of the institutional archive because of its very dangerous uncontainability, but can occupy Frank’s queer archive.

Lemus has said that her book was in part driven by her wonder at Olin’s unknowability. In an interview with *Bookslut*, the author refers to a “concerted effort” to keep Olin out of the historical record, despite her historical successes:

I think she’s kind of been swept under the rug in a lot of ways. That in and of itself was interesting to me. Like, *why*? Why do we not know more about this woman? She was brilliant, she published all these books, and she produced incredible, really brilliant, naïve paintings. Why was there this concerted effort to keep her out of history? I find that intriguing, and it definitely pushes me forward in a lot of ways.

Echoing these words, Frank confronts the gaps in the archive head on, asking Nahui:

“Nahui, forgive me...but if all this is true, how come nobody knows about you anymore?” (108). As it poses these striking questions about her absence, Lemus’s text recovers Olin’s story, participating in a Chicana/o feminist practice of archival recovery and recuperating Olin as a complicated figure of both rebellion and failure.

Lemus’s own story about encountering the photograph reveals the desire to claim this figure as part of a rebellious feminist tradition. Lemus has written about having first seen the Weston photograph that inspired this novel and misreading it as the ad for a riot grrrl band: “I first saw the portrait of her in January 1998 in *The Orange County Weekly* when I was still living in southern California...honestly, I thought, ‘Right on, there’s this fierce riot grrrl

⁶¹ While this seems a rather narrow view of Frida Kahlo, the emphasis here is on her current popular culture presence.

band coming through town,’ and, ‘I’m in love with this person,’ and, ‘Who is she? She’s my new idol.’ I had to find out who she was” (*Bookslut*). The revealing intensity that Weston captured in Olin’s gaze caught Lemus’s attention and registered as feminist punk expression. Lemus was even further intrigued when she learns Olin is a figure of the past. Her need to write Olin’s story demonstrates the resonance of this strong female historical figure in the present. In addition, this admission emphasizes how archival recovery is often driven by a desire to locate contemporary identities or ideas in the past. Queer theorists such as Heather Love have argued against using the past “in service to the present,” rather than as understanding its ongoing role as a “living past, in contact with the same structural oppressions as our present” (9). The problem of this desire for recovering an “idol” from the past is something Lemus’s novel directly addresses by depicting Frank and Nathalie’s desire for Olin’s story. Frank’s ultimate refusal of Olin as a figure of rebellion is part of what makes the archival recovery *queer* for it embraces a messy past with failed rebellion and ideological contradictions over a past simply in service of the present.

Recovering Nahui Olin

Much of what is said to be known about Nahui Olin is actually a constellation of rumors, contradiction, and obstruction. Olin’s Mexican biographer labels her a “poet, painter, and muse” (Malvido). Born Carmen Mondragón in 1893 to a privileged family, Olin’s father was one of Porfirio Díaz’s generals, known for his invention of a repeating machine gun, the Mondragón. Olin spent part of her childhood in Paris, educated by French nuns in art, French and Spanish grammar, and piano. Some scholars have argued that the influence of the emerging “New Woman” in Europe may have influenced Mondragón’s

rebellious character.⁶² Mondragón would later publish a collection of her childhood work of poetry and other writings, entitled *A dix ans sur mon pupitre* (*From my desk at age ten*).

Olin married a young cadet named Manuel Rodríguez Lozano who shared her love for art, and is said to have preferred sleeping with men. There is an interesting moment in Weston's *Daybooks* from 1923 that describes a group that included Guadalupe Rivera, Dr. Atl, and Olin discussing homosexuals in Mexico. Weston notes that Olin states: "Every other man in Mexico is homosexual," likely indirectly referencing her husband, and demonstrating her awareness of a nonheteronormative subculture (30). In 1914, Olin and Lozano left Mexico due to the unstable political situation and spent seven years together in Europe, a time of which there is little "trustworthy evidence" (Rubenstein). Lozano would claim that Mondragón gave birth to a baby in 1915, went crazy, and killed the infant. No birth certificate exists of this baby. Lozano argued that the Mondragón family covered it up. Olin supposedly never responded, publicly, to this accusation, and so her silence in the archive opens up many possible interpretations of this event. In *Like Son*, Frank learns that Olin suffocates her baby while she sleeps and struggles throughout the rest of her life with the uncertainty of whether she knowingly smothered him out of her fear of inadequacy as a mother—and this reading suggests that regardless of what happened she feared maternal failure. Importantly, this story arises in Lemus's novel when Nathalie tells Frank she wants a baby, demonstrating how the recovery of Olin's story initially figures and informs Frank's present-day reality.

⁶² In her chapter on Olin in *The Human Tradition in Mexico* (2003), Anne Rubenstein has suggested that when Mondragón returned to Mexico City with her family in 1905, she was already a modern figure; her poetry, composed in French, "showed a certain precocious interest in the new modernist literature," and "scandalized" her teachers at the Colegio Frances.

In 1921, Olin and Lozano returned to Mexico City, where Olin met the painter and writer Gerardo Murillo, who went by the name Dr. Atl (the Nahuatl term for water), and soon separated from her husband. Atl gave Mondragón her new Nahuatl name, which she embraced (further linking her to Frank whose name marks a new identity). According to the Aztec calendar, Nahui Olin means the fourth movement of the sun, or the earthquake sun, which is said to result in human extinction. Quintessential figures of Mexican modernism, Atl and Olin lived together in Mexico City in a building that was once a convent (making Olin's positioning as a saint all the more appropriate) and their volatile sexual and artistic relationship was the subject of much discussion. Olin embraced sexual freedom, having affairs with both men and women, and posing erotically and in the nude. She was transgressive even within her avant-garde circle of artists and intellectuals, in which sexist gender dynamics persisted that allowed men infinite sexual freedom, while often expecting fidelity of their wives. Within greater Mexican Catholic society Olin was demonized, labeled a witch or madwoman (Rubenstein).

Olin began producing what is termed her best work in 1922. She painted, drew, and published five works of poetry and philosophy between 1922 and 1937. Her writing has been labeled European modernist, but given little critical attention. She completed many self-portraits and often depicted personal scenes from her life that emphasized bodily pleasure. Olin's work is sometimes termed naïve art, a form of painting (and sometimes sculpture) that uses bright, unnatural colors and showcases a "childlike or literal-minded" vision (OED). Olin referred to her own art as intuitive, a term that was often applied to Indigenous art forms. There have been recent efforts to recover Olin's art; for example, in "Strategic Modernists: Women Artists in Post-Revolutionary Mexico," published in *Women's Art Journal* in 2008, Tatiana Flores describes the narrow, male-dominated canon of Mexican

art. She analyzes works from Mexican women artists of the 1920s in order to “expand the narrowly circumscribed canon of Mexican art, and challenge commonly held stereotypes related to Mexico, art, and gender” (12). Flores calls Olin “fearless” and pays particular attention to how gender power dynamics has shaped the current historical understanding of the artistic canon.

The recuperation of Olin’s story in the novel occurs in part through dreams and performance that are aided by Frank’s material archive. This, in turn, illustrates the novel’s investment in expanding traditional modes of archival practice. Demonstrating Diana Taylor’s interactive archive and repertoire, embodied storytelling and dreams work in conjunction with the physical archival materials in this novel. Notably, it is the story of Frank’s grandmother’s relationship with Nahui Olin that is undocumented, save the inscription to the book of poems: “*My love,/ ‘She went through me like a pavement saw.’/ Yours as ever for the revolution,/ Nahui.*” (87).⁶³ Frank’s need to tell the story of his grandmother and Olin’s desire for one another suggests its initial resonance for Frank despite a lack of material proof. And his connection to his grandmother’s story is arguably more powerful because it exists in the repertoire rather than the archive, in dreams rather than waking life.

The story of Frank’s grandmother’s relationship to Nahui Olin comes to Frank just

⁶³ This recalls Derrida’s use of an inscription in Freud’s archive to ground his argument of the archive’s limitlessness. In addition, the “pavement saw” is a violent image, and this inscription is also strangely the lyrics of an (often considered racist) punk band—from the 1987 album “Songs About Fucking,” by the band Big Black, led by Steve Albini. Frank listens to the band Fugazi in the novel, which has a similar sound, but less racial controversy (44). Given Frank’s post-punk musical tastes, it makes sense that the inscription, the marker of a queer familial historical lineage, has ties to his contemporary culture, as past and present are mixed up in the novel. I do wonder if Lemus purposely selected these lyrics from a band that has been accused of racism, given the violence his grandmother, and eventually Frank, suffer because of Olin’s appropriated Indigenous power. Is it an acknowledgment of the problematic racial depictions within post-punk culture?

before sleep, as his “eyelids fell shut,” and thus is logically positioned as a dream (88). Yet, later Frank will refer to moments from this story as pieces of his own family history, or Olin’s story as though they are facts, as this story becomes part of his queer archive. What is faint in the material archive, the story of his grandmother’s affair with Olin, is as real to Frank as the documented love affair of his parents. While the relationship between the two women is grounded in the physical evidence of the dedication, the story exists in the repertoire. Upon waking Frank refers to his dreams as “lucid,” and since clarity of sight is privileged throughout the novel, symbolic of knowing the past, the labeling of these dreams as lucid suggests that they may be the clear vision of the past that Frank needs.⁶⁴ For through dreams Frank can experience his familial past, through his own body and mind he can see what is unavailable in the institutional archive. For despite Olin’s dim presence in the archive, she also represents a privileged Mexican modernist culture that ultimately inhibits her ability to represent rebellion to Frank.

Just before the dream, Frank doubts the possibility of the relationship given the class differences between his grandmother and Olin:

Exactly how did my father’s mother know Nahui Olin? It made absolutely no sense to me. Just from looking at her, it was obvious that Nahui had been a fancy-pants boho artist from a rich family. And from what I knew, my dad’s mom had been a simple working woman to her dying day...Had my father’s mother cleaned Nahui Olin’s

⁶⁴ Throughout the novel, Frank has moments of passing blindness that pass when he focuses on the archive. Blindness, both physical and metaphorical, lurks as a dangerous possibility. Shortly before his death, Frank’s father informs him that he is a genetic carrier of a debilitating eye disease. This blindness is mapped onto gender; as a biological female, Frank only carries the disease, and therefore should not be threatened by his own blindness, but his male gender complicates this distinction. More so than the physical loss of sight, a lack of vision is feared, a blindness that obfuscates an understanding of the past and one’s own desires.

house? (88)

Exploring this doubt, Frank also leaves open the possibility for a relationship between the two women, one that would alter the way he understands his grandmother, and in turn his family's impoverished past in Mexico. Frank remembers his father's concern about his grandmother's emotional state due to her never-ending work: "She must have looked dead in the eyes those days, he'd said. But maybe she didn't. Maybe everything my father thought he'd known about his mother had been wrong" (87-88).

After this suggestion that there is more to his grandmother's story, there is an ellipsis followed by a section break, signaling a fluid movement between the archive and the repertoire, the documented and undocumented. This next section of the novel opens with Olin's words: "Consuela, I wrote this for you," Nahui Olin said. And startled my father's mother out of her daze" (88). Olin gives Consuela the book and the two women kiss. Consuela carries the inscribed book to the US and then back to Mexico, tucked against the "small of her back," a point of physical connection to Olin; she also carries "the pain of [Olin's] kiss with her for the rest of her days" (93, 94). The book represents the connection between the two women, as well as the pain of their unfulfilled desire. The narration in this section continues to be from Frank's perspective, as though he knows the story, rather than he is experiencing the dream for the first time. Importantly, the narrative here is focalized through Consuela, underscoring Frank's alignment with his grandmother.

In fact, Frank's description of Olin's seduction is focused on her privileged position: "my father's mother felt upon her chin a hand that had never done a day's labor, a hand pale from silk gloves, a hand soft from the thick honeysuckle-scented creams she herself had dusted on vanity table silver trays..." (93). Olin's very physicality is made possible by Consuela's labor. Thus, Olin and his grandmother's desires must be read within a historical

context of uneven modernities. While Olin arguably has a difficult life as a queer, rebellious figure, her life is nonetheless one of privilege. In contrast, Consuela and her family experience “slave-like conditions” within the US and endure multiple tragedies that are linked to Olin.⁶⁵

Immediately after the women kiss, Frank’s dream jumps to Chicago, where a train crash at the workers’ camp has killed Consuela’s young daughter. Five years later in Mexico, Consuela harbors desires for Olin, who has apparently greeted her with love upon her return, despite her attempt to deny them. As she sits one day thinking of Olin, lightning hits and kills her husband. Frank’s dream-story not only establishes a strong desire between the two women, but also indicates that desire for Olin is dangerous and can have real, material consequences for Frank’s family. Yet, while Consuela, a devout churchgoer, perceives these dual tragedies as punishment for her desire, Frank seems to attribute them to Olin’s appropriated Indigenous powers. Olin is named after a temporal section of the Aztec calendar, and Frank understands himself to be living in the Aztec temporal category of *Nahui Olin*: “Four Suns—Jaguar, Wind, Rain, and Floods—preceded *Nahui Olin*. We live in *Nahui Olin*. But according to ancient wisdom, nothing, absolutely nothing, will remain in her wake” (106). While the *retablo* is undoubtedly an aid to Frank’s discovery of this particular family background, Frank begins to realize that Olin’s power has brought considerable hardship to his family and should not be trusted. Frank’s ambivalence toward Olin’s use of these powers becomes clearer when Nathalie embodies Olin.

⁶⁵ The Bracero Workers Program (1942-1964) that Frank’s family participates in is a clear example of an American history left untold by colonial narratives that has great relevance in present-day discourse of immigration and migrant labor. The novel offers familial knowledge as the counterpoint to the colonial archive’s erasure of histories, which leaves other generations vulnerable to the same oppressive American power structures.

A few months into their relationship, Nathalie performs Olin for Frank. She has secretly become an expert on all things Nahui Olin, explaining to Frank that she has read everything she could in English and Spanish about the artist, and studied her poems and paintings.⁶⁶ Some of the information she shares with Frank comes from a small and rumor-filled paper archive. Yet Nathalie's embodiment of Olin goes beyond the information she has gathered. She can tell more of the story than exists on paper because she actually *becomes* the artist, both emotionally and physically. Frank "taste[s] her tears," and declares: "Nahui was alive" (110). This embodiment is expected, since Nathalie is aligned with Olin throughout the novel. She is representative of a fierce woman who possesses great power and can wreak havoc over members of Frank's family. "Nathalie. Gorgeous, addictively engaging, ballsy, and devil help us all, she had the stare. Those eyes...The sort of eyes my father tried to warn me about...Nathalie had Nahui's stare" (98). As a desirable "force of nature," Nathalie has the potential to determine Frank's fate, as Nahui altered Consuela's, and Frank's father's lovers altered his, thus positioning Frank within the family cycle. While Nathalie's role as an embodied storyteller positions her as a kind intermediary for Olin, it is Frank's body that is positioned as the receptor of family memories.

During Nathalie's performance, Nahui Olin briefly comes to represent a romanticized figure of queer Chicana rebellion that plays with stereotypes of a feminized Chicana culture: "She was every masked soldier who ever bore arms for their land. She was the little girls in their white communion dresses, playing dress-up as virgin angels. She was a punk whore, eyebrows shaved and lips rubied in homage to professional sluts who turned tricks out of Mexican street booths. She was revolution itself" (110). Frank is initially

⁶⁶ Later Frank learns that Nathalie has deleted the death of Olin's baby in an attempt not to "ruin" her for them—she wants Olin to remain as rebellious perfection.

entranced by this vision of Olin, but when “Nathalie as Nahui” tells him that the two of them are revolutionaries like Olin, he is quick to resist and emphasize the futility of their rebellion. His criticism becomes a criticism of Nahui’s power as well: “[Life] always pulls you right back to the same place that made you want to revolt to begin with...There is absolutely nothing revolutionary about your revolution.’ I said this as much to Nathalie as to Nahui” (110).⁶⁷ Frank explains his criticism by insisting on Nathalie’s underlying desire for normalcy over rebellion: “She was just like the rest of her kind, a spoiled baby idealizing a world of unicorns and rainbows and pink and blue cotton candy for everyone after the General Strike” (111). Nathalie’s “spoiled baby kind” may refer to her class privilege, perhaps to her whiteness, although the novel is ambiguous about her race. In any event, Frank’s use of childlike terms, “unicorns and rainbows,” emphasizes his critique of a romanticized and overly simplified view of rebellion and power. By articulating “*Nahui’s* kind,” he draws a messy distinction between his own family background and Olin, thereby calling attention again to her uniquely privileged position as a member of the Mexican upper class. Frank disidentifies with Olin as a queer figure from his familial and cultural past whom he cannot fully embrace given her privileged status within Mexican modernity.⁶⁸ Looking closely at Frank’s engagement with his familial archive reveals the multilayered silences of the colonial archive.

Accessing Olin’s story through the joint partnership of the archive and repertoire allows Frank to address his ambivalence toward Olin’s privileged state and particular

⁶⁷ Julie Avril Minich has explained that Nathalie, who the novel hints may be “an able-bodied, cis-gendered white woman,” enjoys the privileges of her social and national belonging even though she fears normalcy (81).

⁶⁸ Here I refer to José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of disidentification to emphasize that Nahui Olin is still an important, and perhaps helpful, figure for Frank, despite her privileged state.

racialization. His engagement with Nahui Olin sheds light on Frank's negotiation of a mestizo identity, and a conflicting class identity. The few facts that Frank has acquired about his family that are separate from what he learns from his archive are all racial and class distinctions. Frank equates his great-grandparents' relationship to "an American black boy marrying a Southern white girl"; his great-grandfather was Chichimecca Mexican Indian and his great-grandmother "green-eyed Michoacán Spanish-ancestry pale" (55).⁶⁹ Frank's maternal grandmother looked "Mexican Indian," and privileged whiteness. However, she disapproved of the light-skinned Francisco because he was lower class and born in Mexico, prejudices about nation and class trumping her internalized racism. Frank takes after his father, and is aware of his ability to pass as European white ("vaguely French-looking"), with the "only trace of Mexican Indian" in his flat cheekbones (57).

Frank recounts a story of his maternal great-grandfather's work as a scab for Sunkist. He calls his great-grandfather an "Uncle Tomás," gaining wealth in the United States by undercutting the strikes of immigrant laborers, and thereby the novel refuses any romanticization of his grandfather's Indigeneity that would align him, as a brown Indigenous body, with 1960s progressive Chicano politics that celebrated the politicization of Indigenous identity. Frank's mother's family later opened a store and secretly became rich by evading taxes, although they hid their wealth in order to blend in with their lower-class clientele and neighbors. These references to the racial and class history of Frank's family reveal his struggle to understand himself within a complex and unromantic Chicana/o past. His awareness of his family's mestizo racial and class background leaves him unable to claim

⁶⁹ The Nahua term 'Chichimeca,' which has been used to refer to different semi-nomadic tribes of Mexico and the Southwestern United States, is misspelled in the text.

any simple identity. *Like Son* thereby speaks to the multiplicities and contradictory power dynamics of Chicana/o identity.

In grappling with and recasting histories in the Americas, Chicana/o theorists and authors often address the complexity of Chicana/o racial and border identities. As Sheila Marie Contreras has argued, negotiating a Chicana/o identity means considering the power dynamics between shared Indigenous and Spanish colonial backgrounds as well as border politics: “Chicana/os bear the weight of this history of social relations of power as they attempt to conceptualize relationships both to Mexico and to the United States” (2).

Throughout the novel Frank notes his lack of knowledge about his cultural background and hints at the immense loss he therefore feels—at one point he calls himself an “Untraditional Mexican-descendent jerk” (121). Rafael Pérez-Torres has argued that a Chicana/o mestizo identity is figured in part by dislocation and loss. The mestizo body, “always a compromised site of multiple identities” is dislocated.⁷⁰ Frank describes his overall European, white appearance but notes his possession of characteristically Indigenous flat cheekbones, demonstrating his awareness of his body as a site of contested identities. In addition, his trans body is a site of gender contestation. Pérez-Torres has also argued that the queer Chicana/o body is “doubly marked—by its deviant mestizaje and deviant sexuality” (xvii). In other words, as the Chicana/o body can claim neither Indigenous nor Spanish identity, the queer Chicana/o body also departs from any singular gender or sexual identity.

⁷⁰ Rafael Pérez-Torres reads the mestizo body in Chicana/o literature as a compromised site of multiple identities, embodying dislocation and loss (he is in part working against the valorization of the mixed-race body as an all-knowing or holy site). While Pérez-Torres suggests that the Chicana/o family provides “the underside of history...through the family secrets and lore” that mitigates or mediates this loss, family is not always accessible to these characters, and therefore the archive proves especially charged (108, 199).

Affect is dramatically rendered physical in both of Lemus's novels, as the body becomes a site for both working out identity and mourning losses. In *Trace Elements*, as Leticia suffers depression and isolation she consumes pieces of her dead skin—ingesting herself as she is consumed by emotional pain. Frank's body is wounded in both a fall and a train crash at the height of his isolation and heartbreak. He also writes his somewhat self-destructive love for his unreliable lover Nathalie onto his body, through a painful chest tattoo of a heart with a "Nathalie" banner, which he persuades the tattoo artist to complete in one sitting. This heart becomes an act of material preservation, an archive on the body that is an obvious and desperate attempt to ground his lover as she becomes emotionally distant. Frank is not just mourning the loss of his father but also mourning the loss of knowledge about his own place in the world.

Frank and Leticia both deal with loss and an uncertain, somewhat unreadable mestiza cultural history that they embody. Their queer Chicana/o bodies are not easily read as Mexican; in turn, the tensions between their connection to a racialized past and their ability to pass as white lends particular weight to their possession of charged icons and objects of Mexican culture. If their queer-gendered, light-skinned bodies complicate their positions within any one cultural and familial legacy, the curation of cultural figures and objects help them negotiate their connection to Mexican and Mexican American histories.

Indigenismo and Chicana/o Inheritances

When Frank impulsively moves to New York following his father's death, he has the "embarrassing thought" that he is a "young brave on a vision quest," about to "learn [his] mission in life" (96). Frank's guilt at his appropriation of a common trope associated with American Indian culture underlines his ambivalence of claiming an Indigenous past. He declares: "At least I can admit to shit like that," hinting at his perception of the prevalent appropriation of Indigenous culture. This scene underscores his uncertain search for guidance from his archive. As he has this internal monologue, the retablo floats above the scene, propped in the window and under threat of getting soaked from a summer thunderstorm. When he dizzily approaches it, the retablo is "miraculously...untouched by the rain," calling attention to its unique power to resist environmental forces (96). Seeing it clears his vision. Yet the appropriated Indigenous power that Frank reads on the retablo at this moment again suggests his ambivalent relationship to Indigeneity, and underscores the importance of understanding Olin's problematic relationship to the Mexican Indigenous cultures she represents in the Weston photograph.

The figure of Olin is particularly emblematic of a complex understanding of Mexican identity that was at the forefront of the 1920s avant-garde cultural scene in Mexico. Olin's name is a chosen embodiment of a popular vision at the time (at least in the avant-garde circles she frequented) of Mexican Aztec Indigenous power. At the height of Olin's cultural production, postrevolutionary Mexico was in the midst of defining its nationhood, and a political ideology of *Indigenismo* sought to strengthen nationhood through embracing an idea of a shared (Aztec) Indigenous past. The circle of artists with whom Olin socialized incorporated an appreciation for Indigenous art into their work. An idea of Mexican modernity that in the latter part of the nineteenth century was predicated on the dismissal of

Indigenous (and rural) Mexico and the idealization of Europe, was in the 1920s postrevolutionary period dependent on pride in a shared, singular idea of an Indigenous past. However, this idea of a shared Indigenous past did not translate into rights for present-day Indigenous communities. At the same moment, the industrialization of Mexico meant that many Indigenous groups were subject to state terrorism through loss of land and forced relocation.

Attendees of the 1921 Exhibition of Popular Art in Mexico, part of Mexico's centennial celebration, were guided by a catalogue created by Dr. Atl, Olin's lover. Several months after Atl produced this edition, he was asked to write an expanded version, which Rick A. Lopez analyzes as a "thesis on race, authenticity, and postrevolutionary populist nationalism" (88). This catalog was extremely influential, as it defined the qualities of Mexican popular art, emphasizing authenticity and the intuitive nature of Indigenous art. The catalog sought to celebrate popular art in order to assemble an inclusive Mexican cultural identity, but it did so without considering the agency of Indigenous populations. Lopez notes that although the popularity of the Art Exhibition "redirected the centennial away from a celebration of technological modernity, toward an ethnicized view of Mexican nationality," this new understanding of race and ethnicity was part of the development of a modern nation state that did not respect Indigenous rights (Lopez 76). Tace Hedrick explains that even as Mexican elites rebelled against notions of Latin American inferiority they continued to use "vocabularies of modernism" to define their new nationhood, including a rhetoric of blood discourse: "mixed-race individuals would come to serve for many as a symbol of racial and therefore national unity" (3-4).⁷¹

⁷¹ Hedrick explains that some Mexican leaders at the time realized that "Indians and Indian culture could constitute a racialized basis for a modern civilization" (6). For example, she describes how

Hedrick notes the important role of photography in visualizing racial boundaries during this time period (12). Weston often notes in his *Daybooks* that people have less or more of the Indigenous in them, and Lopez has proposed that Indigeneity during this period was understood in “degrees.” As a model, Olin was sometimes rendered as Indigenous and sometimes as a light-skinned member of the Mexican elite. Therefore, the image on the retablo must be contextualized within this particular positioning, orchestrated by Weston (and, as I remarked earlier, Olin’s shaded face speaks to this duality). Weston was drawn to what he called the “primitive” side of Mexico, and his headshot of Olin, especially the cropped hair, suggests an Indigenous representation. Rubenstein wryly notes, “Only Edward Weston...seemed to have believed in the Indian persona implied by Nahui Olin’s name...She does not look like an Indian, exactly—but she appears to have been Edward Weston’s idea of an Indian” (159). Frank’s critical interactions with the photograph help decolonize Olin’s archive, revising both Weston’s colonial gaze and a destructive romanticization of Indigeneity.

Mexican avant-garde artists like Olin saw themselves as mestizo, as inheritors of an Indigenous past. Appropriation of Indigeneity may then not be a completely accurate term for Olin, as she believed in her Indigenous background, but her privileged state allowed her to exercise a level of (national) agency in naming and defining Indigenous culture and power separate from the concerns of Indigenous populations, an archival agency less powerful than Weston’s, but unavailable to Indigenous Mexican communities, and Frank’s own “peasant” grandmother. In fact, at this moment the concept of *mestizaje* in Mexico hinged on an

renowned anthropologist Manuel Gamio justified his study of Indigenous populations to the national government as a need to understand the “Indian soul” in order to complete nation-building projects of *mestizaje* (6). He wanted to establish an “organic connection” between what he viewed as premodern and what he viewed as post modern.

expectation of Indigenous disappearance. Hedrick explains that artists at the time also understood themselves as “modern” and on a different temporal plane than the present-day Indigenous—thus the embracing of Indigenous culture was predicated on the erasure of contemporary Indigenous populations.

Olin’s image offers Frank contact with his father and grandmother’s pasts, yet ultimately Frank realizes that Olin also represents a privileged and destructive power that may have marginalized his own family. He faults Olin as a failed guide who appropriated Indigenous power: “Nahui was a projection, a false promise, a desert mirage, an ancient myth she herself appropriated” (257). Her danger thereby lies in the misguided, disconnected use of Indigenous power. Frank notes that he feels “alternately depleted and sustained” by his relationship to Olin (257). When he is in the train wreck, Frank wonders if Olin caused it. The nature of this accident aligns Frank with the historical suffering of his family during the Bracero Program, and further distances him from Olin. Frank realizes he needs to put serious distance between himself and Olin, and flies across the country to place the retablo in his father’s old safety deposit box. In addition, he now perceives her own pain; what was once “thrilling” and forceful about her stare he now seems like an expression of her “suffering” (256). Yet he realizes that she has also been useful, accompanying him in times he didn’t want to be alone, a queer saint with which he could disidentify for a time. The novel suggests that Frank uses this ambivalence towards his queer archive—toward wearing his father’s suits, carrying the worry stone, and learning about and worshipping Olin, toward all he has inherited from his family as a like son—as a means to actively mourn his losses. In other words, his engagement with, and eventual discarding of these things, may be finally recuperative, even if the Chicana/o histories he accesses remain unsettled.

Grounding the Archive

The novel begins and nearly ends on Ash Wednesday, the day of repentance, when Catholics receive a material reminder of life's end. These ashes are relevant to queer archival practices because in their representation of what's past (and what's to come), they unite the material and spiritual. Nathalie performs Olin on Ash Wednesday as well. By placing these crucial moments on Ash Wednesday, the novel questions the repentant nature of accessing failed histories—those that are untold in the colonial archive, those that depict failure and tragedy, and those that do not meet recovery expectations. Can we read Frank's archiving of Nahui Olin and his father's (and grandmother's) things then as a kind of repentance? Does Frank then reject his queer Chicana/o archive? I suggest that we read these rituals as a queer kind of repentance that rejects regret in its embrace of a failed or contradictory cultural and familial history, yet that nevertheless attempts to move forward, toward an undetermined future, through archival practice. While the content of the archive may ultimately fail to inspire or represent rebellion to Frank, the queer ritualistic engagement with the past that it allows may in fact be transcendent.

A reading of the archive in *Like Son* reveals Frank's struggle to both get close to, and move beyond, his familial and cultural past; he realizes that "a person must leave behind what no longer serves them and instead take hold of what they want and need" (264). His self-placement as his father's *like son* positions him within a destructive family lineage. But importantly, he is not yet firmly in the position of like son, as he calls himself a "son-to-be," and thus the possibility exists throughout the novel that he will escape this legacy. For Frank also chooses his name "for its function as a verb," meaning "*to enable to pass or go freely*," indicating a desire to move freely, and without pre-determined family destiny or a fixed gender, sexual, or racial identity (112). "Passing" as male is something that Frank executes on

a daily basis; he describes the layers of clothing he wears to accomplish a “careful staging” of gender performance (18). A queer archival practice may allow him to pass through a destructive legacy of abusive relationships and historical inheritances without dismissing their ongoing impact on his identity.

Frank and Nathalie build a home altar on the Day of the Dead in 2002. Positioned in front of a foil-covered wall and decorated with tealights, plastic flowers, and offerings of fruit, the altar turns out “elegant in a homemade kitsch sort of way” (122). Although this is a Mexican cultural practice, it is Nathalie’s idea to build the altar, which Frank suspects is related to her attendance of ceremonies for the one-year commemoration of September 11th. Nathalie’s involvement in the clean-up and citywide mourning of this national tragedy is notably not shared by Frank, perhaps because of his Chicana/o and trans identity. To commemorate his father Frank then places the image of Nahui Olin on the altar, explaining to Nathalie that he lacks any photos of his father. This is a decolonial act because, having no visual record of his father, Frank uses Olin as a stand-in, communing with his familial past through a queer archival presence. The novel suggests that the intensity of Frank’s relationship with Olin is then also a practice of working out his connection to his father.

Kay Turner has written that the home altar is a viable place of communing with power outside of dominant structures: “A woman’s personal altar evokes her particular—her intimate—relationship to the divine, human, and natural realm...she makes her altar a living instrument of communication” (27). When they build the altar, Frank and Nathalie are on the brink of breaking up, and Frank lacks power within the relationship. Since Olin represents the powerful women that have hurt his grandmother, father, and now perhaps him, by placing her on the altar he also begins to mediate this power dynamic through the retablo.

The altar in *Like Son* eventually changes form and function; after Nathalie leaves Frank lets the food on the altar rot, and this altar becomes a representation of his emotional distress. When Nathalie leaves Frank for the second time their downstairs neighbor's body is found decomposing, and the smell of human rot pervades the apartment building. As his present implodes, Frank is surrounded by the physicality of decay.⁷² He is in fact often in a liminal, death-like state because he has been taking copious amounts of sleeping pills. In addition, he retreats further into the past, falling for an old photograph of a "Nahui-wannabe" flapper girl he finds at an estate sale and placing it in the slot in his wallet (instead of an image of Nathalie or Olin). As a queer subject suffering from a traumatic past, Frank's struggle to situate himself within historical and familial lineages, as well as maintain an emotionally intimate relationship with Nathalie, bring him close to death. Frank's brushes with death underline how queerness, as an unreachable horizon divorced from precedent, is both dangerous and hopeful in its never-ending potentiality (Muñoz).

The idea of "grounding" oneself is presented in the novel as a potential method—accomplished through material engagement—for Frank to leave this liminal state, address hurtful legacies, and visualize his future. Returning from her travels, Nathalie fills Frank's pockets with rocks—"to *ground* you," she tells him (149). At the end of the novel, Frank will

⁷² The presence of ashes (both literal and figurative) throughout the novel also emphasize Frank's close relationship with death and the dead. Ashes are important throughout the novel as the physical remains of the living past. When Frank goes to pick up his father's remains, the children's song about the bubonic plague ("Ashes, ashes, we all fall down") gets stuck in his head. I view the repetition of the term ashes in the novel as drawing attention to its depiction of an archive. In an initial description of the retablo, Frank notes Olin's "ashen freckles" to emphasize her physicality across time through the archival material. His father's things stand-in for his father's ashes when he brings them to the beach. The archival materials are the ashes of history, what is leftover when the stories and people are gone, and Frank's contact with them, including the burial, are part of a ritual of mourning.

fly back to Los Angeles to bury his father's things at the beach, a physical act that helps Frank attempt to leave behind destructive baggage: "When my father died, I'd chosen only a few items from his home to remember him by: blind man glasses, walking stick, worry stone, briefcase, and those damned glorious suits. I liked to believe that my father's blindness and worry, both literal and figurative, were not what he would have wished for me to take as my own" (261). Frank buries the glasses, walking stick, and worry stone, the "ill-chosen tokens": "I leaned down and pushed my father's worry stone into the thick wet sand. 'To *ground* you,' I said. I wasn't sure if I was saying it to my father or myself." (262). Archival objects, their physicality, allow these rituals of connecting with and then grounding the past, and open up the possibility of moving forward, toward a better (although perhaps ultimately unattainable) way of living. Frank inherits archival materials, as he inevitably inherits emotional familial baggage. Yet through queer archival practices, he has the ability to curate his own present by recuperatively dealing with the scraps of the past, seeking queer alliances across time without erasing the specificity of Indigenous, racial, and class histories. José Esteban Muñoz's vision of collectively moving toward a horizon of queer utopia, despite the necessary disappointments inherent in the utopic, holds true to Frank's struggles to free himself from an oppressive past in *Like Son*. Even though parts if not all of Frank's self-constructed "fantasy fort" fail, his turn to the past through a queer archive helps him attempt to move toward a self-defined future (102).

Like Son suggests that Frank's physical engagement with the archive has both spiritual and material consequences for Frank. What does it mean when we consider an archive mediatory in this sacred sense—not only telling or preserving history but exercising spiritual and/or material impact over the present? Like my reading of the Indigenous archive in Howe's *Miko Kings*, this queer archive challenges notions of a stable past and

objective historical record through an inherited archive. Frank's curation deprivileges a colonial gaze and allows his grandmother a voice. Yet unlike Howe's text, this novel is ambivalent about the cultural specificity of this archive, about what cultural inheritances to claim. The queer archival rituals in the novel are syncretic because they incorporate Catholicism, Mexican, and Indigenous cultural practices, but they are also built from the ground up by a protagonist who is distrustful of all nationalisms and aware of the destructiveness of romanticized Indigeneity.⁷³

Importantly, the novel appears to start and end at the same place, with Frank standing at the Temperance Fountain, uncertainly awaiting Nathalie: "Family cycle come full circle, there I was, a man of thirty, standing at a fountain, taking my turn" (9). But when the novel returns to the fountain, it doesn't end at that same moment of passivity. Frank declares a mantra of risk that suggests he is ready for some kind of future: "Temperance was for fools... Imposed self-restraint is the most simplistic and naïve of elixirs and should be avoided at all costs... A person must leave behind what no longer serves them and instead take hold of what they want and need. With no hesitation. *Demand your thrill*, the flapper girl whispered in her slurred purr" (264). Yet notably it is the flapper girl (from the old photograph) that is instructing Frank, so he may in fact still stuck in the past, yet his embrace of agency, of "demanding his thrill," may indicate his changed consciousness. He is still awaiting Nathalie, and although he notes that she approaches from the side of the fountain that signifies hope, he is still fully reliant on her decisions, suggesting the ambivalence of his

⁷³ Particular mestiza ritual practices have been described by Chicana/o theorists as methods for engaging spirituality within shifting cultural, religious, gender, and racial identities. Theresa Delgadillo's reading of spiritual mestizaje is especially productive when considering how queer material rituals can access and/or represent the sacred.

healing, despite his new convictions.⁷⁴ I read Frank's engagement with his familial and cultural pasts through archival ritual as marking some kind of healing for him, a *grounding*, despite his potential for destructive relationships.

For when Frank and Nathalie argue about Olin's revolutionary potential, Frank emphasizes that revolutions mean returning to the same place. This notion of return is crucial in the novel, as Frank seems to repeat the mistakes of his father as he returns to stories from the past. But it is possible that this return may actually be a partial escape from the cycle, or at least a return with a difference, accomplished through grounding the past. For example, like his relatives, Frank has become a shop owner, but he does not follow their corrupt business practices.

Lemus's novel suggests that Frank's various losses require him to deeply engage with the past, to mourn his familial and cultural isolation, even at the cost of retreating from the present—in a way he must step out of linear time to avoid being forever stuck in the familial cycle, and he enters this temporal state with the help of contact with a queer physical archive. Theorists of queer temporalities suggest that queer subjects engage with time differently. Muñoz's explanation of queerness as alternative temporality underlines the possibilities inherent in a nonlinear engagement with time: "To see queerness as horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is stepped out of or interrupted" (32). Carolyn Dinshaw argues that those bodies out of sync with linear time are those whose desires and needs do not fit into the linear conception of time's progress. She explains how queerness has a "temporal dimension," and contrasts the "heterogeneous *now*" where boundaries between past and

⁷⁴ Julie Avril Minich offers three helpful readings of the novel's end that consider the revolutionary and reactionary possibilities of Frank's burial and Nathalie's return.

present, archivist and material, are unsettled, with a stale conception of linear time (37). The queer archival recovery that Frank attempts is a messy and contradictory one, and while his own queer identity becomes momentarily entangled in this archive, he negotiates his relationship to its power through a ritual that lets him touch the past, while avoiding getting stuck in a linear legacy in which his queer Chicana/o body is incongruous.

Cherríe Moraga's most recent collection of writings charts her journey of consciousness through personal queer life and political events and offers meditations on Chicana/o activism, spirituality, and queer theory. As a codex, Moraga's collection relies on an Indigenous understanding of temporality to describe the current moment in the Americas, and to reflect on Moraga's own political activism, connecting memory and loss, art and mortality, to the present moment and possible future of Chicana/o organization. Stating in her "Prólogo" that "life is not a progressive plot line," Moraga models a practice of return that allows a clearer vision of the contradictions of contemporary life in the Americas: "[This collection's] arrangement most closely reflects the Mesoamerican cyclical sense of time, space, and movement, in which to advance forward is to return again and again to the site of origin" (xvii). The symbolic idea of return to move onward in Lemus's novel is importantly not a return to any romanticized Indigenous origin, but rather a return to a complex familial and cultural past through an archive. While Lemus's novel is not privileging a particular Indigenous origin site, it is presenting a cyclical temporality that may nevertheless be read in line with Moraga's changing consciousness. Moraga argues that cyclical movement allows "patterns of Xicana feminist thought" conceived in her own past to "return to the present point in time, circling backward in memory as they progress forward in imagination and in living practice" (xvii). Her text explores Chicana consciousness as an ongoing practice that is lived through struggle and spirituality. This

“circling backward” to “progress forward in imagination” and “living practice” is a useful description of Frank’s notion of grounding the past through the physical archive. His archival *practice* helps him return to the past and perhaps move toward a different imaginative, undefined future, without ever fully disconnecting from these legacies. Ultimately I read the ending of the novel as neither tragic nor utopic, but instead containing the possibility of heading toward an undetermined future within a return to a messy and problematic past.

While Moraga’s text is useful for addressing the temporality of Frank’s return, this novel has a complicated relationship to the work of Moraga, and more generally to the legacy of Chicana/o feminism. Directly confronting the appropriation of Indigeneity in Mexican and Mexican American culture, *Like Son* favors historical specificity and failed or contradictory histories, in which Frank’s relatives are both oppressors and oppressed, over a romanticized past. In addition, Lemus’s text challenges the gendered nature of early Chicana/o feminism. For as a *like son*, Frank claims a patrilineal relationship, one that he accesses, however, in part through Nahui Olin (“The three of us: Father, the Son-to-be, and Nahui, the Holiest of Ghosts”). Eventually he also finds meaning in his grandmother’s story. Nevertheless, Lemus’s work does resist any strictly female romanticized point of origin and celebrates Frank’s masculinity, thereby moving away from the privileging of the female subject, and implicitly from the work of foundational Chicana/o feminists like Moraga and Anzaldúa.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Scholars have criticized the problematic status of masculinity in Moraga’s work. Antonio Viega has suggested that Moraga positions the gay Latino subject “as a problem...ultimately weakening Chicana/o political effectivity in a U.S. neocolonial and Chicana/o crypto-- nationalist context. Gay Latino men are often figured as the weak links in political movements for Latina/o ethnic and racial empowerment” (93). Most recently, Moraga has been severely criticized for her depiction of

Yet I caution against situating *Like Son* as oppositional, or even ‘post,’ in relation to a Chicana/o feminist legacy, and instead urge readers to see the novel as both speaking from within and back to this legacy. *Like Son* speaks from this legacy as it recovers a queer historical female Mexican figure, explores the complexities of Indigenous identities, and considers the role of the body and material culture in shaping relationships to history, even as it speaks back to foundational Chicana/o feminists like Moraga by centering a genderqueer, transmasculine character and critiquing revolutionary notions that are based on the romanticization of appropriated Indigenous origin. As Frank’s archival practice teaches us, truly addressing the past is not about a simple linear progress narrative but instead about a returning and a grounding, practices that Lemus’s work takes up in relation to the Chicana/o literary tradition.

Queer Archival Practices in Chicana/o Feminist Texts

This ritualistic engagement with a queer archive that I read in *Like Son* is applicable to other contemporary Mexican-American texts, and helps reveals how characters grapple with familial and cultural inheritances through queer archival practices, as they also seek undefined futures and more expansive gender and sexual identity categories.

In Denise Chávez’s first book, the collection of interconnected stories *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986, 2004), the protagonist, Rocio, communes with the past through a private collection of her mother’s things. Throughout the text, Rocio travels to a different world at night, to the “Gray Room” and the “Blue Room,” places that serve as “refuge,” where she

transmasculine culture in her essay (which appears in the 2011 collection) “Still Loving in the (Still) War Years: On Keeping Queer Queer,” (2009).

can fully realize herself. In contrast, the darkness of her mother's closet carries the inherited weight of her mother's life, held in its objects: "In the half-tone darkness my eyes travel from the wedding photograph at the back of the closet to the reality of my mother's other life. Shoes crowd the floor, teacher's shoes...They are the shoes of someone who has stood all her life in line waiting for better things to come" (17). The juxtaposition of this (emotionally and physically) crowded space, also the physical place where Rocio was born, with the openness of her imagined "rooms" illustrates Rocio's struggle to work out who she is in relation to what she has inherited—the stories she has been born into. Her mother's closet represents a limited, suffocating, and passive femininity. Through Rocio's engagement with a collection of preserved objects and photographs, as well as her creation of an alternative space, Chávez's text renders physical Rocio's internal struggles, representing the difficulty of navigating a nonnormative gender identity within the stifling presence of familial and cultural histories.

Sheila and Sandra Ortiz Taylor's text *Imaginary Parents* (1996) assembles a family history through a juxtaposition of text, object, and image, and questions how memories are engaged through the material. Sandra the artist—whose work utilizes found objects and appears in image form throughout, and in color in a section entitled "La Galeria"—and Sheila the writer, combine their work in "separate but parallel narrative[s]" that are "intertwined like the double helix" (xvi). Sheila Ortiz Taylor writes about the text's position as a kind of altar: "I say [this book] is an altar, an *ofrenda*. Small objects with big meaning set out in order. Food, photographs, flowers, toys, *recuerdos*, candles. *Pocadillas*, my grandmother would say. Scissors and paste, my father would say. *Bricolage*, my sister says. A minuatulist to the bone, Bone Woman insists on all the parts" (xiii). I interpret this collecting of perspectives—as well as objects, images, and stories—that occurs throughout the book as a

queer archival practice that seeks to capture a shifting, incomplete, and affectively driven family history. As Ortiz Taylor resists pinning down one singular description of the text (“Bone Woman insists on all the parts”), the archive the book presents does not contain single narratives of her parents but rather a collection of stories that reach through and beyond the enigmatic “imaginary parents” to tell a larger history of loss and the limits of memory. Sandra Ortiz Taylor’s reflection on their childhood as a time when they “were all things and most ourselves,” when “[n]o room could hold us and no time could contain us” indicates the problem of capturing this recent history in any one room or narrative (and is reminiscent of Rocio’s rooms) (xvii). Additionally, this archive emphasizes the limits of assigning any singular identity to the authors or their parents, gesturing toward a future that must also be assembled through the disparate parts of family inheritance and self-definition. Considering this text as an archive reveals how a queer archival formal practice can demonstrate the limitations of any singular historical narrative.

Norma Elia Cantú’s “fictional autobioethnography,” *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995) also employs photographs alongside text to tell a “collage of stories” that connect and blur past and present, and consider the tensions and overlaps between memory, story, and photograph.⁷⁶ Cantú describes the impact of the book’s form in her forward: “The story emerges from photographs, photographs through which, as Roland Barthes claimed,

⁷⁶ Both the Ortiz Taylors’ and Cantú’s works serve as archives at the level of the text, thereby opening up new possibilities for what constitutes a literary text and blurring the lines between literature, art, and archive. Other Chicana/o texts that can be viewed as archives because of their presentation of archival materials—both fictionalized and otherwise—within the pages include: Ana Castillo’s *The Mixquiabuala Letters* (1986), Nina Marie Martinez’s *Caramba: A Tale Told in Turns of the Card* (2004), and Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s *Calligraphy of the Witch* (2007).

the dead return; the stories mirror how we live life in our memories, with our past and our present juxtaposed and bleeding, seeping back and forth, one to the other in a recursive dance” (Cantú xii). The assembled texts and images in Cantú’s text demonstrate how the past and present, as well as the visual and textual, inform one another, disrupting traditional archival boundaries, just as the US-Mexico border is a porous boundary through which memories and culture travel back and forth in Cantú’s personal histories. Theresa Delgadillo has explained how the short chapters of *Canicula* situate the “domestic sphere in relation to a public sphere,” so that the memories of family, of the domestic, are connected to public structures. The archive in this text is both intensely personal, based on memories and family snapshots, and also participates in unsettled discourses of politics, race, the border, feminism, and spirituality. Identifying this collage as an archive underscores how these intimate engagements can revise historical narratives by connecting the personal, material, and intimate to specific histories of the Americas.⁷⁷

Queer archives and archival practices in Chicana/o fiction disrupt linearity, decolonizing Mexican and Mexican American historical narratives and seeking possible ways to be and to live through a material return to the past. The ritualistic engagement with archives in these texts indicates characters’ agency in choosing how to mediate their contact with the past, with contradictory cultural inheritances, and with prescribed identities.

Through the portrayal of queer archives and the enactment of queer archival practices,

⁷⁷ Delgadillo describes *Canicula*’s use of the photograph to “confront” the way Chicana/o bodies have been “disciplined, read, and interpreted through visual technologies,” explaining how the text’s emphasis on photograph and narrative as two distinct parts (but never the whole narrative) both allows readers to find their own meaning in the photographs and “assumes the authority to see, read, and interpret life on the frontera against any ostensibly universal disembodied eye or I—which is also always historically situated” (104-105).

Chicana/o texts open up space for moving toward a queer future that is nevertheless grounded and informed by messy and often traumatic inheritances from the past.

Chapter Three: Activism & the Archive: Stitching Together Tribal Community

Introduction

This chapter posits that a “stitching” archive in Greg Sarris’s *Watermelon Nights* (1998) merges the Indigenous and queer archives and archival practices of my last two chapters. I outline archival practices fueled by Indigenous epistemologies and community activism. I demonstrate how the fusing of materiality, spirituality, and historical knowledge in these practices addresses a felt colonialism. Decolonizing the colonial archive in this chapter requires queering a heteronormative colonial lens to better understand a tribe’s recent past and strengthen present-day community bonds. In addition, this third chapter adds an important dimension to my dissertation’s examination of decolonial archives because it considers how a paper archive of genealogical charts is both a practical tool for a tribe advocating for federal tribal recognition, and a dangerous and limiting colonial archive that must be countered by tribally specific knowledge systems.

In November 2013, the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria opened the Graton Casino just outside of Rohnert Park, California, under the leadership of tribal chairman Greg Sarris. This controversial project, which started in 2003, has sparked heated discourse that continues today on American Indian land rights in California, environmentalism, and Indigenous identity. Critics have questioned how Sarris can refer to his tribe as restored “keepers of the land” and support a large-scale development project, as well as expressed concern about the project’s encouragement of gambling and drinking.⁷⁸ The most virulent opposition comes from the group Stop Graton Casino (or STC101). This group in part

⁷⁸ Many of the debates have taken place on community websites. For example, see the thread on Greg Sarris at the Sonoma and Marin County bulletin board: wacobb.net

hinges their opposition to the casino on a claim that Sarris is not American Indian, that he has “no Indian blood,” and they have published an ancestry report, prepared by “professional genealogist” Roseann Hogan to prove this claim. The report relies on documents pulled from Ancestry.com (census reports, birth and death certificates) as well as testimony by Velia Navarro, Sarris’s second cousin, that claims Sarris misrepresented members of her family as Indian. Sarris’s website provides a detailed rebuttal that calls into question the documents utilized by the report, and states that the “extrapolation” made from these documents required “guessing” (greg-sarris.com). The website provides counter testimonies (termed “Declarations”) by two tribal members, Rita Carter and Arnold Charles “Tooch” Colombo, that substantiate Sarris’s belonging in an American Indian family lineage.⁷⁹ The testimonials describe personal memories of a grandmother “doctoring” and speaking in another language, in order to prove she is American Indian. Both reports put great weight on these personal accounts, and by doing so acknowledge the unreliability of government documents in recording American Indian identity.⁸⁰

Together the records marshaled by STC101 and the personal testimonials of Carter and Colombo serve as contradictory archives of Sarris’s American Indian identity. STC101 also claims “state sovereignty” over the casino land, arguing that the federal government never took the legal steps necessary to obtain the land from the state and therefore cannot transfer it to the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria. The group filed a petition with the California State Supreme Court in November 2014 and to try to close the casino. They attempt to use archives to dually discredit the identity and land rights of Sarris and his tribe

⁷⁹ See greg-sarris.com/tribal-work/#ancestry to access these testimonies.

⁸⁰ American Indian critics have written of the complicated history of the documentation of American Indian identity by the colonial government. For example, Eva Marie Garrouette describes the problem of using the “base rolls” to establish American Indian identity.

by revealing them as inauthentic. Yet in so doing they demonstrate a blind ignorance to the history of the tribe—to how the state acquired this land in the first place—an ignorance that both Sarris’s literature and activism counter. This recent example of the mobilization of archives illustrates the stakes of archival practices in contemporary American Indian sovereignty struggles, and situates the archives I read in *Watermelon Nights* within this real world context.

In the novel, Pomo characters work to assemble and access their shared histories and community connections, engaging archival practices that strengthen their tribe’s sovereignty. For Sarris, exercising sovereignty involves working within and beyond dominant structures of power, as evidenced by his recent work with the casino.⁸¹ In October 2013, one month before the casino opened, Sarris gave a talk at the Bioneers Conference that explains his vision for the casino’s impact.⁸² He argued that the casino will be able to help the native and non-native community in a myriad of ways, bringing solutions for problems of economic stability and health.⁸³ As he explains his vision for a future of American Indian leadership in a variety of public sectors, he gives a tribal history of land loss and genocide, tying his explanation of the casino project to knowledge of this past. In addition, Sarris advocates grounding community progress in tribal knowledge, “drawing on [tribal] time-old values to

⁸¹ Thomas King has analyzed casinos as both materially useful given “several centuries of economic oppression,” and spiritually depressing since they contribute “little of value to the world” aside from money and jobs. King expresses hope that some casino profits will be directed toward sustainability.

⁸² Sarris’s talk is available at: greg-sarris.com/videos.

⁸³ For example, he states that the revenue will feed back into the community in the form of low-income housing, urban farming to feed low-income neighborhoods, and community green space. He also discusses the process of fighting for a LEED certified building, union builders, and full health benefits for all employees involved in the project. Also, in the keynote of a special issue of *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* (AICRJ), Sarris envisions the casino’s large-scale impact that positions American Indians as leaders in the larger California community.

inform everything.” Finally, he connects the casino project to “rewrit[ing]” oppressive stories controlled by the colonial archive and generating a new story: “creat[ing] an institution and programs that rewrite the old nonIndian story so that we can work together for a new story to come home. And finally, perhaps, find that elusive thing: peace.” Sarris views the casino as a political project, an act of sovereignty, that secures material and environmental community empowerment *as well as* renarrates, and thereby decolonizes, a colonial narrative of his people. In Sarris’s novel, a peaceful and secure future for the tribe is similarly sought through a combination of political struggle, a reckoning with the tribe’s history, and a telling of new stories that allow community healing—projects enacted through archival practices.

The archival practices in *Watermelon Nights* underscore the real world import of claiming archival sovereignty as they work within and beyond colonial structures of power. In the novel, archival practices are mobilized in a struggle for land rights and to counter the impact of historical trauma on a tribal community. A paper archive of tribal genealogies is compiled, while Pomo specific archives of baskets, beads, clothing, and stories are used to work toward community healing. Illustrating Dian Million’s description of colonialism as a “felt, affective relationship,” Sarris’s novel captures the complex affect of multigenerational oppression and trauma on the community, grounding the shame experienced by tribal members in the colonial project (46). In addition, the novel underlines the destructive force of what Million calls “the heteronormative, homophobic, misogynist regulatory Indian policies” of the state (28). An enforced heterormativity and fear of proving bloodline drives violent interactions within the present-day Pomo community in *Watermelon Nights*, as critic Mark Rifkin has explained.⁸⁴ The novel reveals the gendered violence that Million ask us to understand as part of the violent structure of colonialism, as “more than an attack on

⁸⁴ See Mark Rifkin’s *Erotics of Sovereignty: Queer Native Writing in the Era of Self-Determination* (2012).

individuals, and as a mobile but durable feature of colonial power relations” (7). I argue that the Indigenous and queer archival practices depicted in the novel help the community heal by addressing ongoing historical trauma and forging strong community relations in the present.

When I refer to “community healing” throughout this chapter, I mean the reconciliation of rifts within the tribal community as well as the acknowledgement of, and attempt to work through, trauma and pain caused by colonialism. Million provides an important interrogation of the use of the term “healing” toward Indigenous communities within a neoliberal society that values the market outcome and the individual over the collective. She notes that while “*healing* has become a ubiquitous word, there is less examination of the terms of this ‘healing’ from a wound characterized by colonialism” (12). She notes that healing is often proposed as a way to assist Indigenous peoples in transition to becoming neoliberal subjects rather than supporting actual fights for sovereignty that address the structural violences that cause ongoing suffering. I read the healing process in *Watermelon Nights* as community-oriented rather than individualized, and as inseparable from the struggle for further sovereignty through federal tribal recognition. In fact, one of the strengths of this novel is its presentation of a practical, tribal political struggle as intimately connected to trauma, healing, and Indigenous ways of knowing. A focus on archival practices reveals how the novel’s political struggle and community healing are in a reciprocal relationship that depends on archives informed by both Indigenous epistemologies and the structures of colonialism.

In *Watermelon Nights*, a Waterplace Pomo community in Santa Rosa engages with their tribal history and present-day tribal status in a complex struggle for tribal sovereignty that mirrors Sarris’s tribe’s real world struggle outside the text. In the novel, characters fill

out genealogical charts as part of an application to legitimize their tribe's existence and thereby gain rights to land and self-governance. These charts are an act of archival sovereignty, an Indigenous archival practice, even though they are created within the framework of the US settler colonial state and colonial archive. The novel grapples with both the pain and necessity of this genealogical archive and presents ways of accessing, understanding, and representing tribal histories and organizing community beyond the framework of these compiled papers.

Alongside the filling out and collecting of the charts, characters engage in the practices of basket weaving, storytelling, and the collecting, stitching, and distributing of clothing and beads. I read these practices as archival because they are modes of accessing and preserving tribally specific histories, and of representing community bonds, separate from the genealogy charts. Yet I do not wish to setup a binary between the paper archive of genealogy charts and these other archival practices. Instead, I reveal how these different materials—genealogy charts, baskets, clothing, and beads—all work to accomplish archival sovereignty, are all a part of stitching together tribal histories and community bonds. Basket weaving is especially important since it is at once a practical and spiritual practice in Pomo culture that tells and preserves histories through the material. Being tribally specific does not mean, however, that these practices occur in isolation from colonialism. Instead, these archival practices engage tribally specific knowledge systems to address oppression, pain, and rifts in the community perpetuated by the colonial project.

I use the term “stitch,” which appears throughout the text, to name the archival practices I read in the novel as stitches in a recuperative and painful process of archiving that draws connection between community members, and between the past and present. In a literal sense, this term refers to the material stitching of basket weaving, jewelry making, and

clothing that we see (described and named) throughout the novel, and that I read as an Indigenous archival practice. I also employ the term metaphorically, to refer to the bringing together of stories, histories, and people that have been broken or separated. To understand archiving as stitching is to perceive an ongoing and active process of bringing together the historical and present-day realities of a community. To stitch in the medical sense assumes a physical wound in the form of a gap, and also serves as part of an active process of closing over a wound. The term stitching thereby evokes a healing process, but also serves to mark pain and/or injury, as blank lines on the genealogy charts give the community's pain material valence. For I use neither "stitching" nor "community healing" in this chapter to suggest historical closure. *Watermelon Nights* teaches us that the process of engaging with historical trauma is ongoing and necessitates archival practices that are continuous. The archival practices in the novel are at once painful and healing, rooted in both historical trauma and what the novel calls "kind stories," countering the psychological and material wounds of colonialism while also marking its pain.

An Activist Novel

Placing the novel within its political context underscores the decolonizing necessity of Indigenous and queer archival practices. As an activist, tribal leader, and writer, Sarris is particularly attuned to the need take control of his people's story and counter narratives of manifest destiny and victimhood. A document of the colonial archive ended Sarris's tribe's rights to land, and documents needed to be marshaled, an archive both literary and documentary built, to reinstate the tribe. In his public appearances, Sarris often explains that "Pomo" is a name that was given to more than 70 independent tribes by colonizers based on these tribes' linguistic similarity. He notes that his own tribal members, of which there are

approximately 500, are the descendents of thirteen survivors of colonialism and enslavement in the Spanish missions. In 1850, California's *Act for the Government and Protection of Indians* allowed American Indians to reside on what was now private white land, creating the Rancheria system, but the Act essentially allowed for Indian slavery since it made the "homeless Indians of CA" legal property of whoever's land they were on. A century later, the official tribal status of the Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo people was terminated by the California Rancheria Act of 1958, a result of national termination policy.⁸⁵ Seeking to end the Rancheria system, in the summer of 1958 the Bureau of Indian Affairs designated small plots of land for private ownership. Sarris tells and retells the story about how his people were manipulated into losing their land during this time: while the majority of the tribe was in the fields harvesting a crop, three old men left back at the reservation were coerced into signing a piece of paper of private land ownership that ended the reservation.⁸⁶ Sarris began working to regain his tribe's status in the 1990s. He co-authored a bill, H.R. 5528, on behalf of his tribe, and worked to gain widespread support (he notes that he needed to get celebrities Robert Redford and Barbara Streisand on board in order to win). On December 27th, 2000, President Clinton signed the bill and restored the Federated Coast Miwok as a recognized American Indian tribe.

Under colonization, American Indian tribes have had—and still have—to organize and present themselves as a people documented in official archives in order to be recognized as an autonomous group, and to earn the right to exist as a tribe within the US. At the same

⁸⁵ A federal policy of assimilation that occurred between 1940s-1960s, and rested on the belief that American Indians should be assimilated as individuals into the US population, rather than live on reservations.

⁸⁶ For this full story see Sarris's foreword to *Quest for Tribal Acknowledgement: California's Honey Lake Maidus* (xiii).

time, their cultural materials have been widely sought out by non-Native collectors, divorced from their spiritual and historical contexts and preserved in dominant US archives to support a narrative of American Indian disappearance. Despite genocidal practices, broken treaties, land theft, and overall systemic oppression, American Indians must prove the intactness of their communities in order to gain federal tribal recognition. Within the context of these struggles, archival practices like those depicted in Sarris's novel are a means for tribal members to access a shared history and to strengthen their present-day diverse and dispersed communities.

Lisa Brooks's meditation on her people's struggle for land rights reveals the necessity of narrating tribal histories from within the tribal community. In her Afterword to *American Indian Literary Nationalism* (2006), Brooks describes the Abenaki people's struggle to maintain their right to fish the Missiquoi River during the 1980s. Brooks worked as an intern in the tribal office at the time. After the district court judge ruled that the Abenaki continued to possess the right to fish, momentum led to other attempts to empower the community. Yet when the words "land claim" arose, they "cause[d] a change in the universe" (227). She explains that the Vermont Supreme Court "invented a concept" that squelched the movement: "I remember the day the decision came into the tribal office. I remember seeing those little words typed on paper: the judges of the Supreme Court decided that Abenaki aboriginal title had been extinguished...by the increasing weight of history" (227).

The Abenaki are once again dispossessed from their land because of a colonial framing of history. For the "weight of history" is subjective, and can only weigh in favor of the colonizers if it carries a manifest destiny progress narrative that assumes American Indian disappearance. Brooks goes on to explain the internalized oppression she saw after that decision, which led to discord within the tribe and the subsequent "dispersal" of families

that resulted (230). Brooks notes the role of stories generated from within the tribe to aide in “gathering” back together her family: “A huge gap in the web of our family required the mending that only stories can do; those strands reinforced the relationships between us, remind us of our shared history, let loose the laughter that gives us the reassurance that we can, as a family, endure” (213). These stories are an Indigenous archive of tribal history, they “outlast the papers,” as a stronger archive of preservation and survivance: “And what the stories that outlast the papers say is that as long as families continue to gather in place, the nation will exist” (230). The Abenaki struggle is just one example of the oppressive work of the colonial archive, or the “weight” of colonial history, and the necessity of decolonial archives that generate other narratives.

Despite its positive critical reception, heralded as “a realist epic,” reminiscent of the work of Toni Morrison, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway, Sarris’s novel has not been written on very much, and deserves far more attention (Lincoln). Published just two years prior to the passing of the bill that restored the Federated Coast Miwok, *Watermelon Nights* is a living decolonizing document of tribal history, community, and literature. By “living,” I don’t mean a document that is constantly under revision, but one that is vital because it has an active place in an ongoing, dynamic, real world struggle. As a living document, the novel takes on a life outside of its fictional account, by advocating for a Pomo-centered story, one missing from the colonial archive. The representations of activist archiving within the novel become all the more important to examine when we place this text within this high stakes context, following Womack’s call to “break down oppositions between the world of literature and the very real struggles of American Indian communities” (Womack 11). Sarris’s novel functions as a multi-generational tribal history, recounting the tribe’s struggles for sovereignty through fictional characters that nevertheless represent part

of the Pomo tribal reality of the past century. Reginald Dyck has explained that *Watermelon Nights* both parallels and serves as a material argument for Sarris's and the tribe's legal struggle. Dyck calls the novel a "fictional account of the community's efforts to exercise its sovereignty" and states that the novel's depiction of the tribe's struggles in tribal meetings, and generally in coming together and fighting for their community, "offers readers the opportunity to assess the arguments activists and scholars are making" ("Practicing Sovereignty 341). The novel allows readers to assess, and to empathize with, a sovereignty struggle that is long and often frustrating, and one that is predicated on a long history of oppression and dispossession that continues to harm the tribal community. Dyck has argued that the novel's "three narrators are able to create personal stories that become constructive parts of the developing tribal history," thereby "demonstrat[ing] which steps must be taken to strengthen their legal status and collective well-being, that is, their sovereignty" (356). I agree with Dyck's assessment of the "practice of sovereignty" depicted in the novel and its reliance on the interaction and telling of personal stories of the tribe's past, present, future. And my focus on archives, on the way collecting and basket weaving mediate tribal community and history, reveals what this practice of sovereignty entails, by highlighting the connection between literature, archives, and tribal activism.

Doing it "the hard way"

Watermelon Nights spans three generations. Each of the novel's three sections is narrated by a different member of a family: first the son, Johnny Severe, then the grandmother, Elba, and finally the mother, Iris. The novel offers a tribal history that spans reservation life, land loss, and the formation of a contemporary urban American Indian community. The contemporary moment in the novel, as well as Sarris's short story collection

Grand Avenue (1994) (which was adapted into a 1996 HBO TV movie, produced by Robert Redford), is set in a low-income neighborhood in Santa Rosa, CA. Some of the characters in *Watermelon Nights* also appear in the short story collection. Sarris's focus on this urban setting is notable. The landscapes in celebrated novels of the Native American Literary Renaissance, such as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, serve as material expressions of the tribe's stories and/or possess the stories themselves, serving as a living memory of the tribe's history. Sarris's novel asks what it means to organize a people and their stories disconnected from a land base, and an archival reading addresses this question by focusing on material forms of story preservation and community connection other than land.

As the novel opens, the narrator of the first section, twenty-year-old Johnny Severe, is working to create a paper archive of his tribe's genealogy so that the tribe can apply for federal tribal recognition and regain land rights. Johnny goes door to door in his urban Santa Rosa community distributing flyers for an upcoming tribal meeting and checking on people's completion of what he refers to as "charts," pieces of paper that document familial lineage.

Besides his political involvement with the tribe, Johnny, like his grandmother, possesses tribally specific ways of knowing and seeing the world; when he was a child the spiritual leader Old Uncle appeared to him in the form of a frog, he knows the "Old Uncle stories," and has an unusually strong intuitive ability or sight that he refers to as "seeing certain things," "having visions," and seeing "the whole story in something you look at" (142). Johnny has been drawn to his grandmother and lives with her, while his upper middle-class mother, Iris, is distanced from the tribally community, lives in another part of town, and works in a department store.

When Johnny is narrating, most of the tribe is living in urban Santa Rosa, and feuds wrack the community and threaten the process of gaining federal tribal recognition. Johnny

meets Felix, a newcomer to the area (and a distant cousin), and is immediately drawn to him. They partner in their different modes of collecting—Johnny steals and modifies used clothing and Felix collects and sells beads. They grow close and one day play fighting in the river leads to Felix initiating anal sex: “he was on my back and I knew to quit fighting. I knowed to go with him. He wrapped his arms around me, up under my chest, and I felt him behind, pushing...where he couldn’t go, not in the cold water and without more time, and then I felt him between my legs and I squeezed, feeling him just below where I was touching myself” (76). They have opposite reactions to this sexual encounter. Johnny realizes he has an intensely strong connection to Felix, and wonders, without shame, about his own sexuality. But Felix only grows more distant, especially after Johnny articulates their previously unacknowledged emotional partnership (81-82). Felix turns on Johnny, identifying him as a homosexual to the younger tribal members, arranging for him to be beat-up, and nearly exiling him from the tribe. Yet at the end of this first section, there is hope, as the community comes out together to enjoy stolen watermelon on a hot night, and Johnny envisions the shared watermelon as representing a connection of kindness between community members. He also decides to stay and help the community, rather than seek a new life in San Francisco. Structurally, the novel then takes us through the tribe’s traumatic past before returning to the present moment and future possibilities.

In the second section of the novel, Johnny’s grandmother, Elba, narrates her tumultuous childhood and young adulthood, and in doing so provides a history of the tribe’s oppression and land loss that mirrors Sarris’s tribe’s own history. She recounts her early childhood living on a Rancheria, during which time she witnessed the development of the Bole Maru religion, an affair between her childhood idol Chum and the landowner’s son, and

the subsequent dispersal of the tribe from their land.⁸⁷ An orphan—her alcoholic mother freezes to death—Elba is raised by an older tribal member, Clementine, and then sold as a child bride after her death. Elba suffers extreme loss and sexual trauma from a young age, but maintains a connection to her tribal knowledge, having visions of Old Uncle, who watches her on the road. After losing her first child in a fire that she learns is set by a jealous and disturbed family member, she becomes pregnant again as a result of a gang rape, but the vision of this child—Iris, also the term for a plant that makes an “excellent starting knot in coiled baskets”—gives her the strength to keep going (288).

The final section is narrated by Iris and most directly raises questions of tribal belonging and identity, and access to tribal histories and ways of knowing. As a child, Iris seems to disappoint her mother, not hearing the Old Uncle stories and not seeing herself as part of a tribal community. She has grown up mostly alone on the road with her mother, isolated from a tribal community and unable to access her mother’s spirituality. Johnny terms his mother a member of the “lost generation” caught between her Indian and white identities. Iris often feels shame for her Indianness as a child and wishes she were whiter. As an adult, she works at JC Penney (participating in a consumer system that Johnny’s stolen, used clothing store directly opposes) and marries a white wealthy storeowner with grown children. Iris ends her marriage after spontaneously having sex with a horse trainer, which leaves her pregnant with Johnny. Iris and her mother grow closer when she is pregnant and

⁸⁷ Sarris has described the Bole Maru as “Native American religious resistance”: “The Bole Maru, or Bole Hesi, as it is called among the Southwestern Wintun immediately east of the Pomo, is not ancient. Rather it is a revitalization religion, a religious and, ultimately, political response to European and Euro-American domination and ideology. Like the Plains Ghost Dance religion, the Bole Maru was instigated to some degree by the doctrine of Wovoka, the Paiute prophet, who prophesied cataclysmic destruction of the earth and of all the invaders and a return to the precontact Indian way of life” (“Telling Dreams”).

her mother feeds her traditional foods and performs a ceremony in preparation for the baby, (acts Iris later perceives as her mother's connection to the baby). While Elba and Johnny immediately connect, Iris's relationship with Johnny is strained and distant; she does not understand his work for the tribe and tells him he is "American" and that he should educate himself and get a job.

Yet, the end of the novel suggests that Iris may integrate herself into the newly strengthened tribal community. She agrees to attend the next tribal meeting, and envisions herself within a tribal framework that she does not fully understand: "I do not have a view from the moon or stars. So I must work from here, from earth, take my language with its inferior fibers and stitch together a tapestry of what Mother sees from above. I must go back, take clues, gather designs from our past. It is the hard way. It is my story" (296). In this final section of the novel, Iris insists on the need to "go back" to return to the historical past, to educate by taking "clues" and "gather[ing] designs" in order to move forward. She uses the actions of basket weaving ("fibers," "stitch," "gathering") to describe this process of historical recovery and the gaining of cultural knowledge. While it is at first glance ambiguous how Iris can access the past, can "go back," in other words where these clues exist, the process she outlines is one that echoes the storytelling, basket weaving, and collecting—the archival practices—depicted throughout the novel.

While Elba and Johnny seem to have inherited Pomo epistemologies like Ezol's development of an eye tree lens, Iris, like Lena and Frank, has only the material practices as a starting point for knowing a Pomo past. She does not already possess tribal knowledge, but must learn it, by moving through the stories of her family and tribe's past. Since her name refers to a starting point in basket weaving, we can view this process as a tribally specific archival practice that begins to stitch the community back together through an

understanding of shared histories. As Iris thinks about this process, she sits between her mother and son, and is thereby situated between two individuals who symbolize the tribe's past and present that she seeks to stitch together, as well as supported by two individuals who possess a great deal of tribal knowledge and sight. This very process of stitching together, I argue, runs throughout the novel and offers a new understanding of the work and possibilities of archives.

For this “hard way” of Iris's stitching is one the novel's structure supports—moving toward a tribal future by moving through a recent tribal history of dispossession and trauma. In a novel that questions the limitations of a genealogical archive of the people, it is notable that the narration follows a family line. On the one hand this organization suggests tribal continuance through a specific genealogy of blood. Yet, importantly, the narration is not in order, but starts with the contemporary moment, and ends with the story of a member of the “lost generation” only after moving through an earlier tribal history. This nonlinear structure suggests that the current situation of intra-tribal fighting and the struggle for tribal status must first be contextualized within the tribe's colonial history, and that this history can serve as a lens for understanding what a vast divide of worlds Iris bridges. She embodies the archival stitch I will theorize—symbolizes a gap with the potential to heal. Coupled with the novel's structure, Iris's “hard way” underscores the need for decolonial archival practices to access and address a tribal past.

A Paper Archive of Charts & Blanks

“Each one of us was supposed to complete our charts. It was one of a list of things we had to do to prove to the government that we was real Indians” (5).

Above, Johnny refers to the documentation that his tribe must produce in order to get federally acknowledged. The “charts” indicate familial lineages that prove individuals’ American Indian identity. Johnny’s use of the term chart indicates a scientific, neat organization of genealogy, though, as the novel demonstrates, such charts fail to capture the complicated familial lineages of the tribe. Once all the charts are collected they will make an archive of the tribe’s existence, used to apply for federal recognition.

The contemporary Federal Acknowledgement Process (FAP) must be viewed within a long history of US government and American Indian relations that are characterized by the federal’s government’s shifting policies and failure to follow its own treaties and laws. Brian Klopotek’s (Choctaw) work addresses the processes, benefits, and restrictions of seeking federal acknowledgement. He explains that the “federal-tribal relationship has evolved through more than two centuries of treaties, legislation, policy, and case law,” and that now the acknowledgement process most simply means that “the federal government acknowledges the existence of a tribe, tribal sovereignty is assumed, and a set of laws and policies governs the way the United States interacts with that tribe, though the federal government has historically failed to uphold most of its own rules that could be interpreted to protect tribal sovereignty” (21). The recognition movement came out of the termination and relocation era of the 1950s (Klopotek). The current FAP has only existed as an organized process since the mid-1970s, and prior to that time the process was unclear and disorganized (Garrouette). Under the FAP, petitioners must meet seven criteria, including

being “identified as an American Indian entity on a substantially continuous basis since 1900” and existing as a “community from historical times to the present” (bia.gov). The struggle for federal recognition can take more than a decade, and sometimes tribes are denied recognition because their community is dispersed as a direct result of previous federal policy. Sociologist Eva Marie Garrouette (Cherokee) has studied what it means to be “Indian” in the United States, both within the context of federal recognition and the varied contexts of tribal belonging. She notes the difficulty of meeting FAP criteria:

And those tribal groups that do file may confront difficulties in meeting the FAP criteria for historical reasons beyond their control. For instance, the BAR (Branch of Acknowledgment and Research) acknowledges that it will deny tribal recognition to groups on the basis of characteristics or conditions that the federal government itself deliberately created. The requirement that a group has maintained a continuous community is a case in point. Tribes have been refused recognition on this ground, even when the reason for their dispersion clearly lies not with members’ insufficient desire to live together as a community but with the federal government’s failure to follow through on explicit promises to take land into trust for the tribe (29).

The problem of representing “continuous community” is one that *Watermelon Nights* addresses as the charts are filled out. What accounts for a tribal community? How can tribal leaders stitch back together a community torn apart by colonial oppression and violence? In the course of the three generations the novel spans, tribal members are driven apart by land loss and internal rifts caused by extreme poverty and violence. When Johnny is narrating, many members of the tribe have come to settle in Santa Rosa within a multi-ethnic community.

The process of filling out the genealogy charts in the novel both illustrates the tribal community's commitment to activism and reveals the longstanding pain of historical trauma that hinders community connection. As the novel opens, Johnny works to encourage members of the community to fill out their charts and attend the upcoming tribal meeting. With the help of Felix, the tribal meeting is well attended, although discord among members keeps it from being productive. The difficult tribal organizing work depicted in the novel is mirrored in real life by Sarris's years of organizing and advocating for his tribe, and it indicates that the arduous, painful process of generating paperwork within a colonial framework is a necessary part of the struggle.

As Johnny works toward building this archive of tribal identity, reminding members to complete the charts and distributing flyers about the upcoming tribal meeting, he is critical of the charts themselves, explaining that they "look no different than dog pedigrees" (5). Johnny's perception that the charts focus on a dehumanizing breeding record calls attention to the focus of the charts on bloodline. As a light-skinned, "hardly a quarter Indian," Johnny is acutely aware of the ramifications of blood discourse. In his reading of the novel, Rifkin notes that the tribal community has internalized settler colonial racist and heteronormative ideologies, in part through documentation like the genealogy charts. In seeking to visually and textually represent the bloodlines of each individual claiming membership in the tribe, the genealogy charts assume a heteronormative community which is at odds with both the reality of the tribe's origins and the contemporary community. Johnny's love for Felix—the central intimate relationship of this novel—(which I address in detail below) could not be represented as a tribal bond on the charts. In addition, the tribe's multi-ethnic reality refutes discourses of pure "Indianness." The Waterplace Pomo tribe was founded by a half-Mexican woman, Johnny explains, and many of the tribal members have

since “mixed” with other ethnicities and races. The Santa Rosa community is not a “pure” tribal community, but one that is integrated with immigrant, white, Mexican American, and African American communities, making questions of tribal belonging far more complex than the charts can represent. A history of genocide and oppression means that many people are disconnected from their blood families. Despite these realities, members of the tribal community feel ashamed at the dissonance between the diverse makeup of their community and the need to claim “pure” Indian descent.

In trying to fit the complicated mixed familial lineages into the framework of this collection of charts, tribal members end up with “blanks on the chart” that cause them pain—because they are not “wholly” Indian, because it reminds them of lost or dead family members, because people that matter do not count or cannot fit into this archive of genealogy—pain often due to the colonial structures of power that the charts themselves epitomize. The limited notions of tribal belonging expressed by the genealogy charts, the emphasis on “pedigree” and blood quantum, emphasizes the need for queer and Indigenous forms of community organization.⁸⁸

Questions of tribal belonging and identity politics are intimately involved with archives of tribal records. These colonial archives are incomplete, false, and still in use today. Garrouette addresses the question of Indigenous identity and examines how it has been narrowly constructed by both tribes and the US federal government. She argues for a new kind of organization, a “radical indigenism” in which American Indians define new ways of understanding peoplehood and tribal belonging. Sarris’s novel outlines such radical

⁸⁸ Blood quantum, determining what percentage of Indian blood one has, is one method for accounting for tribal membership that continues to be used by tribes today. Garrouette historicizes this process, and details the many different forms blood quantum takes.

indigenism by presenting community revitalization and organization through the teaching of Pomo specific practices like basket weaving, alongside community oriented practices like repurposing clothing *and* applying for tribal recognition.

Rifkin's reading of the novel examines the dangers of privileging the genealogical over other understandings of peoplehood, and considers how "state regimes of (in)visibility shape Native narratives of family identity and history," narratives that work in response to "endemic, state-sanctioned forms of assault and erasure" (155). While Rifkin's argument is helpful for conceptualizing how settler colonialism and historical trauma manifests in conflicts within the tribe, I read the charts as more than a tool of the state regime. The collection of charts is a move toward sovereignty that is generated out of the will and self-determination of tribal activists like Johnny, and I read the gathering of this practical archive as working alongside the other archival practices in the novel, rather than in opposition or as a binary. The collection of the genealogical charts is an exercise in sovereignty within the framework of the US government. Even though Johnny uses the "master's tools" as he encourages members of his community to fill out the genealogical charts, he is still working for the greater health and empowerment of his community. Therefore, his work echoes the process of claiming archival sovereignty that I lay out in my first chapter, in which colonial archival materials are used for decolonial practices. The character Johnny thereby mirrors Sarris's investment in doing whatever he can to practically and materially help the tribe while also being highly critical of these systems and the colonial narratives they support. In her study of the federal recognition process, Joanne Barker (Lenape) also reads such acts as expressions of resistance and sovereignty: "In the struggle for Indigenous survival and well-being, tribes seeking federal recognition are engaging an inherently anticolonial and antiracist act" (39). Regardless of its painful limits, this practical formation of a limiting, yet politically

practical, archive of tribal organization is a decolonial move to gain back land control within a US political framework. In addition, the archive of charts becomes more than a political tool, serving to mark loss within the community, and in so doing may actually help the community heal, as queering the charts become an avenue through which to mark and discuss painful stories.

The collection of the charts brings Johnny into interaction with different members of the tribe, and these interactions are constituted by pain, the pain of not having “complete” families as constituted by the charts. On the one hand, the blanks in the chart can be marshaled as insults to hurt one another. For example, Johnny’s interaction with the tribal chairman’s son, Raymond, illustrates the way that this pain can be used to create rifts in the community. Johnny notes that Raymond “looked about twelve” even though he was twenty, and couldn’t get a summer job despite two years of college (5). Johnny’s perception allows him to understand why Raymond talked down to him, “like he was in a higher position and knowed more” because “he had to make himself feel good somehow” (5). But their interaction over the charts illustrates another dimension of discord that is caused by mutual pain. Raymond had displayed his filled out chart, and Johnny notices that Raymond’s part for “mother” is missing, and his eyes go to it: “But Raymond had his all filled out, or at least I thought he had, I spied that half wasn’t complete, the part for ‘mother.’ His mother ran off after he was born, rumor has it, with some junkie from San Francisco” (5). When Raymond sees where Johnny’s eyes have gone he retaliates by claiming that his mother is from another tribe and is “full Indian,” subtly insulting Johnny’s lack of “Indian blood” (5).

Johnny characterizes the empty lines on the chart as emotional “land mines,” that cause him to come to terms with the pain prevalent in his tribal community and attribute it to the historical trauma experienced by the tribe. Johnny is reluctant to complete his own

chart, despite his investment in the project: “Here I was Mr. Pass-Out-Flyers-for-the-Meeting, and I hadn’t done my chart” (7). The shared trauma that arises because of the charts becomes particularly evident during one of Johnny’s first meetings with Felix. Johnny unintentionally “pushes [Felix] into a land mine” when he asks him to start with his mother, who he then learns was killed by his father (12). Johnny then understands why Felix had avoided talking about his own family line, deflecting the conversation by focusing on Johnny’s “blanks”: “All those questions about my father, my empty line, was a way for him not to think about that empty line on his own chart, where he knowed he’d have to start” (12). Johnny’s conclusion about Felix’s actions can be applied to multiple rifts within the tribal community that the collection of the charts reveals—the desire to seek blame, the quickness to judge and ostracize others—coping mechanisms used to deflect painful stories that reflect internalized shame.

Yet the novel suggests that the recognition of such pain can also unite a community through an understanding of shared struggle and the need for community activism. Johnny recognizes that both he and Felix have “empty lines” they must address—he sees connection between them through these blanks. The novel’s insistence on describing these empty lines calls to mind their visual appearance. The importance of stitches in a Pomo basket weaving context may be applied to these lines on the charts, allowing them to be queered; in other words divorced from their heteronormative context and representative of a more complex system of belonging and relationality. I read the empty lines as visually representing stitches that can connect tribal members to painful memories and historical trauma, and also to each other, through shared, intimate memories of pain. The distribution of charts allows Felix to tell Johnny his story. Therefore this archive of charts becomes more than its practical purpose; the blanks are stitches that archive lost, missing, or unknown family members, and

in so doing may begin to unite the community, becoming an unfinished archive of collective trauma. The charts are both painful and potentially unifying; at the very least, they raise questions about the tribe's history. Other forms of archive in the novel also generate both pain and possibility.

Archives of Thing Stories & Watermelons

The novel presents the circulation of certain stories about the tribe's past as harmful to the present-day community. Johnny's tribal activism as well as unique power of perception helps him understand the impact of these harmful stories. The collecting of the charts leads Johnny to directly address the negative "thing stories" that organize his tribe, and this acknowledgement may possess the possibility of moving beyond them:

Things stories like drunk parents dying in the cold on lower Fourth, fathers that don't upfront claim you, white blood, being a queer. Thing stories that make folks bow their heads in shame only to look up a day, a week, a year later with suspicion and hate at all the world and everybody they know. And then, so they won't be alone, singled out in their shame, they take to the business of collecting and spreading thing stories about everybody else. A poisonous basket weaved together with their fear and hatred. My Indian community. (123)

Johnny uses the image of a "poisonous basket" to discuss how the tribe continues to weave these negative stories, what he calls the "thing stories" which are traced to the colonial lens, but repeat in a cyclical and destructive manner, causing community members to distrust and criticize one another. Rifkin has suggested that the novel depicts the ways tribal storytelling and "official records" are "entangled," because "settler discourses

intimately influence the terms and contours of the stories Native people tell about themselves to themselves” (201). Weaving different kinds of stories becomes the antidote.

At the tribal meeting represented in the novel, members argue that they don’t even want a reservation because they do not find community with one another: “Federal acknowledgment for what?” Lena asked ‘A bunch of thieves, cheaters? Uh-uh, not me” (32). Tribal members assign blame to one another for their losses and therefore cannot organize. Sarris presents this anger and blame as part of a legacy of colonial violence. Johnny himself has internalized an origin story about his tribe that he recognizes as discouraging any “pride” in his people:

We all come down from one woman. Her name was Rosa [the sole survivor of the tribe] and she was half Mexican. Her mother was named Rosa too, and she was the wife of a Mexican general. Truth is, she was his wife in name only. She wasn’t treated any better than a whore, a slave. Pride is a game none of us should play (6).

The “Rosa story” is told many times, manifesting the sadness and hurt in different ways, and thereby transmitting different historical knowledge. Big Sarah, the Roundhouse spiritual leader, tells the story again and again when Elba is a girl: “She talked endlessly about our ancestors, the first Rosa and the second Rosa, vilifying the first Rosa who stayed within the “adobe walls” and celebrating the daughter, Rosa, who escaped (149). Elba will later explain to her grandson that the “meanness” between members of her tribe can’t be helped because of “Rosa and that Mexican general,” implying that this original colonial relationship constituted by power and dominance has resulted in internalized hatred. Iris refers to the “sadness” and “tragedy” of the stories: “The second Rosa’s story, and then it went on to this one and that one, this sadness and that tragedy, mostly the women, right up to Mother’s mother, Carmelita, who, on the coldest night in 1929...froze to death on her back porch

after trading a fine basket in town for a quart of crude whisky that she polished off before she reached the porch steps” (381). Iris’s explanation calls attention to the gendered violence Million outlines as intrinsic to the colonial system.

The “thing stories” that circulate in the novel reflect the narratives of the colonial archive, but other decolonized stories are also gathered. The novel is thereby able to both illustrate the negative impact of the colonial Rosa story *and* leave room open to read this Rosa story differently, through a decolonized archival lens that allows both Rosas to be survivors. Elba’s claiming of the Rosa-esque figure Chum as an elder through a basket weaving practice—that I examine in detail below—becomes a decolonized version of this tribal history.

In order to organize the community and fight for sovereignty, an archive of what Johnny calls “kind stories” must be accessed to address these histories of colonial violence—the charts and the gaining of land will not be enough. Johnny’s perceptive understanding of what his community needs positions him as a leader. He unknowingly starts the “watermelon night” by stealing a watermelon from a pickup truck for his grandmother. Two teenage boys watch him, and commence in stealing watermelon for the whole community. Wandering around that night and watching his community come together over shared watermelon and conversation, Johnny realizes that the meaning of the watermelon is “kindness,” and that a story of kindness (implicitly the novel *Watermelon Nights*) can begin to work against the hatred:

Lots of sad songs, the same stories sung over and over through the generations like a song...But there were other songs too. Not-hitting-back songs. Old Uncle songs...Kindness, which is nothing more than the sweetness of watermelon and the thought that somebody might like a taste...It had become more and more of a

secret, something we hid with the tough times, but nothing else ever held us together. (142)

The watermelon night leads Johnny to understand a tribal archive of kindness that exists alongside the “sad stories” of violence and betrayal. The physical sharing of the watermelon facilitates this sharing of stories, as community members come out and talk to one another, forming a living archive of tribal stories that create community connection. Significantly, the watermelon must be stolen to initiate this night of kindness, pointing to the community’s severe economic disadvantage and the need for a radical activism that opposes oppressive structures of power. Million’s work tracks the connectivity between the colonial system and today’s neoliberal society and emphasizes the need for healing initiatives separate from these systems, noting that Indigenous epistemologies “represent ways of thinking about the world truly different from capitalism” (*Therapeutic Nations* 162). The material collections that help the tribe come together in the novel all exist outside of the capitalist system; plants are gathered for weaving baskets, and watermelon, beads, and clothing are stolen. The powerful repurposing of material goods into decolonial archives is informed by Indigenous epistemologies.

Curating “the Leftovers” : Tribally Specific Archives of Material Culture

I read the following material collections in *Watermelon Nights* as archives because they are sites of tribal knowledge, as well as tools to mediate relationships within the community. Studying material culture as knowledge production has been an important mode of incorporating Indigenous epistemologies into academia.⁸⁹ In this section, I first focus on Johnny’s repurposing of stolen clothing as an archival practice. I then examine the powerful

⁸⁹ For example, see Kathleen Washburn’s “New Indians and Indigenous Archives.”

and dangerous role of Pomo beadwork in the novel, before dedicating a final section to the presence of powerful baskets and basket weaving as Indigenous archive.

Much of the action in the first part of the novel is centered around Johnny's relationship with Felix. Johnny and Felix first meet because of a flyer about an upcoming tribal meeting: "It was red, with black lettering that told the time and place of the meeting. At the top was the tribe's name, Waterplace Pomo, and below that was a drawing of a pond with rocks and grasses around it" (3). Johnny has been putting up these flyers to announce the tribal meeting, and Felix appears drawn to them, deciding to come to the meeting and help organize the tribe. Their relationship commences through this moment of information exchange and a commitment to officially documenting the tribe. At the time Felix expresses enthusiasm for the project—"We're gonna change the world, eh?"—and the two seem joined in an activist project of community revitalization, but what ends up truly uniting them is their shared drive to collect objects that possess tribally specific power (1).

While they are together, Johnny and Felix's relationship is mediated by the collecting of material objects: "We hung out. Beads, clothes; the things between us. Junk shops, flea markets, yard sales, Goodwill. I learned all about finding beads; Felix, he seen how I picked out clothes" (40). The items that they search for, collect, and then repurpose, beads and used clothing, serve to hold their relationship together, are the "things between" them. Together they are building archives of the tribe that organize relationships between tribal members differently than the charts do. They are also united in their ability to see things clearly, to have visions. For example, Johnny is amazed that Felix can quickly understand his friend Tony's entire domestic situation simply by observing: "And right then Felix seen the whole story. Without me telling him a word" (49). These visions are connected to the material

goods they repurpose, suggesting that their intuitive yet divergent perceptions of their community are dependent on forming these material collections.

While Johnny has some hope for his tribe's future, Felix sees them as positioned in a post-apocalyptic world. They've reached the "bottom," and are now left "dealing the leftovers," creating collections of leftover materials in a space of destruction and hardship: "Look at us," he said. "You and me. We're doing the same thing. Dealing junk at the end of the world. Dealing the leftovers. We're there. Only difference is, we see it...I see it" (41). Here Felix attempts to equate himself and Johnny, as two people positioned at the world's end, at their tribe's end, making good on what remains. Yet, as indicated by the ellipses, Felix is not too certain that Johnny has the same awareness of this apocalypse, which is why he backs down from the both of them "seeing it." Felix has a more cynical outlook than does Johnny, viewing his tribe's position as hopeless. While Johnny's dealing of used material goods fosters tribal community, positioning the leftovers as repurposed goods indicative of an activist archive that uses what is at hand to elude a system of neoliberal capitalism, Felix's use of the term "leftovers" calls attention to his belief that the tribe is finished, that they have nothing to do but pick up the pieces and "deal" them for personal gain.

Felix sells his (implicitly stolen) beads at markets, and knowingly relies on stereotypes of American Indian men to both sell his jewelry and attract wealthy white women, thereby subverting these stereotypes for his own personal gain. In a sense, Felix's manipulation of racist structures is his own way of fighting back; he identifies and then repurposes for his benefit the romanticization of Indigenous culture. Johnny too makes money on his clothing business (selling to non-Natives as well), but he primarily views the purpose of his clothing business as a way to help his people take pride in their appearances, to tell new stories about themselves, and thereby overcome the shame of the "thing stories."

Johnny chooses and alters (stitches) clothes for members of his tribe, reinvigorating these leftovers to make people feel good. His unique vision allows him to immediately know how clothes will look on someone and what clothes are most needed. Johnny's work with clothing is driven by these "special abilities," and his visions and subsequent stitching is healing and transformative, because he can make "poor people" feel like "movie stars":

I made use of my special abilities; I looked at a person and seen what fits her inside, what made her heart comfortable and secure, and I put whatever that was on her body. Might be something totally out of style, like a forties jacket or fifties tapered pants, but you got a whole neighborhood of poor people feeling like movie stars every time they walked into the Safeway supermarket. (21)

Johnny steals this clothing from deliveries to Goodwill and creates his own affordable thrift shop for the community in his grandmother's home, underscoring the necessity of extralegal sovereign economies. Johnny even stitches Felix a new pair of pants. He is invested in trying to put things back together, in trying to put his community back together by uniting his tribally specific vision with material practice. Stitching clothing mirrors the stitching in basket weaving that tells and preserves histories, and underlines his ability to adapt tribally specific practices to fit other material modes of organizing community formation—indicating a persistent but mutable tribal culture. Through the distribution of clothing, Johnny tells prideful stories about his community and enables his recipients to do the same.

The novel indicates that Johnny's strength lies in his ability to acknowledge a painful past and then seek a future beyond it. Johnny's acceptance of his own desire for Felix demonstrates his ability see beyond destructive structures of racialized heteronormativity, whereas Felix's homophobia and ultimate betrayal of Johnny illustrates his inability to see beyond the colonial lens. In her study of queerness in American Indian literature, Lisa

Tatonetti has written that queerness can be “a paradigm through which we can make felt experience legible... a living, breathing, erotic mode of understanding *and* a transformative methodology” (181). As a lens, queerness reveals the intimate relationship between these two partners (who may also metaphorically represent the tribe, as I consider below) that is figured by material collections. Although he had “never considered, this [queer] love,” Johnny accepts his feelings for Felix, and decides to seek out the known queer tribal member, Edward, to ask him about homoeroticism and gay identity, without admitting his own experiences (97). Despite his discretion, Johnny notes that he wasn’t “ashamed” of his sexual encounter with Felix, nor did he regret it (123). This self-acceptance of his unexpected same-sex desire is in line with Johnny’s tribally specific ability to accept and tell new stories for his tribe; he is aware of the past and his tribe’s hardships but also interested in moving toward an unchartered future.⁹⁰

In contrast, Felix’s actions reflect anger, fear, and shame that the novel connects to his traumatic past. Felix’s ability to make beaded jewelry is both powerful and dangerous. Pomo tribes have a history of using certain kinds of beads, such as clamshell, as currency (McClendon and Lowy). Felix stitches together disparate beads to represent tribally specific designs, and uses them as currency to help survive. His beaded designs carry a spiritual, potentially destructive, power in the form of his life story, which can be harmful to those who possess them (recalling the Olin retablo). Elba hangs the bracelet he gives her outside of the home as a symbol of her distrust of his power. Mollie, who is Felix’s aunt and becomes his lover, is enraptured by the beads, as though in a trance. Felix’s jewelry is an

⁹⁰ Johnny’s tribal vision and openness to new desires is reminiscent of José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of queer futurity, the need to “dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (1).

archive of his own pain, a means of containing, accessing, and expressing his childhood trauma. Johnny is able to “read” this archive: “Then vision kicked in. I seen things. Fury and fight, all them things in that bracelet...But it was made from the battle Felix was fighting; his own battle, his own mad stitching and beading against sadness” (49). Felix’s designs are stitched for others but they are a way for him to wage his own wars, and he thereby harms others by bringing them into his own fight. Eventually understanding the “whole picture” of Felix’s mother’s violent death, Johnny realizes that Felix’s father’s murder of his mother has made him violent, as he is on probation for severely beating a girlfriend, thereby repeating the gendered violence of his father: “It gone past sad. It gone to frightful” (131).⁹¹ The day of his sexual encounter with Johnny, Felix throws stones at a group of nonnatives canoeing down the river. Afterward, Johnny notes that Felix looks “full, all of himself,” and therefore his anger, motivated by trauma, may inform his sexual desire (76).

By beginning the novel with the flawed partnership and attraction between these two forces of sight, Felix and Johnny, that lead to different ends, Sarris may open up multiple lenses for reading the violence that happens in the subsequent sections. Does Sarris want to keep open the possibility of hopelessness and anger, or is Felix’s cynicism undermined by the night of watermelon sharing? While the novel leaves room for empathizing with, and mourning, Felix’s sense of apocalyptic loss, I suggest that Sarris is ultimately invested in representing possibility through the three narrators—Johnny and his community activism and powerful sight, Iris and her “hard way” of bridging of two worlds, and Elba’s reclaiming of tribal histories through basket weaving.

⁹¹ Felix’s characterization illustrates how the perpetuation of gendered violence is driven by racialized heteronormativity. See Mark Rifkin’s *Erotics of Sovereignty: Queer Native Writing in the Era of Self-Determination* (2012).

Basketweaving as Archival Practice

Felix's description of how things have gone wrong is also figured by the metaphor of stitching: "Humans, man, we fucked up...Pulled out the stitch in things so nothing's connected" (41). Like Johnny, Felix is able to clearly see the problems, the stitch pulled out, the poisonous basket of stories, but he does not have the means to work against them. Basket weaving is presented as the counterpoint to this pulling apart of the community. If, as Felix states, the "stitch" has been "pulled out" so that "nothing is connected" then stitching the community back together is a means of revitalization. Sarris presents basket weaving throughout the novel as storing tribal histories and transmitting tribal knowledge, and thereby hope for the tribe's continuance.

For Elba, hope for the future when she is most distraught comes in the form of a basket. After losing her child in a fire and becoming the victim of a gang rape, she finds her way back to the abandoned Rancheria where she momentarily retreats in the ruin that was once her community. The only house left standing is Chum's, the prideful and life-loving young woman she looked up to as a child. Chum had an affair with the landowner's son that led to her supposedly hanging herself, though the novel hints that the landowner had her killed. Much of the tribe perceives the affair as Chum's betrayal of her people, as this act caused the tribe to be driven off their land, and mirrors the Rosa story in which Rosa is the one scorned. Elba, however, continues to embrace Chum's legacy in the form of baskets. Elba finds and claims one of Chum's baby cradle baskets, and proposes that the position of the basket indicates that Chum was poisoned. This scene connects Elba's loss of a child, her suffering, to Chum's death, recovering and repositioning Chum as Elba's elder, despite her

shamed position within the community.⁹² Chum is the one who taught Elba about baskets: “Chum showed me how to make a cradle, bending and tying willow rods, and how to use bulrush and redbud for color if I wanted a design, and I got good at it. She tucked bulrush around the rods and made a star, for design, which was always plum center, where the baby’s head would rest” (165). Chum, resistant to the strict teaching of Big Sarah, who often blamed the people for their own suffering, expressed pride in her tribal culture and taught Elba a material practice of remembrance. By remembering Chum with pride and reconsidering the cause of her death, Elba is able to counter the Rosa story of shame and decolonize the tribe’s recent history.

Elba’s revision of the Rosa story is connected to her claiming the baby basket and her own pregnancy as hopeful. It is as Elba clutches the basket that she realizes that she is pregnant with Iris, suggesting that Chum’s spirit passes on through basket weaving; in other words, despite the gang rape that impregnates Elba, it is the spiritual power of Chum’s basket that is positioned as Iris’s origin: “My heart begun to pound, the clam disk beads and the abalone pendants clinking and clacking against the basket with my heart, everything pounding, and I gone faster and then he was singing” (288). The sounds of the pendants evoke Chum’s tribal dancing, and the “he” is likely Old Uncle, the spiritual leader whose songs Elba is able to hear because of her contact with this basket, allowing her own rebirth.

The Pomo have long been renowned for their basketry, though most anthropological accounts explain little about the spiritual meaning of the baskets. For example, anthropologist and linguist Samuel Alfred Barrett notes that the Pomo have an immense

⁹² This reclaiming of Chum mirrors the decolonizing work of Chicana/o feminists who have reclaimed female figures traditionally positioned as colonial traitors or whores. See, for example, Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s recent publication *[Un]framing the "bad woman": Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui, and other rebels with a cause* (2014).

variety of baskets that serve the following purposes: “gathering, transportation, grinding of vegetables products, cooking and serving foods, and for ceremonial and mortuary purposes” (Barrett 135). Though he provides detailed explanation of the materiality of the baskets, Barrett offers little knowledge about their “ceremonial” or spiritual work. In his work on theory and pedagogy, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts* (1993), Sarris addresses the role of colonial archives in misrepresenting Pomo basket weaving and not giving weavers a voice: “What is not asked—perhaps because the answer has successfully swept into the corners of a political unconsciousness and thus assumed in a vague way—is what happened and continues to happen that allows one group of people to discuss the artifacts of a another people separate from the people themselves?” (Sarris 53). He notes that Western scholars operate in a compartmentalizing colonial framework that makes it difficult for them to understand basketweaver and medicine doctor Mabel McKay’s unification of the material and the spiritual (52). Pomo baskets have a strong following and have had collectors since contact, Sarris notes, but they are often so disconnected from Pomo weavers in this context that their commercial popularity has worked to further obstruct Pomo cultural histories.

Sarris explains that baskets in Pomo culture are “living,” because they store knowledge and histories:

Her baskets are living. They live with her. They live with their holders...Mabel’s baskets and so many Pomo baskets I have known have stories, songs, and genealogies. They have helped us on our travels and told us who we are as a people. They have healed the sick and forecast momentous events. The weaver’s hands move, and the basket takes form so that the story can be known. And the baskets keep talking. (61)

Note Sarris's use of "genealogies" here; he sets baskets up as a direct contrast to the charts in the novel, as an alternative means of organizing peoplehood. The baskets are a living archive of the tribal community that helps define themselves and store important tribal knowledge. Both Sarris's writings on Mabel McKay and his novel recontextualize Pomo basketry within Pomo epistemologies. If Pomo baskets, spirituality, and histories cannot be separated, then the basket weaving must continue as an ongoing archival practice that continually connects a tribal community to its past and present.

The passing down of the basket weaving practice indicates community continuance. In Sarris's story "The Water Place," Alice, the daughter of the emotionally distraught Molly in *Watermelon Nights*, learns to weave from the medicine doctor and weaver Nellie Copaz. Nellie is a cousin but has been ostracized from the family due to marrying a Benedict—the family of the landowners that kicked the tribe off the Rancheria (Nellie is thereby also a recuperated "Rosa" figure). Nellie finds great hope in Alice's talent of tribally specific "singing," which is a spiritual part of her basket weaving process: "Then I hear the song and turn, seeing this girl named Alice singing as sure as tomorrow. The frog winks at me and I smile like never before. I'm not too old for miracles" (229). Teaching basket weaving to a new generation recuperates Nellie's place within the tribal community and is recognized by the tribal spiritual leader "Old Uncle," who takes the form of a frog. We learn in *Watermelon Nights* that Mollie is learning as well, and healing through this process. Johnny reads this fact as a vision of hope: "Funny how a mind works. I seen this: Mollie weaving baskets with Auntie Nellie" (139). Alice's basket weaving seems to give her a power of sight—a tribally specific vision—that reflects Johnny's own tribal vision. Mirroring *Miko Kings*, passing on a tribally specific vision is accomplished through a combination of stories, material culture, and tribal epistemologies in *Watermelon Nights*. In addition, viewing a representative member

of the so-called “lost generation” as a starting point (as “Iris” is the plant that a weaver uses to begin), suggests that basket weaving can also be used to confront new realities, not relegated to the so-called “traditional” but representative of a mutable tribal culture of survivance, that may be somewhat incompatible with the Old Uncle stories (as is Iris). Elba creates new basket designs to address new tribal realities, reflecting the vitality of this tribally specific archival form.

Stitching Together the Archives

What does it mean to see the historical contained in this way that includes the ephemeral and the material, as basket weaving unites knowledge, spirituality, and the material? What if we move beyond seeing stitching as metaphorical and see it as a functioning form of knowledge and knowledge production? The decolonial archival practices I read in *Watermelon Nights*—which include the compiling of the charts, the repurposing of material practices informed by Pomo epistemologies, and of course Pomo basket weaving—Indigenize theories of archive, affect, and community activism. They also queer a heteronormative and colonial system of tribal belonging. My reading of *Watermelon Nights* strengthens and extends my theory of archival sovereignty, acknowledging the activist possibilities of a tribal community coming together to take control of their representation—to claim archival sovereignty—within colonial and Indigenous and queer archival frameworks.

The ability to experience knowledge and community within an Indigenous epistemological frame—what Million has called “intense dreaming”—gives activist power to the Pomo archive (“Intense Dreaming”). The interdependency of knowledge production, material culture, and the spiritual in the novel displaces historical empiricism and objectivity.

Sarris distinguishes Pomo culture from Western culture by its sense of wonder, and its disinterest in certainty. For example, he describes Mabel McKay's ability to frustrate many an academic crowd by refusing to provide clear answers to their questions.⁹³ He quotes her as saying "White man is different, he didn't want to know 'he don't know'" ("The Truth" 230). In other words, Mabel McKay understands Western academia to be fearful of unknowability, to seek facts and absolutes as antidotes to wonder. This idea of needing to know, of trying to find certainty and ownership in knowledge, pertains to colonial understandings of archives, in which to document and preserve the past is to produce a fixed and stable historical narrative through material evidence. Accepting instead that there is no singular, fully knowable historical narrative, but instead a material archival process of addressing what has past, opens up the possibility of perceiving interactions with the past as affective relations with political import.

Sarris's novel depicts the activist possibilities in accepting historical uncertainty. The growing strength of Johnny's perceptive abilities are tied to his acceptance of the nonlinear and incomplete reception of knowledge: "I don't try to figure out dreams...pieces of it float up...when you ain't thinking of it at all" (79). As I explain in my second chapter, the process of accepting a degree of archival unknowability or failure is something embraced by theorists of queer temporalities. My reading of Sarris's novel substantiates the importance of accepting unknowability, but I suggest that such unknowability in a Pomo context is

⁹³ Sarris has written of the difficulty of translating Pomo histories and basket weaving for a nonnative audience. When telling his tribe's history, Sarris tries to explain it within Pomo ways of knowing. For example, he details a historic Pomo culture of respect, built on fear that prevented organized warfare (which therefore was not a marker of underdevelopment, as was written in the colonial archive, but rather one of peace and respect for the many communities that inhabited the area). He gives evidence of the stories told to provoke fear about unknowns and prevent tribal members from disrespecting neighboring tribes.

embraced in order to make space for a tribally specific knowing, or mode of being, that constitutes a creative engagement with the world. Significantly, accepting the unsettled or unknowable in the novel is inextricable from creating community bonds. When Johnny asks Elba the meaning of the watermelon she never provides a direct answer, and although in the past he has been frustrated by her refusal to tell him the answers, in this moment he comes to his own understanding of “kind stories” as community bonds represented by the watermelon, indicating Johnny’s own power to determine meaning. A Pomo specific archive empowers its archivists to imbue meaning into objects, both through the mode of basket weaving, in which the weaver is weaving both materials and tribal knowledge, and other creative interactions with material culture. Through such active engagement with tribal knowledge, Pomo tribal members like Johnny can stitch together their own forms of community, which allows the fostering of queer relationalities and diverse conceptions of tribal community.

The stitching archive in *Watermelon Nights* is at once a collective and individual practice of assemblage. I use the term assemblage to emphasize the active relations—between past and present, individual and community or tribe—made available by this stitching archive, relations that confront and evade structures of colonial violence. Lisa Tatonetti has proposed “the powerful, active, and generative practice of Indigenous assemblage” within literature as a replacement for a “narrative of tragic victimry” (173). She argues that “the active nature of assemblage...highlights the decolonizing possibilities of alternate responses” to colonial violence (155).⁹⁴ Sarris’s novel illustrates how a Pomo

⁹⁴ Building on Jasbir Puar’s expansion of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari theory, in which Puar argues that race, sexuality, and gender should be considered “concatenations, unstable assemblages of revolving and devolving energies, rather than intersectional coordinates,” Tatonetti reads Janie Gould’s (Koyangk’auwi Maidu) writings as an Indigenous “critical methodology” that sheds light on

specific community archival practice like basket weaving allows for an ongoing stitching of bonds between tribal community members, enabling the tribe to continually redraw its boundaries and reassess tribal identities.

In addition, reading basket weaving as archival process emphasizes an ongoing archival practice that does not end, but requires constant engagement with the past, and thus allows the continual processing of historical trauma. Though baskets can be finished, in a Pomo context the process of basket weaving is viewed as circular and unending, passing from one weaver to the next. Ann Cvetkovich has explained the importance of a collective and public processing of trauma. Basket weaving, the watermelon night, Johnny's stitching of clothing and collecting of the charts, and Felix's beadwork all involve the community distribution of material objects to narrate the tribal community's past and present. Diana Taylor's work also emphasizes the importance of collective engagement and embodied historical knowledge, especially in marginalized communities of the Americas:

Thinking about the interconnections among atrocity, embodied knowledge, and subjectivity proves urgent for the many populations in the Americas that have experienced centuries of social trauma. Approaches to memory and trauma that privilege the individual subject fail to do justice to the cumulative and collective nature of the trauma suffered. (193)

As process-orientated, subjective knowledge production that never ends, a basket weaving practice connects the weaver to the material, and to the histories the baskets hold, as well as

the possibilities of assemblage as theoretical framework for understanding Native relations to tribal culture and community in a time of dislocation and change: "Reading queer diasporas in Gould's work, thus presents a more relevant theoretical framework for queer Native literatures: the regenerative and transformative assemblages that exist in the inherently queer space of the sacred." (152)

to her students and community members. A stitching archive can account for the collective histories of a tribe and the continuous formation of tribal community. *Watermelon Nights* demonstrates how Indigenous and queer archival practices inform a tribal community's struggle for political power and communal healing. This novel roots the activist potential of claiming archival sovereignty within these affective and material practices that can at once address felt colonialism and work against its damages.

Archives of Community

My reading of a stitching archive in *Watermelon Nights* helps reveal how tribally specific archival practices in other contemporary American Indian novels also strengthen present day tribal communities. I provide two especially relevant examples here.

Eric Gansworth's (Onondaga) *Mending Skins* (2005) describes an American Indian community suffering from the flooding of their land and the drowning of their tribal memories by the US government. The novel reclaims control over the representation of tribal histories through stitching together tribally specific stories and community bonds. Gansworth's work as a painter appears within the pages of this text, including an image of a needle and thread positioned in front of an eyeball—visually representing the process of mending, to take the text's own term. Through a juxtaposition of text and image, Gansworth proposes a multi-dimensional archive of telling and seeing histories that fosters tribal community connection in the face of structural violence.

In Craig Womack's *Drowning in Fire* (2001), the protagonist Josh Henneha is isolated from his peer community because he doesn't conform to contemporary norms of gender and sexuality. He learns to heal and find Creek community connection through an engagement with Creek histories facilitated by archival materials. An old photograph of his

rebellious, storyteller Aunt Lucille guides one of his “travels” to the past. Other sites of access to the past include: a bedroom of historical and recent photographs that give Josh a destination, a library of Creek history, Jimmy’s father’s burned American Indian Movement jacket, and the old family photograph Jimmy has framed for Josh. The character Seborn is called “history book,” and embodies both oral and written tribal histories, insisting that “some things need telling” (220). Designated himself as a Creek “Speaker,” by his last name, Henneha, Josh’s interactions with a Creek past and subsequent self-acceptance holds both personal and community importance, as his path is representative of a struggle for acceptance of nonheteronormative individuals within tribal communities, and thereby serves as a stitching archive that brings him into contact with both a Creek history and a larger, diverse tribal community that help him understand his own place within a contemporary Creek community.

In conclusion, my reading of *Watermelon Nights* helps forward discourse around the role and possibilities of decolonial archives that unite community activism and tribal histories. In considering how different archival practices exist in harmony in Sarris’s novel, I demonstrate how tribal knowledge, stories, and the material can work together to help a community address the ongoing impact of colonialism, acknowledge and mourn historical trauma, and rewrite histories of shame and internalized racism, thereby creating archives of community strength.

Conclusion: Seeking Alliances in the Archive

“So I told him...About how I picked onions long before I was old enough to have a legal job and dreamed of becoming something more than a worker with a bent back. About the scar I had across my chest because a barbed wire fence had ripped my skin as if it were no more than a piece of paper” (27).

Coalitional Archives

Above, the El Paso writer Juan Carlos, the narrator and main character of Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s “He Has Gone to Be With the Women,” from his collection *Everything Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club* (2012), tells his new lover about his early life as an illegal child laborer. He compares his skin to a “piece of paper” to describe the extreme vulnerability he experienced in this role. Sáenz’s story, as I explain below, is concerned with documentation, with how people and events are, or are not, recorded. As an underage Chicano farm laborer within an unjust economic system, Carlos was not able to choose, nor narrate, his own story; he instead embodied something to be written on.⁹⁵ Now a successful writer, he has some degree of control over representation, but is scarred by the memory of being so easily wounded, of being a body that counted very little within structures of power. In this substantive conclusion, I consider how uneven access to archival practices, to the means to document, and to be documented, informs the expendability of certain bodies within recent contemporary Mexican American literature.

As I began my dissertation with the colonial document that “lies,” and a turn to voices undocumented in the colonial archive, I end by considering the documenting and

⁹⁵ Recalling Salvador Plascencia’s *The People of Paper* (2005).

undocumenting of border-crossing bodies and violence. The term “undocumented” carries great weight because of its relevance today in immigration rhetoric. “Documented” indicates both the role of paper archives in grounding historical narratives, and in marking citizenship and belonging. Sandra M. Gonzales brings together the meaning of “undocumented” in an essay that also draws alliances between American Indian and Chicana/o contexts:

“Indigenous precontact histories, like the people who bear them, are largely ‘undocumented.’ They are kept outside of the established academic discourses, kept out of the journals, kept out of the classrooms, kept out of the textbooks, never crossing into or out of the United States or Mexico” (317). As my work on *Watermelon Nights* underscores, means of documenting peoples and their histories have severe real world consequences in regard to land claims, tribal belonging, state-sanctioned violence, and political representation. The urgencies and dangers of documenting citizenship are rendered clear within this contemporary moment’s global refugee crisis and anti-immigrant rhetoric, and within the division of the US population into those documented and undocumented. As I write, hunger strikes continue among inmates at Texas immigration detention centers. Because of a lack of papers, many people in the US inhabit an unstable position between immigrant and prisoner, citizen and laborer.

A major next step in forwarding my work on decolonial archives is to strengthen the hinges on which I bring together American Indian and Mexican American contexts.

Throughout this dissertation, I have demonstrated how contemporary American Indian and Mexican American texts decolonize the archive through specific Indigenous and queer archives and archival practices. My concept of archival sovereignty explains the powerful repurposing of the materials of the colonial archive within Indigenous epistemologies.

Revealing the unsettled and subjective nature of the past, queer and Indigenous archival

practices merge the intimate, spiritual, and material to accomplish recovery projects that open up historical possibilities. I have illustrated how decolonial archives strengthen community bonds and are mobilized in struggles for tribal sovereignty. Next, I plan to strengthen my comparative frame by contextualizing archival sovereignty in contemporary Mexican American fiction within struggles for citizenship and human rights in the Americas.

In seeking to continue to articulate coalitional archives and archival practices in these bodies of literature, I will move in two general directions. First, I want to place archival struggles for federal tribal recognition in American Indian fiction in conversation with archival practices that address migrant labor, (non)citizenship, and national belonging in Mexican American fiction.⁹⁶ Secondly, I would like to expand my discussion of archiving gendered colonial violence to a Mexican American context by examining literature that addresses the epidemic of femicide on the US-Mexico border, and place such work in conversation with American Indian texts like Frances Washburn's *Elsie's Business* (2006) and Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* (2012), which consider the documentation of sexual violence within Indigenous communities. As I move forward with this work, I will pursue the following questions: What is the relationship between immigration struggles and queer and Indigenous archival practices in contemporary literature? How does contemporary literature decolonize archives of border and/or sexual violence? Below I gesture toward this work by offering two readings that address undocumented labor in the US and the femicide

⁹⁶ In addition to the texts I analyze in this substantive conclusion, there are many contemporary Mexican American texts that address the positionalities of undocumented immigrants and/or migrant workers, including Helena Maria Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) or Graciela Limón's *The River Flows North* (2009). Also, there has been a recent proliferation of young adult novels that address undocumented immigration. See, for example, Julia Alvarez's *Return to Sender* (2010) or Bettina Restrepo's *Illegal* (2011).

on the El Paso-Juárez border in the work of writers Manuel Muñoz and Benjamin Alire Sáenz.

An Archive of Silence

In Manuel Muñoz's short story "Lindo y Querido," from his collection *The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue* (2007), Concepción, (called Connie by her US employer, and throughout the story), is a single mother and undocumented domestic servant in the US whose teenage son Isidro dies from injuries sustained during a motorcycle crash. Isolated from family and community, Connie speaks to no one about her son's death. Her work and life in the US is unacknowledged and undocumented; implicating the reader, the narrator describes Connie's employment: she does "work that doesn't need defining. You know what she does and how she does it and how hard it is" (2). At the hospital, Connie is fearful that her son will be taken away and so refuses to sign any paperwork, begging the staff to allow her to take Isidro home to die. With "no piece of paper that validates her name, the day she came into this world, the country she can claim," Connie exists in a vulnerable and silenced state (2). The narrator lists the material objects Connie's employer gives her, seemingly as a tally to mark Connie's self-worth, evidence against her nonexistence. Most prized are the Egyptian cotton sheets that the dying Isidro stains, emphasizing the fragility of an economic position defined by castoffs and undocumented labor.

An archive of love letters preserved under the mattress of Isidro's bed transforms the way Connie thinks of her son and her own positionality. Shocked and angry to see they are written by the other boy who died in the accident, Connie destroys the letters, tearing them into "tiny, tiny pieces," trying to see them as only "sheets of paper, as meaningless to her as the green ink corrections from Isidro's teacher," but is unable to ignore "the pencil

hearts scrawled across the pages” (20). She begins to use the absent letters to help define her own life, and her new understanding of the letters suggests an alliance with her gay son and a stronger conception of community.

Connie dreams of her son and Carlos on the motorcycle, and recognizes that “this was love,” and that her son died at the very moment of the utopic possibility of this love, which she analyzes through a moment in her own youth when she loved the man that would become her husband (who has left her), and traveled with him down the same stretch of road (23). She realizes that unlike her own experience, Isidro will not live to be disappointed, to look back with doubt on what he experienced. Framing her son’s hidden love within the story of her own past transforms what was a relationship to destroy into one to understand and suspend in a moment of possibility. Connie “will regret” destroying the letters, and begin to see them as the “beautiful things,” the only material remnants of Isidro’s life “worth keeping” (23). Haunted by them, she will awaken to “stare at the dark space” in the closet where she has kept a few of his things and where the letters should be (23).

The haunting of Isidro’s letters—in other words, the persistence of this absent archive that represents a past moment of love and hope just before death—resists Connie’s total silencing and isolation, and aligns her status as undocumented immigrant with her son’s closeted sexuality. She understands that there is another mother in the town who is “just like her,” —whose son also died, and also loved a young man—and thus this story gestures toward the possibility of community connections through a found archive (23). This absent archive of hidden letters suggests a coalitional politics between those lives silenced within heteronormative structures and those silenced by noncitizenship and the destructive movement of global capital.

“Expendable as Pennies”: Archiving Border Violence

The first story in Sáenz’s collection, “He Has Gone to Be With the Women” narrates a relationship between two men from different sides of the US-Mexico border. The story is in the perspective of writer Juan Carlos, well respected in his El Paso community and emotionally guarded, and Javier, a younger man, son of a murdered social worker and trans activist. Javier loves his native Juárez and works as driver for the US consulate. Though he lacks US citizenship papers, Javier attended school for twelve years in El Paso, his aunt and uncle “passing” as his parents. The men meet because Javier now crosses the border every weekend to care for his dying uncle.

Carlos watches Javier reading in a cafe for over a year before they first speak, setting up his role as a witness and writer of Javier’s story: “Every Sunday he was there, a singular solitary figure—but not sad and not lonely. And not tragic” (11). They grow close, and Javier spends weekends at Carlos’s, where together they read and discuss literature. Javier refuses to move from Juárez, partly because he does not want to flee the city he loves, and partly because he lacks the papers to stay in the US full time. One night Javier is disappeared, murdered without explanation or evidence. His neighbors Magda and Sofía, activist schoolteachers, explain that men with weapons “rounded up” all the men in the neighborhood, looking for someone (40). Carlos embarks on a desperate search for Javier, but finds nothing.

A focus on means of documentation in this story reveals the dissonance between El Paso and Juárez. As the opening story in a collection about the intimacy and disruption of the border, “He Has Gone to Be With the Women” puts a lot of pressure on the differences between the two cities, which are reflected in the two lovers. As a successful writer, Carlos has the power to narrate the world, and Javier, like Juárez, at first seems the othered subject

of the story, through which Carlos “searches for suffering” (13). Carlos’s love for Javier is connected to his obsession with writing political poetry about a city growing ever more violent, “hungry for the blood of its people,” which he understands as both a part of and separate from El Paso (23).

The greatest point of discord between the men is about documentation, both the documenting of violent events, and the documenting of citizenship. Carlos and Javier have a disagreement before they are even lovers about the role of newspapers; Carlos is buying *The New York Times*, as is his Sunday ritual, and Javier questions his affinity for newspapers: “They’re the past. And they’re all lies” (13). Javier distrusts what is written about his city, whereas Carlos displays a naïve trust in what the papers say, explaining to Javier that they help him form an opinion. Javier’s response emphasizes his belief in personal testimony over official documentation. He states: “The world you live in can give you all the specifics you need,” and this statement underscores Javier’s own vulnerability, his inability to “stay safe,” as Carlos begs, because he is not a writerly witness to the violence, but always already a possible victim (16, 23). Javier cannot understand why Carlos chooses to write about Juárez, when he knows its sad violence so intimately, so bodily. As a citizen of Juárez and an undocumented man within the US, Javier is in danger, his life expendable within the power structures of both nations, and that’s the unvoiced difference between the men, between life for a middle class man in El Paso, and for a driver in Juárez. Even before Javier is killed, Carlos laments how sorrowful it is that “good and beautiful and decent men like Javier mattered so little” (29).

Javier’s distrust in the documentation of his city’s violence is connected to his queer resistance to a neoliberal path to US citizenship and a safe, homonormative life with

Carlos.⁹⁷ When they argue about Javier's ability to live in the US without papers, Carlos suggests that he start the visa process, and Javier states that the US doesn't want him, and insists that "countries are bigger than men," underlining his vulnerability within (trans)national forces, but also his more radical politics (34). For this story also sets up an important contrast between Carlos's neoliberal individualism and Javier's communal politics. Javier is dedicated to staying in Juárez, like his mother before him ("What would happen if everybody left?" he asks), whereas Carlos tells Javier "you're the only country I want" (34). Javier's belief in the communal over the individual is also illustrated by the community of friends that support him at his uncle's funeral, in direct contrast to how Carlos's friends, mentioned only once and never seen, call Carlos "disgustingly self-sufficient" (31). Carlos recognizes the unbroachable distance between their life views: "I was not his only love and never would be. Perhaps he loved Juárez more than he loved me" (36). Sáenz illustrates how Javier's distrust of official documentation and structures of power, renders him vulnerable, but also part of a queer community bigger than himself that is committed to Juárez.

After a desperate search for Javier that turns up nothing, Carlos starts occupying Javier's apartment, surrounds himself with his "books and plants," and begins to "dream him back to life," (42). Months after Javier disappears, Magda and Sofia give Carlos the watch Javier never took off, asking him to stop hoping, to "leave it alone," and explaining that they have been taken to where Javier is, and that he "has gone to be with the women. With all the nameless women who have been buried in the desert" (43). Through his love for Javier, Carlos is displaced, his peaceful routine and safe existence in El Paso destabilized as

⁹⁷ Lisa Duggan's *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (2004) and David Eng's *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (2006) define neoliberalism and homonormativity in the context of contemporary struggles for equality.

he feels himself both country-less and tied to Juárez: “And then I just wanted to go home. But where was home?” (44).

The “nameless women” that Javier joins are the victims of an epidemic of femicide that has been occurring on the border since the early 1990s. In a sense, Sáenz’s story queers this femicide by aligning a queer man with the women in the desert. Both the identities and bodies of the victims are often undocumented, though in recent years there has been a proliferation of representations of these killings, as well as highly gendered, and often misogynistic, descriptions of the vulnerable young women at risk of being disappeared.⁹⁸ Looking closely at the archive of this border violence reveals the contradictions within systems of documentation in which hyper-visibility does not render certain bodies any less expendable.

In their 2010 edited collection on this epidemic, Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán connect the killings of young female factory laborers on the border to transnational forces of capital that render these workers expendable. In so doing, they question modes of archiving border violence. Charting the growing awareness of the femicide in popular culture, the media, and academia, they emphasize that the extreme visibility of these murders has not stopped them, and, in fact, could be a factor in their perpetuation:

There was a time when little coverage could be found in newspapers or on television shows or on the Internet about what was happening in Juárez to poor, young, Mexican women. Nowadays, we know too much, and yet we continue to know nothing. In the process of learning; reading; researching; raising consciousness;

⁹⁸ Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán describe the characterization of the murdered women: “The victims are known colloquially as ‘*las inditas del sur*,’ the little Indian girls from the South of Mexico—poor, dark-skinned, and indigenous-looking—who have arrived alone and disenfranchised in Ciudad Juárez to work at a twin-plant *maquiladora* and send dollars back home” (1).

signing petitions; writing stories, poetry, and music; making art; organizing conferences; and collecting anthologies, there are only two things that have changed. The number of victims continues to grow. And now the Juárez femicides have become a legend, the ‘black legend’ of the border. (2)

Such representative exposure of the atrocities has not equaled political change, which necessitates other kinds of archives, decolonial archives that confront a borderland formed by the uneven flow of global capital. For despite an awareness across borders and disciplines of the epidemic, the killings continue unabated, showcasing the powerlessness of documentation that does not challenge structures of power. Critics such as Clara E. Rojas have described how patriarchal discourse about the victims that situates them within virgin/whore binaries propagate violence and are inappropriately focused on individual acts rather than the systemic violence of the border. The growing archive of these murders has at times further disconnected them from these transnational systems of violence that allow the expendability of underpaid, migrant factory workers.

By tying the murders to systems of global capital, Gaspar de Alba’s novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005) illustrates how the victims are already “expendable as pennies” in their employment in *maquiladoras* on the border between first and third world (“Poor Brown Female”). The collections of essays Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán have assembled strive to decolonize the archive of these murders, to connect the expendability of these female bodies with their labor position within movements of global capital. For example, in an essay from this collection, Elvia R. Arriola connects the implementation of NAFTA (The North American Free Trade Agreement) in 1994 and the beginning of the femicide in Juárez.

In many cultural and media references to the murders, what comes up again and again is the disappearance of the bodies, and the lack of closure this causes. In Sáenz's story, Javier describes his mother's disappearance as a swallowing: "her flesh swallowed up by the fucking sand" (28). In these descriptions of the disappeared, the desert and sand become naturalized forces of destruction (as they often do in stories of migrants crossing the border). Yet these deaths must be denaturalized, and instead viewed within an archive of the transnational, neoliberal structures of violence that regulate who is documented and who is expendable. Sáenz's story subtly critiques the role of the writer/observer whose interest in representing the violence of Juárez misses its insidious presence within structures of citizenship and transnationalism, of which his own neoliberal subjectivity is implicated.

In Conclusion

The stitching archive I read in *Watermelon Nights* illuminates how struggles for federal tribal recognition necessitate the structuring of community bonds that are both legible within a colonial state apparatus and strong through shared understandings of history and culture. Similarly, these two Mexican American short stories emphasize the need for a community building across borders that counters violent silencing and the expendability of undocumented bodies. Literature has the ability to subvert official or romanticized forms of documentation and propose other forms of archive, charting the connections between individual violence, marginalized communities, and destructive power structures like the colonial archive.

Decolonizing the archive in American Indian and Mexican American literature enables views of the past that are intimately connected to sociopolitical and affective realities of the present, as well as queer visions of the future. Indigenous and queer archival practices

bridge literature, history, theory, activism, and the material as they dismantle the colonial historical lens and gesture toward a future based in strong communities and collective knowledge.

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