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An Offering on the Altar of Queer History: Amalia Mesa-Bains and *Sor Juana's Library*

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Abstract: This paper argues that home altars are archives. I consider the history of altars within Chicana community practices; political, and feminist critique of both patriarchal nationalism; and the role of the altar in challenging the public and private divide defined by nationalist discourses of the US and Aztlan. Furthermore, I use Amalia Mesa-Bains's altar installation *The Library of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz* to consider how altars are spaces of feminist queer memory-making and resistance against colonial logics.

Keywords: altars, domesticana, queer theory, feminist theory, decolonial resistance

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Introduction

The archive's purpose is memory-making. Archives house, collect, organize, and interpret contents of interest, usually for institutions. Who are archives for? Are they for us—the queer, mongrel, *atravesados*? (Anzaldúa 1999, 25). What tools do we have to do archival work? The home altar is a practice of archiving that challenges and transforms people's relationships to institutional archives and evidence of quotidian practices of archiving erased in official accounts of what constitutes and is the purpose of archives. In the same vein, the ephemeral and quotidian practice of altar making—rendered illegible to institutions of record keeping such as libraries, foundations, and universities—constitutes a queer practice. Thus, I argue, making home altars using the logics of feminist Chicana practices of *domesticana* and *desorden*, constitutes a feminist queer archival practice as evidenced in the work of Amalia Mesa-Bains. The altar and its maker(s) practice functions as mnemonic device that challenges logics of normalization, organization, and legibility.

Challenging the Definition of “The Archive”

According to Jacques Derrida (1999), the root of the word archive is the Greek “arkhe,” meaning commencement and commandment (2). In this way, the foundation of the archive signals the beginning of history and the ability for some to command (manipulate/interpret) this material. Furthermore, he articulates that these actions take place within the home since the only meaning given to the word archive stems from the Greek work “Arkheion,” meaning house or domicile; the place where documents are kept is the home. The guardian of those documents, the archon, the superior magistrate, lives there. He is responsible for these documents through his authorial interpretation. As such, the documents when interpreted by the archon speak the law. Therefore, the home is where the order of the social begins and where the law is articulated. This is done through the gathering, classifying, organizing, and interpreting of documents.

The home in this formulation is the space where the public and private converge; it's where meaning and authority comes together to organize the social through the law. In this way the home is the space of the patriarch, the hermeneutic expert of the law, or the gatherer who deposits and organizes. This dual process, what Derrida terms consignation, is a fusion which "aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration" (3). Consequently, heterogeneity threatens the archive, its unity, authority, and the law which organizes its inside and outside, if such a distinction can be made. If it must, Derrida alerts us that this distinction is overcome through institutionalization. The system created to legitimize the home, the archon, and the law. Therefore, the archive is an institution that consigns documents with meaning through the authority of the archon within his house. Indeed, the Library of Congress is the house of archon, but the archon has disappeared and what remains is their authority represented in the architectural structure of the library and the national imaginary which frames all documents and records kept there.

When we consider the altar, the person in charge of it is not a sole figure, it is a community, everyone in the home can participate in creating and maintaining the altar. Kay F. Turner (1982) explains that the practice of altar making functions to create and maintain community, "People come together around a central, if hidden, identity which they uphold through a sharing of symbols, for example, names, images, implements, and sacred territories. Any actual community has this quality of network, a flow of symbolic and social relations, both positive and negative, between those who affirm the same tradition" (314). Furthermore, Turner underscores how this practice challenges traditional logics of patriarchy because it is led by women:

If home altars are an iconic representation of the power of relationship, and power as relationship, it is blood relations that serve to model all others. It is not a form of religious expression officially recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, and no reference is made to the tradition in the Catholic Encyclopedia or in the New Catholic Encyclopedia. Because it has been predominantly a women's tradition in a male-dominated Church, and certainly because of its remarkable similarity and probable historic link to the pagan practice of maintaining house gods, home altar making—a globally encountered folk tradition of the Roman Catholic faith—is denied any formal history by the institution which indirectly makes it possible. (315-16)

Women have a long history of holding this role that challenges the sole, male, authority of Derrida's conception of the archive. Furthermore, as a communal practice, altar making happens among women, children, the elders, and all members of the family who wish to participate. This extended participation leaves room to include queer intimacies, communing with the sacred, and communal practices that resist giving single authority over the altar as archive. This set of practices and relations challenges stable meanings of its production and record keeping. The home altar erodes logics of organization through what Laura Elisa Pérez (1999) calls *desorden*. She states "Chicana/o cultural practices have operated in disordering, profoundly disturbing ways with respect to dominant social and cultural, spatial and ideological topographies of the 'proper' in the United States" (23). The "proper" in this case refers to the Catholic tradition and imposition of European saints and religious iconographies which are not central to the practice of home altar making. The altar does not follow institutional logics or structures; it is disorderly, and embraces the *domesticana* practices of feminist *rasquachismo*, an aesthetic expression that develops from fragments, recycling of everyday materials and repurposing of what is discarded (Mesa-Bains 1999). *Domesticana* is instrumental for the Chicana artist as it serves as a basis for cultural identity and socio-political movement. *Desorden* and *domesticana* together are culturally informed methodologies/methods that work with the idea of "queer as mess" (Manalansan 2014, 97). In "The 'Stuff' of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives," Martin F. Manalansan IV (2014) states:

The idea of queer as mess takes off from the initial impetus that propelled the contemporary reappropriation of queer. Michael Warner has famously likened the project of queer theory to a sensorial morass by creating a funky atmosphere in an otherwise stale academia and making it stink of sexual rut. Such a messing-up mission reverberates in the kinds of queer scholarship that focus on the recognition and centering of underrecognized practices, stances, and situations that deviate from, resist, or run counter to the workings of normality. Far from romanticizing deviance and oppositionality, I intend to locate discomfort, dissonance, and disorder as necessary and grounded experiences in the queer everyday and not as heroic acts of exceptional people. In other words, while mainstream queer studies scholarship has valorized dissident dimensions of disorder, my deployment of mess is about funkying up queerness in a way that retains the mundane, banal, and ordinariness of queer experience and its mercurial often intractable qualities. (97-98)

I understand the practice of altar making as part of the queer “mess,” *desorden* that stems from the mundane practices of women within their home that challenge patriarchal, colonial, and archival logics of order and meaning making. Learning from Chicana artists and cultural workers, altar making provides a practice of resistance and memory-making within the home, accessible to all members of a community or household.

Chicanas within the United States have cultivated their own practices of memory-building by collecting, organizing, and interpreting their religious and cosmological beliefs on their home altars. This practice is reflected in the work of Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains and her tripartite installation series *Venus Envy* (1991-1994) consisting of three altars: *Chapter One: First Holy Communion, Moments Before the End*, *Chapter Two: The Harem and Other Enclosures*, and *Chapter Three: The Library of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz*. I engage in Mesa-Bains’s installation because she embraces the practice of altar making and provides a feminist decolonial critique of the practice and the subjects she chooses to highlight. According to Jennifer A. González (2012), installation art is unique in that:

Art installations . . . take part in a situational aesthetics to the degree that they recontextualize existing social institutions and de-emphasize production of new objects in favor of sampling and reorganizing found elements. Following this logic, such works also decenter the eye, or the “I,” of the spectator who is no longer located in the transcendental role of solitary contemplation vis-à-vis the work of art, but is rather positioned as a culturally situated subject who both constitutes, and is constituted by, the work of art. (8-9)

The altars Mesa-Bains creates embrace the practice of altar making and break the subject/object binary through its composition that ask spectators to engage with the collection of objects chosen to constitute the private spaces of Chicana women, altering the space of the museum and the people who encounter it. I focus on chapter three, *The Library of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz*, because of the mythological connection to feminist and queer icon, Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, and argue this altar is a queer archival practice. *The Library of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz* is a queer archive because Mesa-Bains invokes Sor Juana’s opaque historical position as religious feminist rebel and queer ancestor as the basis for the altar installation. González (2008) writes that, “The home altar serves the artist as a framework for the investigation of the institutional power of religion, gender roles, and the history of colonialism in the Americas; Mesa-Bains interrogates the power of cultural archetypes to shape feminine subjectivity” (16). The objects and display of the piece “seeks to disrupt or interrogate traditional, institutional archival practices” and “blurs the distinction between the private and the public” since its inception is rooted in Chicana altar making in the home (Watts 2018; Cvetkovich 2003). Further, altar making and keeping challenge the centrality of the individual and the secular in the concept of the archive as articulated by Derrida because the altar is a practice that anyone can participate in and add to. Mesa-Bains’s work is created through the *domesticana*

aesthetic practice or feminine *rasquachismo*. The repurposing and reusing of materials are queer in its revalorization and intimacy with the discarded and marginalized. The altar is more than object, it is a practice, and requires everyday tending that produces diverse meanings in its creation and maintenance. Thus, eluding legible organization, interpretation, and normalization through institutional logics. In highlighting the place of the altar in the home and the role women have in creating and maintaining this practice, the altar as queer archive resists masculinist/patriarchal heteronormative conceptions of the Chicana/o community, the colonial imposition of Catholic religion, and institutional sense-making.

Chicana/o (Art) Movement: Considering Mesa-Bains's Feminist Intervention

Art history and history in general has not included the impact of the Chicana/o movement. Revisionist histories (Acuña 2015; Anzaldúa 1999; and Rosales 1997) have challenged the record to reflect its significance within the United States. In art history, a binary historiography was first developed in the work of Shifra Goldman and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto (Davalos 2017, 4). The Chicana/o movement emerged during the 1960s alongside the Civil Rights movement, other burgeoning liberation movements around the world, and the Vietnam War. Chicana/o art like the Black Arts movement was an integral part of the political struggle of the time. According to Goldman and Ybarra-Frausto (1991), there are two proposed identifiable periods of the Chicana/o art movement. The first spanning from 1968-75 is characterized “by non-commercial community-oriented attitudes and expectations” (83). In addition, a high sense of idealism characterized this period exemplified in public art forms, such as posters and murals. The Aztec warrior and indigenous mythology came to represent central aspects of Aztlan. The second period beginning in 1975-81 and into the present changed considerably due to the expanding geo-political concerns emerging outside of the United States, thus, the movement aligned itself with international Third-World and Latin American struggles. Karen Mary Davalos (2017) challenges this binary in *Chicana/o Remix*, arguing that conceptualizing Chicana/o art in this manner must be challenged:

[T]he ways the methodology of Chicana/o art history has consistently turned to a binary to characterize Chicana/o art and artists in the following ways: political versus commercial art, folk versus fine art, parochial versus cosmopolitan art or global aesthetics, representational versus conceptual art, older or veterano artists versus younger ones, women versus men, feminist versus Chicano art (in this case, the authentic category is structured as patriarchal), historical documents versus aesthetic objects, untrained versus formally trained artists, ethnic-identified versus post ethnic artists, and Chicana/o versus Mexican artists. The polarities are coupled so that the existence of one requires the existence of the other. My burden of representation is to repair the “entrenched, polarizing accounts” and explain how Chicana/o art “might bridge or even exceed these categories.” (4)

Bridging and exceeding these categories is what Chicana/o art has always done, as Davalos work evinces. Feminist critique does the same, as the lived experiences of Chicanas inform their feminist practices, Chicana artists created works that challenged the limits patriarchal beliefs placed on women participating in the movement.

One feature that bridges these two periods, and challenges its binary, is the internal critique of the movement by Chicana feminists. Chicana feminism “represented an ideological and political movement to end patriarchal oppression within the structure of a cultural nationalist movement” (Garcia 1997, 4). A challenge presented to the movement was the participation of women in leadership roles and artistic production. Although rare for its time, Antonio Bernal's untitled mural at the Teatro Campesino

headquarters depicts archetypal visions of women's historical role within the movement; the Adelita, the indigenous ancestor, and the farm worker (Goldman and Ybarra-Frausto 1991, 84). Women for the most part were not part of the representations of the nation when they were, they were depicted as symbols of idealized womanhood, the selfless companion of the revolutionary soldier (Adelita), the indigenous elder, the farmer and the virgin mother (Virgen de Guadalupe).

Chicana activism, critical theory and art emerged in the 1970s as a challenge to the masculinist articulation of the nation of Aztlán and stereotypical depiction of Chicana women (Mesa-Bains 1991, 84). One prominent feature of the movement was its public presence through protests, boycotts, and marches. Although women participated, the public space was recognized as the sole locus of political engagement. However, the work of Chicana artists like Carmen Lomas Garza, Santa Barraza, Patricia Rodriguez, Patsi Valdez, and Amalia Mesa-Bains challenge the logic of the public as the sole political space (Garcia 1997, 4-9). More recently, Cristina Serna (2017) examines the work of feminist Chicana and Mexican lesbian artists such as Alma Lopez and Las Sucias who create queer images of La Virgen de Guadalupe and engage in what she calls "a Latin/a American lesbian feminist counterpublic whose participants are linked through the circulation of written, visual, and other multimedia texts as well as by physical encounters where social and erotic love between women is 'understood as a mode of political action—as social erotics,' to borrow from Chela Sandoval" (54). These artists focus on the domestic space as a generative site of political resistance against dominant Anglo hegemony through affirmation of cultural values and a space that resists restrictive gender/sexual identities imposed on by the Chicano culture.

Amalia Mesa-Bains (2011) has worked extensively with the altar as a site of political, historical, and personal resistance and memory-making. This essay follows this critique of the public/private divide into the home of the Chicana and the construction of the altar and considers "the public" similarly to what Ann Cvetkovich (2003) describes in *Archives of Feeling*:

[T]he term public culture, I keep as open as possible the definition of what constitutes a public in order to remain alert to forms of affective life that have not solidified into institutions, organizations, or identities. I would like to "support forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity" because "queer" is difficult to entextualize as culture. (9)

Queer is meant to be difficult to understand; the term is undefined and yet it is a critical lens with which we question the sources of power that norm our understandings of gender and sexuality (Butler 1999). As a group of Anonymous Queers ([1990] 2021) declare:

Being queer is not about a right to privacy; it is about the freedom to be public, to just be who we are. It means everyday fighting oppression; homophobia, racism, misogyny, the bigotry of religious hypocrites and our own self-hatred . . . It's about being on the margins, defining ourselves; it's about gender-fuck and secrets, what's beneath the belt and deep inside the heart; it's about the night . . . Everyone of us is a world of infinite possibility . . . Queer unlike GAY doesn't mean MALE (sic).

Understanding the relationship between the public and queer enables an unearthing of meaning in Mesa-Bains's work since it is housed in museums and opens up room for more questions about the relationship between the public and private divide, the archive, and queer critique. In doing so, it explores how the altar is a queer archive made and kept in the private sphere and moreover a woman-centered spiritual practice with political dimensions.

Mesa-Bains's series, *Venus Envy*, explores themes developed in her other works, such as the dialectical exchange between different ways of knowing, the divisions between the objective/subjective, intellectual/visceral and mind/body (González 2008, 10). *Chapter Three: The Library of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz* debuted in 1994 as part of the *Venus Envy* multi-partite series at the Williams College Museum of Art. It is a "hybrid form of ephemeral installation" that emerges out of "the tradition of home altars and Day of the Dead celebrations" [it] "is inspired by these popular practices and directed by the Chicano movement in a persistent process of critical intervention" (Mesa-Bains, artist statement, 1995). *The Library of Sor Juana* was created through the *domesticana* aesthetic practice or feminine *rasquachismo*. Mesa-Bains (1999) explains that "in the work of Chicana artists, techniques of subversion play with traditional imagery and cultural material" (161). Disrupting traditional gender/sexual roles and cultural material is a praxis of queering the archive, as it interrogates who and what meanings are imposed through culture and how can they be challenged by organizing and collecting through the practice of altar making (Watts 2018).

Mainly, *domesticana* is a methodology and a practice that exemplifies the Chicana/o struggle within and outside the domestic sphere. The altar, "established through pre-Hispanic continuities of spiritual belief . . . functions for women as a counterpoint to male-dominated rituals within the Catholic church" (Mesa-Bains and Meyer 2011, 132). The appropriation of the altar and the figure of Sor Juana queers the meanings of altars and reframe Sor Juana from a *domesticana* feminist lens. Furthermore, the altar is also part of religious practices emerging in Europe—specifically the Roman-Catholic tradition transplanted to Mexico by the conquest. Through resistance practices to colonization, the altar, in its current form lives within the home in the Americas. That is, it is a practice that has survived the historical process of colonization through hybridization. It combines Roman Catholic, indigenous and modern elements. Feminine *rasquachismo* or *domesticana*, then, reflects the historical conditions that engendered hybrid subjects; as a method it uses fragments and discarded objects, what is at hand, to create meaningful spaces of worship/art, as in the case of Mesa-Bains's work, and redefines women's relationships to religion, nation and each other by revaluing the practice of putting an altar together and inserting Sor Juana as a rebellious feminist icon worthy of worship.

Altars are places where the sacred is recognized and interacted with. "In altars objects, space and time combine to conjure the [sacred]" (Gutierrez 1997, 53). Indigenous populations in Mexico, for the most part, believe that spirits animate the world; all objects, living things, and landmarks—such as mountains, lakes, and rivers—have spirits and are significant to the everyday (245). As such, recognition and reverence of these spirits is part of the balance of the cosmos and the well-being of the community. Through offerings of food, fire, flowers, salt, water, human energy (dance) the balance of the cosmos is kept. Altars serve as a site to communicate with deities. According to first K.W. Bolle's short history of altars in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, an altar is "a place designated by custom or tradition for the presentation of sacrifices or other offerings to superhuman beings (God, ancestors, or others) which reveals and guarantees communication with the other world" (qtd. in Turner 1982, 316). The history of women as the makers and keepers of altars in the Americas does not originate in Europe, it is an indigenous practice, yet has ties to the Christian tradition because of colonization. Turner (1982) explains:

Because we know from contemporary observation that home altars are maintained by women in Greece and Italy as well as Spain, it seems possible the tradition spread during the early Christian era from Italy to Spain, was brought here from Europe during the period of conquest, and assimilated with the pre-Conquest Mexican tradition of keeping home shrines. There is some documentary evidence from the major chroniclers of the Conquest stating that household shrines were kept by indigenous peoples. For example, Landa (1938, pp. 56-57) [sic] reports that near or under their beds Mayan women on the Yucatan Peninsula maintained personal idols dedicated to Ixchel, the goddess of the moon, fertility, and childbirth. (317)

Consequently, the practice of offering is central to indigenous life and altar making. Therefore, the Roman Catholic altar enforced through the destruction of indigenous icons and shrines at the moment of conquest and later through the development of the secular state, served as a place to keep the practice of offering alive through a seemingly different meaning. For example, offerings for a Saint or a Virgin had a double meaning; on one level, it adheres to imposed Catholic beliefs/practices and on another, the offering is made in the name of their own deities, for example Coatlicue—goddess of birth and destruction—for the Virgen de Guadalupe, hence helping to restore the balance necessary for the community to thrive within their own cosmology.

In fact, “[d]omestic altars were made in opposition to Catholic altars” (Gutierrez 1997, 14). As such, their existence, reflects the political stakes of their presence in the home as a practice of resistance since the colonial period. Hence, the home for Chicana/os is political. Accordingly, the altar is too, as the site of resistance by indigenous people against colonization, evidence of the flexibility the church was forced to adopt in order to institute Christianity, and the synchronicity of Christianity and indigenous beliefs reflected in the practice of domestic altar making. Now, that we are in the Chicana/o home among altars, let’s ask the question: how is the altar a queer archive?

Significantly, the figure of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz is representative of process of hybridization. The daughter of a criolla, a person born in the colony of Spanish parents, and a Spanish captain, she was self-educated, learned to read when she was three and by the time, she was a teenager she mastered Greek logic *and* wrote poems in Nahuatl. She became a nun and one of the first Mexican literary figures; in fact, she was a writer and investigator of the natural sciences and “the first woman in the Americas to argue for the intellectual rights of women” (Meyer 2011, 10). Notably, there is much intrigue around her sexuality and her work instigated conflict with the Catholic Church and “near the end of her life, she was effectively ordered into silence when the archbishop confiscated her books” (11). In this way, Sor Juana embodies how the indigenous and colonial ways of life mix as a result of colonization and resistance to patriarchal colonial systems of gender and sexual norms are made visible through her story. Furthermore, she exemplifies the struggle Mexicanas and Chicanas are engaged in against the colonial legacy inherent in hegemonic power structure imposed by their own community.

The Library of Sor Juana consists of a large dark wooden desk, with a statuesque chair, and a smaller auxiliary chair set in an office-like space or study. González (2008) contextualizes the space of the study:

Sor Juana’s library in the convent functioned as a room-sized cabinet or study . . . [In] early modern architecture, [s]tudies and cabinets increasingly became the expression of the individual as creator and intellectual, yet they continued to bear traces of their origins as a place for study, prayer, seduction . . . [A]t the same time, such sanctuaries could be seen as an escape from narrowly defined ecclesiastical traditions . . . the *estudiolo* became a place filled with private artifacts of knowledge (books, paintings, globes, and scientific instruments). (156)

“Sor Juana’s Library” is a place of individual confinement and intellectual, religious, and sexual cultivation within the home. Mesa-Bains’s altar installation constructs this space with a proliferation of objects that reflect the history of the *estudiolo*. A large white door looms in the background, around the walls there are frames and mirrors with pictures and writings set in them. There are also several pictures and excerpts of writing glued to the door of the office. The table, the central surface on which this altar is built, is covered

with a myriad of objects: a globe is featured prominently to the right, with a smaller globe in front, candle sticks to the left, a skull next to them, pictures, surgical tools, books, gems, rocks scissors, beakers, even a star fish. Closest to the chair is a row of documents and a long feather pen in ink. The altar is an example of the *domesticana* aesthetic: fragmented, recycled and discarded materials make up its contents. The fact that there are books, beakers, surgical tools, a pen and documents alongside mementos like pictures, seashells, and a star fish represents the elements that women in general, but Sor Juana in particular through Mesa-Bains's imagination, used to resist gender oppression within colonial society. The collection of objects reflects, "Sor Juana's beli[ef] that scientific research into natural phenomena would inspire spiritual devotion rather than challenge religion" (González 2008, 157). Her position with the church was at odds with its doctrine. After all, Sor Juana's reasons for joining the convent have long been a mystery shrouded in possible heartbreak of women's love unrequited; this aesthetic lends it-self to secret keeping alongside ephemeral resistant archival architectures. Furthermore, the hybridization that colonization engendered. That is, Sor Juana learned to read in secret because schooling was not afforded to women at the time. By the same token, *what* she learned to read was the bible and the texts about the natural sciences brought by the Spanish colonizers; what was recognized as "real knowledge." This contradiction is reflected in the objects on the desk. Their juxtaposition is a characteristic technique of subversion in *domesticana* aesthetics enacted through playing with traditional imagery and cultural material; here expressed in the skull, for example, which can be both a symbol for science and for the dead commemorated by the day of the dead celebrations.

The seemingly chaotic status of Sor Juana's Library functions as what Pérez (1999) calls *desorden*. *Desorden* is a "discursive technique of resistance in the face of a totalizing enunciation of a nation and secret keeping in plain sight" (Stone and Cantrell qtd in Watts, 2018, 104). The chaos is order, the order is there to be discovered by the knowledge of Sor Juana's history and poetry, and the desire within these works strewn within her "library." She was ordered into silence by the archbishop for her work *Sor Philothea* where she advocated for the women to be educated beyond "traditional activities" (González 2008, 157). In this instance, Sor Juana exemplifies resistance to patriarchy, heteronormativity, and colonization. Historically, Chicana/os resist the erasure caused by the treaty of Guadalupe Hildago in 1848, which granted the Northern Territory of Mexico to the United States. Since the 1960s disordering, oppositional, practices have challenged the assimilationist decree of the US nation. Significantly, Chicanos developed and articulated Aztlan as their nation through political, artistic, and everyday practices; these practices, Pérez (1999) points out, "were/are heterogeneous and conflictive, *with respect to both Chicana/o and dominant U.S. culture*" (emphasis mine, 23). Disordering the nation, then, as a practice, opens up room to challenge the assumptions necessary for the body of the nation to articulate its totality. That is, the United States asserts homogeneity through the juridical subject, which ignores the historical reality of colonization of native peoples. Similarly, Chicanas have disordered Aztlan, their own nation, to challenge patriarchal and hetero norms. Like Sor Juana in the late nineteenth century, Amalia Mesa-Bains's work currently challenges both colonial/imperialist power and patriarchy within both nations. Significantly, her work takes up the private and public divide inherent in the logic of the nation. By creating installations that focus on women's practices of domestic altar making she brings attention to the struggle within Aztlan in the "private" domain in contrast to its other public articulations in print media and murals. Thus, she produces a space of political engagement within the home by creating installations that recreate these spaces in the public domain of the museum.

The Altar's Symbolic Architecture

The home, the place where the archive is born, is redefined in Mesa-Bains's work and the practice of altar making. If the archive is a place of gathering, organizing, classifying, and interpreting, then the altar also has these functions. An altar maker must gather, organize, and classify pictures, candles, flowers, food, water, etc. The altar has a symbolic architecture. In the space where an altar is kept, there is a sense of the celestial being close to the ceiling, the earthly in the middle, and underworld at the bottom (Gutierrez 1997, 20). In this way, the altar has a spiritual dimension that it must also contend with. As such, the interpretive function of altar making must consider more than the physical space but also the cosmological configurations of the space. In fact, making an altar coproduces the cosmological order within the home. Women who tend the altar do not speak the law; instead, they *practice* the cosmos. In this way, the division between the public and the private, secular and divine, is conflated in everyday practices. Altar making coproduces the sacred, the community and the self, and in the case of Sor Juana's altar, the self that is reflected is a queer Chicana shrouded in archival silence. Gina Watts (2018) considers the missing aspects of archives as productive and constructed to make possible queer histories without proof. She discusses the film *Watermelon Woman* by Cheryl Dunye to illustrate this point by discussing the idea behind the film, imagining and (re)creating a record, a "fake archive," of an artist whose story is absent yet recreated within the film. *Watermelon Woman* then makes the "absence of a 'real' archive visible and doing so, authorizes and inspires future projects" (Kumbier, qtd. in Watts 106). Watts elaborates this idea:

In this archive, something can be true without ever having actually happened—something a traditional archive would have great difficulty making sense of. These contradictions are everywhere in queer archives and come about precisely because of the sense that we are missing important queer history. Establishing its existence in other ways allows queerness to make a stronger claim to precedent, even without authentic materials. (106)

Mesa-Bains's altar to Sor Juana does just that; it creates a space where her history as a rebellious, possibly lesbian, person can be visualized and interpreted. As Robert Summers (2015) reminds us, "queer art and archives produce counter knowledges and histories, which are non-enlightenment based over what was the 'true,' 'real,' and linear event/s; a strand of queer performativity refuses traditional systems of knowledge-production binary operations, and chronology" (47). In *The Library of Sor Juana*, Sor Juana's recreated study becomes a space that is both private and public and a repository of (im)possible memories and resistances to her then and now context within Mexican and Chicana community and cosmos.

When we look at domestic altars in Mexico, we can see that they embody these dichotomies simultaneously. The altar gathers religious symbols such as angels, saints, crosses, and representations of Jesus alongside statues of indigenous figures, baskets, flowers, and instruments. In addition, altars also gather electronics, dolls, bottles of alcohol, toy cars, in short, objects of mass consumption. Further, all of these objects and representations cohabit with pictures of family members and loved ones. The objects themselves have meaning. For example, the religious figures speak to catholic beliefs inherited through the process colonization, the indigenous figures, often dogs, are spiritual guides for the dead, and last, the found objects are offerings or represent miracles or promises that were asked for and granted. Therefore, while the altar gathers like the archive, how it organizes and classifies its contents and interprets them differs. Accumulation, organization, classification, and interpretation coalesce under the cosmological order. The altar is a palimpsest of accumulation. It builds upon what it has depending on the current need or celebration. The task of tending to the altar is always in conversation with the environment; the caretaker acts depending on the occasion and needs of the community. During the Day of the Dead celebrations, the altar must be prepared for the souls of the dead to return. Marigolds, chocolate, bread, candles, dog figurines, incense, and fruits are added to altars for the dead to find their way home and feed themselves

for the journey into the afterlife. All these items are added for the dead and then their relatives and the rest of the community consume the leftovers. Thus, the altar is not just a place of gathering, organizing, classifying, and interpreting but also one of participation, desire, and sustenance.

The mode of engagement with the altar, then, elucidates the spiritual relationship this practice of gathering and accumulation requires. Derrida's consignment is impossible in this archive. That is, this is not a practice that is interested in unity or totality in the closed sense. On the contrary, it thrives on spiral and cyclical movements of daily practices, always opening to the next layer and ensuring that the delicate balance of the cosmos is kept for the preservation of the past and the enabling of a future(s). Furthermore, the practices of *domesticana* and *desorden*, produced through the Mexican and Chicana experience, are antithetical to the construction of a single whole or teleology. The home altar is ephemeral and undergoing constant transformation since its practices are those of fragmentation, recombination, accumulation, display and abundance representative of the Mexican/Chicana worldview (Pérez 2007, 99). Thus, there is no sole figure of authority, no archon responsible for the commencement or commandment of the altar. The relationship of the objects to the self when considered to be done by Sor Juana in her library allow us to understand the absences, silences, and challenges her legibility. Her library, as altar, alters the spectator by not normalizing the relations between history, persons, and things as enactment of queer epistemology/ontology enabling a subjective opacity, like that of Sor Juana, that can be afforded to anyone. The altar is always in a state of flux, enacting the cyclical movement of time exemplified by the practices of offering, cleansing, and celebrating death. The symbolic architecture of the altar embraces practices of queer architecture with the potential for community and cultural transformation, opacity, and space for multivocal stories of Chicana life.

Mesa-Bains's altars are part of the oppositional history against patriarchy within the Chicana/o national project. Altars provide a critical commentary on the nation and the role of women within it, making the altar a site for reflection, healing, and transformation. Furthermore, they produce an awareness of the political dimension of the altar, spiritual practices, and domestic space associated with Chicana practices. *The Library of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz* is one articulation of Chicana struggles against oppressive Anglo hegemonic structures, patriarchal impositions within their own community, and an awareness of the role spiritual practices play in resistance and memory-making. Indeed, the altar as an archive disordering the hetero-nation. It is a multi-layered critique of two nations: the US and Aztlan; it resists assimilationist discourse and patriarchy and urges a process of decolonization.

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