

Documenting the Movement for Mexican American Studies (MAS) in Texas Through Critical Latinx Public Digital Humanities (DH) and Chicana Feminisms

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Abstract

This essay introduces the MAS Muxeres Oral History Project, a digital storytelling project that uses ArcGIS StoryMaps to share the oral histories and intimate archival materials of the muxeres who build and sustain Mexican American Studies (MAS) programs in Yanawana/San Antonio, Texas. The focus of this essay is twofold: 1) to introduce the project, and 2) to explore the transformational possibilities of incorporating critical Latinx public digital humanities (DH) approaches into MAS research. In this current moment of anti-DEI, anti-critical race theory, and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, particularly within the state of Texas where this project is based, critical Latinx public DH approaches provide the opportunity to engage in community-based and feminist research within MAS that 1) centers women, their activism, and contributions; 2) visually documents the larger movement for MAS and ethnic studies in Texas through the experiences of muxeres; 3) fosters partnerships with the community to produce public research that is accessible beyond the confines of academia; and 4) offers hands-on digital training through the development of digital public research. In this essay, I explore how incorporating critical Latinx public DH within MAS research helps to not only address the intentional gaps in both U.S. and traditional Chicano history that erase the contributions of women and queer/communities of color but also helps to address contemporary issues in MAS and ethnic studies.

The MAS Muxeres Oral History Project as Feminist Research within Chicana Studies

The fields of Chicana and ethnic studies developed out of a long history of activism by youth, their parents, and larger communities who participated in walkouts, organized youth conferences, studied radical global movements, and protested on their campuses to demand that universities serve the needs of the local community. The Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), a coalition of students led by the Black Student Union at San Francisco State University, ignited the movement in 1968 with a strike lasting five months that demanded changes to their university's admissions policies, and later, the hiring of faculty of color who could produce and teach radical scholarship. The University of California at Berkeley currently houses the Third World Liberation Front Research Initiative that compiles materials such as oral histories, books, primary sources, audiovisual materials, and newspapers to document and preserve the history of the movement.

Less documented is the movement for ethnic studies, and specifically MAS, in Texas. During this same time period as, and inspired by, the TWLF's activism, a handful of Texas cities also organized and participated in walkouts, to include Edcouch-Elsa, Crystal City, and San Antonio. These students shared similar demands as their California counterparts of an equitable education which included the hiring of teachers and administrators of color, altering schools' punitive behavioral policies that harmed students of color, offering college counseling and preparation, and having access to

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curriculum that centers Mexican American history. This organizing ignited the larger movement for MAS and ethnic studies in Texas which continues to this day.

In comparison to the TWLF's growing online archive, Texas's movement for MAS/ethnic studies remains under-documented and as such, out of the reach of the local community. While a few public DH projects exist on the Texas walkouts and the larger movimiento in Yanawana/San Antonio (see the University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries' *Mapping the Movimiento*), they often uphold patriarchal narratives of leadership focusing largely on Chicano men and placing little to no emphasis on the contributions of *muxeres* [Blackwell 2011]; [Chabram-Dernersesian 2013]; [Delgado Bernal 1998]; [Espinoza, Cotera, and Blackwell 2018]. Cotera and Garcia Merchant's *Chicana por mi Raza Digital Memory Project and Archive*, in contrast, serves as one example of DH work that centers the activism and labor of *muxeres* within the context of the larger *movimiento*. However, presently there are no existing DH projects that focus specifically on the *movimiento* for MAS as a field of study in the state of Texas. In fact, while attending a Mexican American Studies statewide summit in the summer of 2021 organized by the Somos MAS Colectiva comprised of MAS K-12 teachers and community college and university faculty across the state of Texas, it became apparent that, as a whole, MAS scholars, activists, and stakeholders were so busy building and sustaining the field that it was often difficult for them to find the time to exchange ideas, updates, and strategies with each other, much less document these strides visually using DH approaches.

For this reason, the *MAS Muxeres Oral History Project* emerged out of a commitment to documenting and preserving the local movement through the experiences, leadership, and expertise of the *muxeres* running, sustaining, and building the field. MAS in Yanawana/San Antonio is unique in that it boasts courses and programs at the high school, community college, and university levels. Even more unique is the fact that the majority of these programs at the higher education level are run by women of Mexican descent/Chicanas/x, historically and today. While research is emerging on the development of the field, the movement itself, and the activism and organizing of stakeholders involved ([Saldaña 2021]; [Valenzuela and Epstein 2021]; [Valenzuela, Epstein, and Unda 2021]), more attention needs to be placed on this important movement, not just to preserve its history, but to also to propel it into the future. Based on the oral histories collected through the project thus far, one reason for the delayed output of research on MAS in Texas could be because MAS *muxeres* often find themselves in the role of program coordinator/director, positions that leave less time for research and publishing.

As a Chicana starting her tenure-track faculty position within the field, I learned immediately that to work as a faculty member in MAS or ethnic studies is different from being in other faculty positions, particularly in Texas. Because of neoliberal university budget models that use enrollment numbers to determine the amount of institutional support a program or department receives, MAS, ethnic studies, and the humanities struggle for institutional resources. These budget models leave faculty within these areas not only having to meet their research, teaching and service requirements as outlined by the institution, but also needing to regularly recruit students, develop programming, fundraise, and apply for grants just to sustain and grow these programs to in part justify their continued existence in higher education. In Yanawana/San Antonio, *muxeres* primarily assume this labor in unpaid program coordinator or director positions at the Alamo Colleges, the local community college system, as well as at public and private universities throughout the city.

When I began my position at UTSA in MAS, I wondered how the two *muxeres* credited with helping to build the MAS program – first Dr. Josie Mendez-Negrete and soon after Dr. Marie Keta Miranda, now both retired – navigated their faculty positions along with the never-ending labor required to grow MAS in Texas in the late 90s and early 2000s. I imagined and desired an archive of their strategizing, their thought processes, their private conversations and institutional *movidas* ([Espinoza, Cotera, and Blackwell 2018]), and access to any notes that helped them and their co-conspirators to build MAS, and later the department of Race, Ethnicity, Gender and Sexuality Studies (REGSS). As a newly hired MAS faculty member in 2020, it seemed to me that our program was fighting the exact same battles as Dr. Mendez-Negrete and Dr. Miranda had decades prior. And it remains that *muxeres* lead the charge in growing the field still today in Yanawana/San Antonio.

Further, as a result of neoliberal universities' publishing demands that privilege academic research in peer-reviewed

journals and books, the history of this movement remains inaccessible and almost unknown to the local community and to succeeding generations of MAS students. Students enrolled in MAS courses regularly express that they did not have access to their own histories prior to enrolling in those courses, and also that they were unaware of the history of the struggle for ethnic studies locally and nationwide. Presently, this fight for MAS and ethnic studies looks like state legislation removing DEI from Texas public universities; local school districts attempting to ban books with themes related to race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality; and repeated attacks by legislators and conservative family organizations against what they refer to as critical race theory (CRT) – an umbrella term and a strategy used to further whitewash curriculum in schools by eliminating any content that addresses race, racism or gender and sexism. As such, the *MAS Muxeres Oral History Project* was created out of a Chicana feminist commitment to name and document *muxeres* and their labor within the movement and to make this history accessible to the larger public in this heightened moment of conservative backlash and attempts to dismantle MAS, ethnic studies, and public education as a whole.

The incorporation of critical Latinx public DH approaches within this project allows for the possibility of educating the larger public about the struggle for MAS in Texas in real time through ArcGIS StoryMaps; to build community online with other MAS and ethnic studies stakeholders; and to solicit advocacy, policy reform, and community organizing. In other words, critical Latinx public DH approaches within feminist MAS research help not only to preserve and document the oral histories of these *muxeres*, but also to engage in research in collaboration with community partners that is accessible and is motivated and shaped by the needs of the community and larger movement. In the next section, I outline my theoretical approach for the *MAS Muxeres Oral History Project* drawing from critical Latinx public DH scholars who bridge borderlands theory, Chicana feminisms, and DH.

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“Digital Rasquachismo”: At the intersections of Chicana Feminisms and DH

The *MAS Muxeres Oral History Project* uses the Chicana feminist method of oral history, in combination with archival materials and critical Latinx public DH approaches to document the contributions of *muxeres* within the MAS movement in Texas. The use of oral history is in line with the legacy of Chicana feminist scholars who have used the method to locate and center *muxeres* within the historical record. Vicki Ruiz, Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, Dionne Espinoza, and Dolores Delgado Bernal are some Chicana feminist scholars who have intentionally used oral history out of a Chicana feminist praxis to center *muxeres* and to document their activism within the *movimiento* years.

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Rather than isolate these oral histories solely within traditional academic research formats such as journal articles and books, the *MAS Muxeres Oral History Project* draws from critical Latinx public DH approaches to feature this history digitally. This project relies heavily on the expertise and scholarship of critical Latinx public DH scholars like Sylvia Fernández Quintanilla and Maira E. Álvarez, whose research is a prototype of what it means to bridge borderlands theory, Chicana and Latinx feminisms, and DH to produce feminist research. For the purpose of this essay and drawing on the work of Fernández Quintanilla and Álvarez, I define critical Latinx public DH as research that 1) centers women, 2) visually documents social justice movements, particularly along the border and/or in connection to borderlands spaces, 3) fosters partnerships with the community to produce public research, and 4) encourages hands-on digital training for researchers, community practitioners and students.

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[Álvarez and Fernández Quintanilla 2022] established their Borderlands Archives Cartography (BAC) DH project using their expertise as *transfronterizas* and scholars of border, literary and archival studies to engage in “locating, mapping, and facilitating access to newspapers dating from 1800 to 1930 to visualize and deepen the understanding of the region, its communities, and its shared histories” [Álvarez and Fernández Quintanilla 2022, 520]. This DH project emerged as a result of their awareness of the impact of colonial approaches to archiving both in the U.S. and Mexico and how these approaches have shaped dominant narratives of the border. As such, through the digitization of newspapers across three time periods from a feminist transborder approach, BAC functions as a digital counter archive of the Mexico-U.S. border, highlighting the agency and resistance of border communities. Álvarez and Fernández Quintanilla offer that their methodological approach within BAC necessitates “resourcefulness and adaptability, thus embodying the essence of *rasquachismo*” [Álvarez and Fernández Quintanilla 2022, 150].

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Rooted within Chicana cultural studies and coined by Chicano scholar Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, *rasquachismo* references the act and resulting aesthetic of working-class Chicana communities making do with what they have to produce something new, as evidenced by lowrider car culture. For [Álvarez and Fernández Quintanilla 2024] and their BAC DH project, as well as for the *MAS Muxeres Oral History Project*, *rasquachismo* involves dealing with “limited funding, restricted access to archival material, and resistance from certain institutions” which requires the development of creative *movidas* in order to build a digital counter archive - what they refer to as SIGuache [Álvarez and Fernández Quintanilla 2024, 150]. Their SIGuache methodological approach is necessary within the *MAS Muxeres Oral History Project* since I am a team of one trained within women-of-color feminisms and ethnic studies research methodologies, but not trained within DH. Learning to build a StoryMap in which to feature the oral history interviews and other archival materials of the *MAS muxeres* eliminates the long turnaround time of research publications, avoids academic journals’ paywalls, visually maps the movement, creates a space for communities to talk back and contribute their own knowledge and information, and functions as an online counter archive detached from an institutional host, a plus for community-engaged MAS research.

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With [Álvarez and Fernández Quintanilla 2024] SIGuache DH methodology there is grace and a leaning into a slow research process that acknowledges the realities of engaging in digital research that makes do with what is available in terms of time, energy, and resources. For the DH work of [Álvarez and Fernández Quintanilla 2024] this includes recognizing the time constraints in self-learning new digital technologies, choosing software with flexible payment plans and user-friendly functions, avoiding institutional hosting, and utilizing open-source and minimal computing tools — all insights and expertise that have informed the *MAS Muxeres* project. Similarly, Hicks-Alcaraz refers to her counter-memorias digital testimonio project centered on Blackness in U.S. Latinx and Latin American racial politics as “digital *rasquachismo*, a socio-political praxis that retools everyday technologies to provide creative solutions and new pathways for Black and non-Black Latinx memory work when resources are limited” [Hicks-Alcaraz 2022, 110].

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With digital *rasquachismo*, SIGuache and Chicana feminisms as a framework, I introduce the *MAS Muxeres Oral History* project as it slowly develops over time with the goal of creating an accessible online counter archive that maps the movement for MAS in Texas while centering *muxeres* within. In the next section, I outline the project in detail as it is developing in ArcGIS StoryMaps. I then provide a discussion of the potential of critical Latinx public DH approaches within feminist MAS research, particularly within this sociopolitical moment of neoliberal university budget models and conservative backlash against MAS, ethnic studies, and the humanities.

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The MAS Muxeres Oral History Project

The larger research questions that shape the project draw from Chicana feminist oral historians and their work in preserving women’s movement histories, as well as my own cultural intuition as a junior MAS faculty [Delgado Bernal 1998]. Originally and still, the project was concerned with preserving and making accessible the origins of the MAS Movement in Texas, leadership by Chicanas/x within, and the future of MAS in Texas. Introducing critical Latinx public DH into this project has expanded the possibility of how to frame and visually represent the insights offered by the *MAS muxeres*, and to think of creative and collaborative ways for the community to interact with these histories.

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Since the start of the project in 2021, the *MAS muxeres* who have participated in oral history interviews or provided written personal narratives for the project include two retired faculty from UTSA, one (at the time) program coordinator at UTSA, one coordinator from Texas A&M University, San Antonio, one (at the time) program coordinator based out of Our Lady of the Lake University, and one former coordinator from Texas Lutheran University. All participants were offered a gift card for their time and expertise funded by a small university faculty seed grant. Given their heavy teaching loads, I was unable to interview the *MAS muxeres* from the Alamo Colleges. However, their insight is crucial to the historical narrative of the MAS movement in Yanawana/San Antonio and Texas and their roles at the community college are an integral pathway into MAS at the university level. I look forward to featuring their oral histories in the future.

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The *MAS muxeres* submitted either a written testimonio or completed a recorded oral history interview (either in person or via Zoom), lasting at minimum 40 minutes to an hour and a half, responding to the larger research foci (history of MAS, women’s leadership within, and the future of the field). Archival materials are also being gathered and digitized

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using materials from UTSA Special Collections, specifically Dr. Marie Keta Miranda's archive that she donated to the university before retiring, as well as from the personal archives of the other MAS *muxeres* (such as photos, emails, flyers, posters, artwork, event programs, and other artifacts and ephemera). The testimonios of Dr. Miranda and Dr. Mendez-Negrete were central to this oral history project, as they worked collaboratively with each other in the 90s to strategically build MAS at UTSA.

Dr. Miranda engaged in two powerful movidas to help build MAS that were useful for me to learn about as a junior MAS faculty, and that are also important to the history of the development of the field in San Antonio and Texas. She, 1) created the Somos MAS Colectiva, a collaborative of MAS faculty, teachers, students, and community members across various institutions in the city and larger state that could organize and advocate at the school board and at the city and state level on behalf of MAS/Ethnic studies; and 2) developed the MAS Teacher's Academy that could prepare future teachers to advocate for and teach classes in MAS at the K-12 level, thus creating an institutional pipeline for MAS K-20. This vision and strategizing is important advocacy that is key to the MAS *movimiento* in San Antonio and Texas and would otherwise go unknown if not for explicitly centering women's labor and activism in MAS.

In embodying a SIGuache methodological approach and drawing from Chicanx feminist oral historians, I initially envisioned and began to develop a StoryMap with the goal of having the "data" speak for itself. Rather than people having to access and download an academic article and read a theoretical framework and methodology section, the public could simply go online to access the oral history interviews directly within a GIS map that highlights the various schools where MAS is currently taught. ArcGIS StoryMaps is an attractive choice for the project because of my limited training in DH and specifically coding, its ability to create working teams that could allow for future partners (graduate research assistants, community members) to log in and participate in adding to the map, and because of its free public account with limited tool options (which makes creating the StoryMap feel user-friendly). Still in process, the map currently reflects my initial idea of using the GIS mapping system to layout the schools with MAS programs across Yanawana/San Antonio, Texas and to have the MAS *muxeres'* interviews linked, respectively.

This also stems from my observations having attended the MAS statewide summit in 2021, where MAS stakeholders shared information about their respective institutions, such as which university boasted a MAS major and/or minor, which schools had a MAS program or a larger department, how many students were enrolled and majoring in the field, which institutions had an actual center for MAS, and how many faculty were hired within. Listening to these MAS faculty from across Texas share about what their programs had (or did not have), and their struggle to push for basic resources made me desire a map that could provide the larger public with this information to understand the MAS *movimiento* from the perspective of educational leaders within.

Further, the map could visually feature the *muxeres* at the helm of running and building these programs — not only their photos, but also their CVs, publications, oral history interviews and/or written testimonios, photos, flyers, institutional data — essentially a visual mapping and archive of women's labor across the city that would be useful for MAS and Ethnic studies advocates, scholars, students, and educators. The incorporation of critical Latinx public DH approaches and a SIGuache methodological approach have presented other opportunities and critical questions on how to expand the StoryMap and curate this movement history.

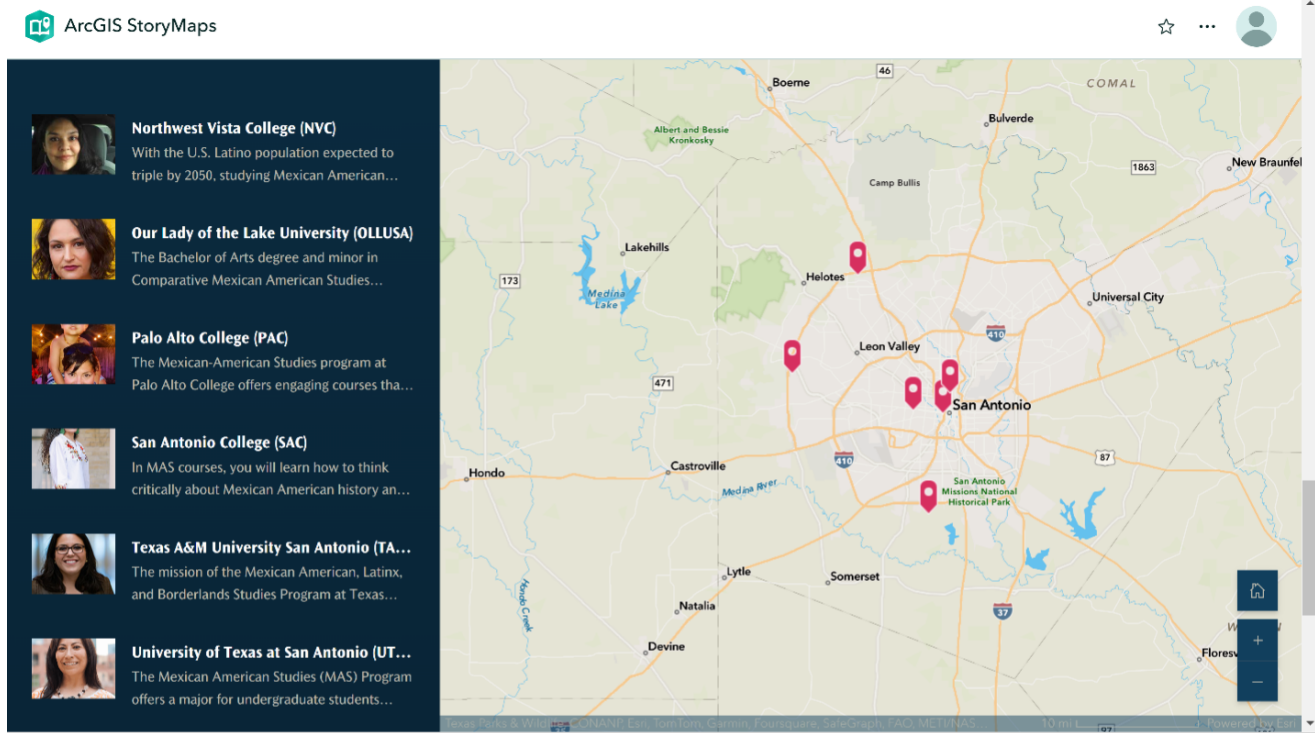


Figure 1. The *MAS Muxeres Oral History Project* ArcGIS StoryMap featuring the *MAS muxeres* on the left toolbar and a map of their respective schools/MAS programs on the right.

For example, new questions around curation, audience, ethics, and community participation emerge through critical Latinx public DH. As a novice within DH, I find myself wondering in what ways ArcGIS StoryMaps can curate a movement history to feature “data” that appeals to various stakeholders such as policy makers, curriculum writers, K-12 teachers and students, community organizers, and/or higher education faculty, without losing sight of the unique contributions, contexts, and personal archives of each of the *MAS muxeres*. This question is not only a methodological one, as I learn ArcGIS StoryMaps and DH approaches, but also a strategic one, especially post-election where educators as a whole, and MAS/ethnic studies educators in particular, remain uncertain about the future of the field.

Initially, I recognized that critical Latinx public DH approaches within this project could reach a larger audience. Typically, it is MAS/ethnic studies faculty and graduate students that are looking to access academic research about these fields. However, a critical Latinx public DH StoryMap has the potential to reach other important communities and stakeholders which are needed in this current sociopolitical moment to energize the movement for MAS and to organize and advocate to keep these courses and programs available in Texas. In what ways can the project’s StoryMap be curated to touch on points that are needed by various stakeholders to advocate on behalf of the field? For example, is there a way to also map the strategies of state board of education allies or city council members who support MAS and other ethnic studies programs? How can the StoryMap speak to ways that community members can advocate on behalf of the programs, and include their own demands of schools and universities, as well as their own historic contributions to the larger movement for MAS and ethnic studies in Texas? In what ways can a StoryMap bring together various stakeholders to organize and share information, resources, and strategies?

In considering the possibilities of a StoryMap as both online counter-archive and potential organizing tool, how can a StoryMap be accessible to the community, while also limiting who has access to our strategies and organizing information in order to protect the *MAS muxeres* and other stakeholders involved? How do we not reveal our hand to the opponent, yet utilize DH to still document, preserve, and organize? In what ways can the project’s StoryMap invite connection, participation, community organizing and advocacy, beyond its current limited use of a StoryMap as merely repository? These are questions and practices that I am presently exploring as a MAS researcher slowly learning how to bridge critical Latinx public DH. Critical Latinx public DH approaches are even more urgent within MAS research today given digital public research’s immediacy compared to traditional publication deadlines, its potential for collaboration,

and its direct training for students and community practitioners.

Given the heightened anxiety and uncertainty regarding the future of education, MAS, and ethnic studies post-election, especially in Texas, students' usual question around what they can *do* with a MAS degree has now transformed to, "Should I even major in MAS?" Again, here is where critical Latinx public DH approaches are a salve for MAS and MAS research, because they provide students with hands-on training and digital skills, critical feminist research methodologies, and researcher ethics that can be applied in any field, discipline, or industry, such as public history, communications, journalism, museum studies, education, public administration, civic affairs, governance, etc. Not only do critical Latinx public DH approaches help transform traditional MAS research and make it more accessible and immediate to our communities, but it also trains students across disciplines on how to curate histories, build StoryMaps and other online public exhibits, ethically engage with communities, and use digital technologies to preserve, document, community build, and solicit advocacy. The bridging of critical Latinx public DH with MAS research provides students with both digital skills training and researcher training that culminates in the development of a digital research project for students to use as they prepare for the job market.

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Conclusion

In this essay, I introduced the *MAS Muxeres Oral History Project* as an example of the transformational possibilities when critical Latinx public DH approaches are introduced to MAS research. Through a framework of Chicana feminisms, digital *rasquachismo* and SIGuache, I outlined the slow research process of learning new technologies and using whatever resources are available to publicly showcase feminist MAS research that creates a counter archive, maps out the movement's history through the contributions and experiences of *muxeres*, and potentially creates a digital organizing space for stakeholders to communicate, share resources, and build with each other into the future. Given the current sociopolitical climate around education, I shared the ways in which critical Latinx public DH can not only enhance MAS research but also provide training and skills that students can take with them across disciplines and industries as they learn to curate, map, archive, and build digital exhibits that center MAS research. The incorporation of critical Latinx public DH approaches into MAS not only addresses students' concerns with marketability but also fosters the opportunity to engage in research that invites activism, thus contributing to the larger movement for MAS in Texas.

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