A Living Archive of Desire: Teresita la Campesina and the Embodiment of Queer Latino Community Histories

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Archive Stories

FACTS, FICTIONS, AND THE WRITING OF HISTORY

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On December 10, 1999, in a crowd of about fifty Latinos, queer and straight, Teresita la Campesina took to the stage in a well-known community-based arts gallery in San Francisco’s Latino Mission District. She prefaced her singing performance that evening with a speech about the importance of voting in the 2000 mayoral election in San Francisco. For the first time in the city’s history, one of the two candidates in the runoff election was openly gay. Teresita insisted that all those who cared about gay rights must vote for Tom Ammiano; otherwise the city would see a return to the days of police raids and actions against homosexuals. Even though she had not voted in over thirty years, she admitted, Teresita felt that it was time to stand up and go to the polls to defend her rights as a male-to-female (MTF) transgender, as a queer. Linking the city’s mayoral race with the impending California Knight Initiative (Proposition 22), designed to outlaw the recognition of same-sex marriages in California, she called for action against the return to a repressive social climate for queer folk.

Teresita followed her impassioned testimonial at Galería de la Raza with a moving performance. Singing live in Spanish several of the famed Mexican ranchera singer Lola Beltrán’s classic songs of loss and love, she delivered a strong rendition of Beltrán’s best-known melodies. That Beltrán had passed away in 1996 made Teresita’s songs that much more important to her as the continuation of the Mexican legend, in her own queer way. These were not songs for simple emotional engagement. They were Teresita’s tribute to a Mexican singer of great popularity on both sides of the border (national and sexual borders that is), a cultural icon belonging not to the elite but to the masses and their quest for a homeland. Teresita
performed the feelings and memories of loss and recapture, a complex structure of historical and cultural relations played out on the battle for land and for bodies. It was, as the playwright Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas commented, loss as strength, with a transgender Latina enacting not just a queer performance, but also a Mexican and Latino national treasure.4

Three years before this performance, Teresita had already set the record straight with me. In March 1996, during my first recorded oral history interviews with her, she made it quite clear who it was that I had the privilege of interviewing. “You’re talking to me,” Teresita said forcefully, a pioneer . . . so please wake up and smell the coffee! [followed by thunderous laughter] . . . I made it, and I am here testifying. But, that’s why I tell all the people of today: you’re so lucky to have these privileges. But then you’re not, because in my days they didn’t have AIDS. I caught syphilis, gonorrhea—I’m not ashamed to admit it, everything I’ve done in my life . . . I was very young and gorgeous. And I’m an old lady now, but looking whory, you know. I refuse to lay down and look like an antique. I like to varnish myself. And so I keep my voice and they say I still look good . . . They say I’ve got a young face sometimes. “Oh, she’s had facelifts.” So what?! . . . But I had the money to do it with, and I didn’t work a day for it. I made it all through prostitution. Because, why lie?!5

To be “testifying” was no trivial matter for Teresita. A Latina MTF-transgender artist living with AIDS at the age of fifty-five by the time I met her, she found in me a willing and interested listener. Making her musical rounds in Bay Area bars, restaurants, and house parties since the late 1950s, she remained a living legend, not necessarily always or universally well liked, but firmly grounded in what she believed she represented in history. Deeply committed to laying out a living historical record of queer desires, Teresita was not going to be ignored.

In this brief excerpt she explained that she was “testifying”: she assumed a responsibility to pass on the stories and histories of the fallen, those who came before the current generations of queer Latino/a community builders. She spoke about her tricks of the trade, how it is that she had survived for more than five decades as a poor, illiterate, transgender Latina, but one with the gift of a powerful voice she always used to her advantage. Talented, proud, outrageous, and big-mouthed, Teresita was an ideal queer narrator if there was ever one. Bridging many
periods, peoples, and places, the times and tales of Teresita, famous and infamous, help us understand the contours of queer and Latino life in the region.

This essay discusses the life and memory of San Francisco’s male-to-female transgender Latina artist, the late Teresita la Campesina (1940–2002). Her life history frames a living archive of evidence that responds to both the whiteness of queer archiving practices and the heteronormativity of Latino historiography. I discuss Teresita’s living historiographical intervention in three interrelated areas: the importance of her life as an oppositional history; her life history as an example of what Michel Foucault argued as a “general history” and alternative to a “total history”; and the question of mourning in the time of AIDS and related ongoing creation of community archives for documenting the loss of life.

Teresita’s Queer Life: A Memory Narrative of Opposition

As Tina M. Campt notes:

We think of memory as individual, subjective, and specific. We consider it always partial, inherently flawed, and ultimately intrinsically unreliable in that it can give us only a single individual’s perception of the past, colored by that individual’s very subjective interpretation of events or experiences. But although memory is in fact all of these things, it is also far more than just an individual’s cognitive process. Memory is also a deeply social process through which individuals construct and articulate their relationship to the world and the events transpiring around them, both now and then.6

Teresita walked and lived a great deal of her life alone. An outcast transgender Latina, she made a public life in bars and clubs, in homes, and in the street. But after the shows, the parties, and the excitement, home was often a place she occupied alone. The specificity of Teresita’s memory captures both of these dimensions: the loneliness that comes from being a “historical pervert” and the complete rejection from blood family, and the collective celebration of life found in the events, venues, and feelings she shared with thousands in public. This “deeply social process” in oral memory that Campt describes as a characteristic of what she in turn refers to as “memory narratives” was part of the archival contribution of Teresita: an
individual's perceptive and felt interpretation of social life—subjective, specific, partial—standing against the detached and monumental overshadowing of national and institutional histories.

Born in Los Angeles on November 29, 1940, to Mexican immigrants, Alberto Navairez was the last child of twenty-one. Early on, by the age of five, young Alberto, who eventually changed his name officially to Alberta, began to sing at home. He made his natural gift public in the family by hiding behind their large radio and projecting his voice as if it were actually coming out of the box. Ten years later and in her teens, already pushed out of her home for being joto, a “fag” in her Mexican context, Alberta no longer had to pretend. Broadcast live from Hollywood’s Club Guatemala under the artistic name of “Margarita,” Alberta sang her way across the Los Angeles radio waves via the Spanish-language KW, her renditions of Lola Beltrán making her a very popular artist. Most listeners, of course, likely had no idea who Margarita really was, a fact the club’s promoter did not care about as long as club patrons and profits kept coming and, to avoid police surveillances, Alberta did not mess with the men at the club.

Despite her popularity, and the ease of finding sex in the streets of L.A., life for Alberta, like that for most visible “perverts” in the 1950s, was rough. Like many, Alberta was repeatedly arrested for “masquerading,” for bending gender identity through dress in public. In postwar Los Angeles, the Hollywood industry manufactured a virulent white heteronormativity that Spanish-speaking brown queers like Alberta found it difficult to navigate. And so in 1958 she set out toward the already presumed Mecca for gays, the famed international city of perverts, San Francisco. The ranchera singer and grassroots storyteller was a legend from the moment of her arrival until her death on the 12th of July, 2002.

Teresita was especially known in the city’s Latino Mission District. As an artist, she was one of the most important personalities in its queer Latino history, creating through her art a very visible (queer) Latino community. Despite being HIV-positive for more than ten years, she continued to make space for herself, singing to and educating whoever cared to listen to her legendary stories. Peppered with camp, live reenactments of outrageous episodes, and often plain old too-much-information, Teresita made history come alive. Literally walking around with her art form and her history in her mouth, Teresita gave voice to Spanish language, to Latino
Young Alberto Nevaerez
in Los Angeles, circa 1941.
*Courtesy of Alberta Navaerez/
Teresa la Campesina and
Sergio Iniguez.*

(below) Alberta Nevaerez/
Teresa la Campesina, at a
residence in San Francis-
co’s Mission District, circa
1980. *Photo by and courtesy
of Daniel Arcos.*
cultural traditions, and to Latino queers in a city with an overwhelmingly white queerness.

Public about her HIV-positive status, Teresita took her singing seriously. She reminded her audiences that she was not only still living despite the toll of AIDS, but that she was an artist—a singer and a good one at that—not simply what she disparagingly referred to as a “lip-sync drag queen.” She demanded attention and respect not only for her craft but also for what she felt she represented for queer generations. For Teresita, her living testimony spoke to queer survival despite great odds, a complex narrative of past conditions and struggles and the present need for action—all dramatized through her singing and live narrations. Her narrative served as evidence that in the past things were not that easy for queer Latinos. She enacted a history of queer Latinas and Latinos who did not find accepting communities but who had to fight for them. In her life, in her body, and in her singing, Teresita manifested queer desire as uncompromising and challenging.

For marginalized communities constantly involved in struggles for visibility, political identity, and space—the business of “cultural citizenship”—testimonios about their existence are critical acts of documentation. On behalf of her “sisters and brothers”—as she referred to the thousands of other queer Latino community members who made the Bay Area their home for decades, people living with AIDS, those dead and dying from the disease, and her queer family—Teresita took every possible opportunity to narrate her relationship to the city. She connected those who had come with her and were no longer by her side with those from recent generations who she felt must understand what came before them. She also boasted about her own life constantly, flirting, often showing off, on more than one occasion literally raising her blouse and displaying her breasts. To shock and to provide re-gendered historical evidence, Teresita’s revelation of her own body was literal queer evidence. Triangulating the lives of those she remembered, her own body, and those she entertained, Teresita was living historical content and interpretation.

Storytelling, autobiography, and the testimonio tradition have a central place in history and theory. Situating the power of the story in the formation of theory, Avery Gordon argues that these multiple forms of narration fill a basic epistemological hunger. “We have become adept at discovering the construction of social realities and deconstructing their architecture,” Gordon explains,
confounding some of the distinctions between culture and science, the factual and the artificial. . . . And we have made considerable representational reparations for past exclusions and silencings, making the previously unknown known, telling new stories, correcting the official records. . . . Yet I have wondered sometimes whether, for example, we have truly taken seriously that the intricate web of connections that characterizes any event or problem is the story. Warnings about relativism to the contrary, truth is still what most of us strive for. Partial and insecure surely, and something slightly different from "the facts," but truth nonetheless: the capacity to say "This is so."9

This is what Teresita was doing in the recorded conversations with me, telling and arguing with us that "this is so."9 When she told me to "wake up and smell the coffee," when she asked and declared, "why lie?" she was making claims to important truths about her life, an extensive queer transgender Latina life in the second half of the twentieth century.

That Teresita was a performer herself complicates what Judith Butler offered as a theory of performativity, that gender is not a "natural," self-evident category, but is "performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence."10 In this sense, Teresita indeed performed her gender—the category of "woman" that she claimed and for which she worked. But she also ridiculed it. She became Margarita, Alberta, and Teresita, leaving behind Alberto, and got breast implants and embodied as best as she could a well-known woman singer. She also occupied the categories of "queer" and "pervert" because, in part, society and history would have her do so anyway. As the performer that she was, she also knew the limits of her own performance. While she sang powerfully and many assumed that she was a woman, she also mocked the whole enterprise of wishing to pass as one. She was an example of performative Latina queerness, while still a queer vilified and outcast. While telling the evidence of her gendered desires—the performance and construction of her persona—she also mocked herself and relished on her ability to fool many a man in her sexual exploits.

Speaking differently about "the intricate web of connections" Gordon finds necessary for social analysis, Renato Rosaldo finds the messiness of oral history narratives to be its particular strength. "Does all narrative meander," he asks,

now bending for another perspective, then for an overview, and again to tell what was happening elsewhere in the meantime? Narrative in fact does not
move in a straight line. And those who restrict narrative to linear chronology (the one-damned-thing-after-another version of history) have both misread history and underestimated the variegated potentialities of story-telling. Indeed, one strength of analytical narratives is that they can do so many jobs at once. Unlike more single-minded hypothetico-deductive propositions, stories can simultaneously encompass a number of distinct plot lines and range yet more widely by describing the lay of the land, taking overviews of the situation, and providing key background information.  

In Rosaldo’s view, the power of storytelling lies precisely in its open-endedness. Rather than trying to fit it into a neat, linear arrangement of events, the power of the story is its messiness, the fact that in both breadth and depth it can take us to places and meanings still undiscovered. Narratives begin to grow precisely at the point where the personal and the historical find common grounds, where biography meets history, as C. Wright Mills told us quite some time back. Because Teresita’s life story was one of the few surviving reconstructions of queer Latina and Latino pasts in the 1990s, the historical and evidentiary meanings of her existence prove to be an indispensable archive in the community and beyond. Unlike the inanimate paper archival sources we use (when we are able to locate them), which, as Renée M. Sentilles argues in this volume, are interesting and historical but cannot actually “speak” to us, Teresita did indeed talk back to and with us, ensuring as much as possible that the fluidity and meandering qualities of her existence did not remain in silence.

“To smell the coffee” in Teresita’s words was to recognize her pioneering role in singing Mexican songs as a queer subject in history, one admired by queer and straight alike. Pioneering, Teresita argued, in walking the streets in the 1950s and 1960s, before any popularized notion of gay liberation and pride, Latino or not. And not working a day for it? She took pride in the idea of not “working,” not because sex work is not “work,” but because while it was risky, and stigmatized, and challenging, it was also often pleasurable. All of this insight came in Teresita’s meandering memory of less than a minute.

Teresita was an excellent collaborator for the making of public history and public archives. Michael Frisch notes the critical space oral history occupies in its ability to produce at once “a source” for public history and interpretive frames, people’s understandings of their own lives. “We need projects,” Frisch believes,
that will involve people in experiencing what it means to remember, and what
to do with memories that make them active and alive, as opposed to mere
objects of collection. To the extent this is done, we will be seizing an opportu-
nity not nearly so accessible to conventional academic historical scholar-
ship...: the opportunity to help liberate for that active remembering all
the intelligence... of a people long kept separated from the sense of their
own past.13

To connect the past to the present, to make of history a collective process
of human signification where all of us become agents for its production, is
to be “testifying,” again in the words of Teresita. For Chicano and Latino
history, as Mario T. García has observed, the field is still fresh. As opposi-
tional histories, he explains, testimonios broaden historical authorship and
thus the perspectives we bring, can produce political texts able to critique
oppressive institutions, and make public records of stories not privileged in
dominant narratives.14 Or, as Yolanda Broyles-González argues in her bi-
lingual testimonio with Mexican American singer Lydia Mendoza, histori-
cal narratives like hers interpret history as “past in the present,” a neces-
sary collapsing of temporalities to create historical meaning.15 To try to
find the records and memories of people of color like Teresita in institu-
tionalized (queer) archives is simply a leap of faith bound to encounter
historical absence. Indeed, meeting Teresita in the Mission District in the
1990s, that is, facing living queer Latina and Latino history extending back
to the 1940s as it engaged me directly, forced me to shift my approach and
to make research, emotional, and political decisions about the historical
work I wanted to conduct: rather than spend valuable research time in that
oh-so-revered educational institution of UC Berkeley (where I was earning
my Ph.D.) or in queer regional archives that lacked racial ethnic specificity,
archival work on both spaces that—I already knew—would prove fruitless
in terms of queer Latino anything, I instead spent time walking, talking,
waiting, and making and returning calls to the living archives of desire
around me. That I was earning my degree in an interdisciplinary field
(comparative ethnic studies) that allowed more theoretical and method-
ological flexibility than an average history department made this shift
smoother. As Tony Ballantyne reminds us in this volume, our archive
stories should not simply be about the bodies of evidence we use, but must
speak to our ongoing concerns and preoccupations on multiple levels. For
me, knowing that Teresita was living with AIDS, that no one else before
with considerable access to educational resources—grants, time, institutional privilege—had made the effort to record queer Latino community lives, that I as a gay Latino in my twenties did not want to become HIV-positive, and that this historical work had everything to do with my commitment to life and my community’s health were all pieces of my appreciation for the living archives I had before me.

Oppositional narratives provide alternative perspectives to the course of history and its archives. Where the course of U.S. history presents mostly a black-and-white racial paradigm, Latinos can speak on behalf of a larger landscape. Where this mainstream historical course marginalizes queer subjectivities, lesbians and gays, transgenders and bisexuals have something to say. And when these narrative exclusions intersect—where queer life is Eurocentric and white, and the Latino body dogmatically heteronormative—someone like Teresita will certainly open her mouth, as she did. Against these intersecting archives of exclusions, Teresita sang, spoke, screamed, posed, and narrated living queer desire.

Long before I arrived in the Bay Area in 1994 and began to listen to Teresita’s narratives of opposition, she had already found attentive eyes and ears with others. In all those stories, she uncovered and she recalled with amazing precision just as often as she exaggerated and left glaring holes for her listeners to fill. Teresita’s narrative agenda was complicated, not always a noble endeavor, never a tale for passive listening. Because her tales were also musical, to listen to and to enjoy, Teresita was always a multilayered experience of history told and history sung, as pleasurable as it was exhausting. It was not just her testimony but also her actual presence, her living exchange with me, which “proved” for Teresita that she remained a historical participant in queer Latino San Francisco. Well aware of my larger project to produce an archive and a written narrative of the community, Teresita found an ideal situation to lay out a historical framework for her life and those lives around her. In a dialectical relationship between listener and narrator, Teresita and I collaborated to produce this frame as an important piece for queer Latino San Francisco and her role in making it happen. That she trusted me in her final years of life also meant that she set a responsibility for me to do something with the archive she was revealing. The walks and rides we took together in the streets of San Francisco to visit old friends in forgotten old bars to gather old unrecorded memories were the only means and method to her archival practice.
Alberta Nevaerez/Teresita la Campesina performing at the Mexican Museum, San Francisco, at the opening reception for the exhibit of the gay Mexican artist Nahum B. Zenil, March 16, 1996. Photo by and courtesy of Luis Alberto de la Garza C.

Teresita was certainly not a passive agent in this telling of her life. She was in a constant battle for memory as AIDS became a final challenge in the last decade of her life. In this battle for life, memory, and historical evidence, she engaged us in different ways and locations: the occasional and irreverent showing off of her breasts in public spaces; her voice and musical demands to interact with her in whatever venue she chose (the street, the bus, the car, the private home, the nonprofit agency); her mocking gestures, often "lovingly" dismissing individuals with "¡ahh sí, ese joto!"—"ahh yes, that little faggot," that is, certainly not someone with her artistic and historical stature. To Teresita, few others came close to her significance in her community's history or could locate pivotal archival anchors of that history. Her exaggerated irreverence, simultaneously play and challenge, meant that Teresita was pushing me to understand the evidence she laid before me. Similar to Durba Ghosh's detailed discussion of how racially and sexually laden research on colonial relations between India and the British Empire "exposed" her during archival research to
gendered and nationally driven expectations, presumptions, and warnings from gatekeepers about what she “should” be doing with particular archives, Teresita “burdened” me with her own demands, expectations, and interpretations of what her living narratives meant and what I could and should do with them.

Advertising her body and talents was not only an individual show but also a means to make space collectively. Teresita’s everyday informal performances created a cultural geography of the multilingual intersections of sexuality, race, and desire. The talented and daring transgender artist would take off in Spanish, English, or Spanglish wherever she could get away with it. It was an important accomplishment in queering Latino San Francisco artistically, to create cultural citizenship through music in Spanish. To testify in song and in conversation from the authorial position of “I” spoke to her political truths. Like others located in multiple positions of oppression, Teresita found in oral testimony a practical tool for telling history. Similar to others’ testimony involving disempowerment and domination, Teresita’s narrative was firsthand knowledge shared for political reasons. That I, as a listener of this history and witness to her reconstruction of its peoples and places, was a community member with an academic connection and professional legitimacy was further evidence for Teresita that she mattered in history. She wanted to talk and to show because she believed she had important lessons to communicate.

A “General” Queer Latino History

Teresita’s narrative functioned on many levels, all important for considering queer Latino community formations and destruction in San Francisco. The peoples and places in her memory did not give a “total history,” but rather what Michel Foucault referred to as a “general history.”17 “Total histories.” Foucault noted, draw all phenomena around a single center, with this single source presumably affecting all levels of society at the same time. In queer total histories, for example, 1969’s New York Stonewall Inn Riots mark the “pre” and “post” of gay liberation, a static, simplistically linear progression of history from repression to freedom, with no racial or ethnic specificity. For many of us queers of color, as Martin Manalansan writes about diasporic queer Pacific Islander histories, to be “in the shadows of Stonewall” can be an overwhelming struggle to create identity and
community outside the neat contours marketed on behalf of presumed global freedom, what Stonewall is meant to symbolize. In this evolving archive of Stonewall and its worldwide celebrations, the liberated white male gay subject takes center stage as the queer genders and sexualities of color are left scattered in historiographical background.

A "general history," however, speaks to "series, segmentations, limits, differences of level, time lags, anachronistic survivals, possible types of relation." The goal in this general history, Jeffrey Weeks notes further about Foucault's differentiation, is not simply to offer a jumble of different histories, or, to return to Rosaldo, the "one-darn-thing-after-another" model. General histories, Weeks says, help us "determine what forms of relation may legitimately be made between the various forms of social categorization, but to do this without recourse to any master schema, any ultimate theory of causation."20

Because Teresita lived on "both sides" of 1969, her own memories of gay liberation and repression provide an excellent general historical account of the meanings of freedom and of its presumed "progress." To return to the brief excerpt from Teresita, we see the tensions and unevenness of her general history. As a "pioneer," Teresita dates herself: she came long before most of us queers of the 1980s and 1990s, and at least one generation before the gay liberations of the 1970s. She walked the streets of Los Angeles in the 1950s, often getting arrested but other times surviving well, often even with grace. That she even made local fame as a cantante mexicana—Mexican singer—in radio proved to her that her voice was effective for transcending (maybe "masquerading") gender and sexuality, particularly in Spanish and for a large Latino public.

"You're so lucky to have these privileges," Teresita reminded me. Her general queer history also recognized the changes for younger queer Latinas and Latinos. She got to know some of us from university campuses who could organize to get her money to perform; who could invite her to speak and perform her life in our conferences; who in fighting AIDS were able to choose from several health agencies in the city to get services; and who could write, paint, or make videos in community-based projects to explore our gender, sexuality, and race openly, without getting arrested. In all of these instances of public history and memory, we created yet more archives of our lives—flyers, announcements, proposals, video and audio records, photographs, speeches—through the life of this living legend.21

Finally, in this general history, Teresita also recognized the limits to this
“progress,” most clearly in the reality of AIDS as a community challenge. When she spoke at Galería de la Raza calling us to vote, she reminded us that there can indeed be retrenchment in liberation. The lay of the land in Teresita’s general history provided many anchors to grasp the queer Latino history—and herstory—some of us are just beginning to document and archive.12 As a transgender, she spoke about socializing with Latina dykes on the famed 16th Street gay Latino strip, a very important facet of the multi-gender queer history of the barrio. She also made sure she named the names of those queer Latinas and Latinos who made space in straight bars, again, long before Stonewall. A “general” history, no doubt, but not generic at all, for her testimonies were part of a community’s survival strategies in the face of AIDS, gentrification, representational and archival silencings.

For communities excluded, outcast, and marginalized, voice can speak to power: it is literally a weapon of evidence against historical erasure and social analysis that fails to consider the experiences of individuals and communities on their own terms. Teresita had “a big mouth” at times, insensitive and careless in her volunteering information about other people’s HIV status, for example. These transgressions were also part of her narrative, problematic of course for those not wishing to be part of her tales. Yet, her insistence on making HIV status part of her storytelling kept this dimension of queer Latino life and death visible. Despite more than two decades of dealing with the disease, there remains much misinformation, silence, stigma, and insensitivity surrounding AIDS and people living with the disease. As a survivor, Teresita exercised her right to speak also to this truth.

The fact that other Latinas and Latinos (queer and not) considered Teresita’s testimonio important for their lives adds further meaning to that general history. In my oral history interviews with nearly sixty narrators, she has been by far the most frequent name to emerge as people remembered the local community; she was also one of the ones most often photographed and therefore appearing in the personal archival collections of several narrators. Some narrators found her intriguing and mesmerizing while others found her obnoxious and meddlesome, but nevertheless historical, in the sense that she marked space, time, and place; she was a loaded historical gun. Through her singing and irreverent revelations, her tales of sexual conquest and genital proportions, she earned her place in the collective memory. “Historical and hysterical,” as she herself inter-
preted her life, Teresita’s “I” spoke as a queer Latino “we,” the shape of a queer Latino testimonio and collective archival body in formation.

Why did Teresita want so much to “testify”? For this generation of queer Latino elders, facing AIDS in their own bodies forced many to come forth. But because many also died in silence—self-imposed, enforced by family or homophobic religious dogma, or a combination of these—Teresita spoke up. Because she had many stages from which to perform this truth about her dying community, she took advantage whenever possible. Teresita was also correcting the queer historical record of the Bay Area. She knew that the more popular histories and narratives of the region make some more visible than others. Her references to José Sarria, for example, the well-known historical figure in San Francisco’s gay history, involved commentary about what she argued was his choice to socialize and organize with white queers. Sarria may have a Spanish name, but for Teresita that was not enough for queer Latino significance. She instead remained known in Latino San Francisco, singing in Spanish, finding support and means for survival in Latino nightlife. The Los Angeles sexual outcast of the 1950s wanted to make sure we knew what she had accomplished, because books, films, classes, and archives did not reference her existence or her community’s.

The testimonial purpose of oral history is effective for catching experiences where those who lived them are no longer there for their resurrection. Teresita was not alone in doing this. The butch Chicana lesbian Diane Felix, for example, having socialized with many gay Chicano men in the 1970s, most of whom are now dead, had important perspectives to give, not quite on their behalf, but at least in direct relation to their lives. Likewise, as a transgender performer among a dying generation, Teresita was one of the only ones left behind. She was under their shadow, as one of the only ones available to tell “their story,” in a way shedding light on the historical debris of her people. Whereas this position can be one of privilege in having the ability to tell what few others can, it can be also one of overwhelming responsibility. Because Teresita had accumulated many losses, to rise to the podium of testimonial history was no easy task. But with no living biological family left and few surviving friends from her generation, Teresita’s community testimonio was her life at the end. Having lost the majority of photographs of her early life, narrating the fame and the infamy of “Teresita la Campesina” was the only visibility and archive of memory she could use. The seemingly simple and straightforward social
act of talking—in video and audio recordings, when singing, or when blurting out the names, dates, and places of queer Latino life in San Francisco—was the living archive Teresita bequeathed to future generations.

Memories like Teresita’s are particularly crucial in queer communities where cross-generational dialogue, with the joint participation of younger and older members, is not common. As an elder, Teresita refused “to lay down and look like an antique” among the more visible youth. Through her retelling of stories, she also found a form of companionship, of queer Latino citizenship. Queer companionship as citizenship is not to be taken for granted in an ever smaller queer community of people living with AIDS. This was, of course, citizenship and companionship that I shared as a participant-historian, a community member very much concerned with the business of survival—my own, Teresita’s, and our community’s—and the recognition of archival significance heretofore ignored.

Community Mourning and the Archives of Desire

As Liz Kennedy and Madeline Davis point out in their study of Buffalo’s working-class lesbian community, oral history research is necessarily a project of those willing and still able to tell their stories. The stories we queer oral historians process are often those of survivors, of those not having succumbed to social stigma, repression, alcohol and drug abuse, poverty and homelessness, and, from the 1980s onward, the ravages of AIDS. Just as oral history opens up the possibility of documenting the past, creating collective dialogues that are simultaneous acts of living reflection and archive building, highlighting celebration and survival, it also serves as a window into community loss, pain, and death. In this sense, “talking history” is an emotional, mournful enterprise for those of us made invisible and less significant in dominant historical narratives about the Bay Area, about Latinas and Latinos, and about queers.

At the closing of the 1980s, when AIDS deaths were as extensive as the homophobic stigma against the communities it afflicted, the New York Times calmed its presumably straight readers by stating that “the disease is still very largely confined to specific risk groups” and that “Once all susceptible members [of these groups] are infected, the numbers of new victims will decline.” The critic Douglas Crimp posed two challenging questions facing queer people then in the struggle for survival and mourn-
The challenges Crimp posed involve several implications for queer sexualities in the times of AIDS. Already marginal on multiple levels, queer Latino sexual consciousness confronted a new crisis with AIDS. In the 1960s and 1970s, sexual liberations and struggles for gender, racial, and sexual equalities gave thousands—including Latinas and Latinos—the possibilities to dream about overcoming oppression. For queers, narcissistic satisfaction meant the right to pleasure—to queer pleasures and citizenship long denied. But despite years of denial among Latinos generally and Latino queers specifically that AIDS affected us, AIDS came right in the middle of the sexual consciousness most were just beginning to celebrate. Our own “epidemic of signification,” to use Paula A. Treichler’s apt phrase, had conveniently but falsely constructed AIDS as only a gay white men’s disease. In the meantime, AIDS continued to remove bodies from the community, and, often, all records of these queer lives were literally thrown in the streets.

Thus a new set of sexual, cultural, and political strategies had to be learned to survive the disease, many still unperfected today. Many of us have managed to stay alive, or to remain HIV-negative, often compromising pleasure for safety, even companionship for the promise of life. But many of us have also died, like Teresita, and continue to do so, and those moments of queer pleasures we feel the right to have while staying alive crash against the very success of that survival—because guilt can be overwhelming. The contradictions between queer life and queer death became entangled in a queer Latino triangle: we were trying to celebrate our sexuality, while remaining vigilant about staying alive, and continuously mourning those who died. It is ever so much easier to list these dynamics than to actually live them and survive them. But mourning we had to do, with or without guilt. The living archival record Teresita fought to narrate was itself a mirror of this community dialectic between life and death.

Mourning someone like Teresita, ironically, was actually an anomaly in queer Latino San Francisco. A majority of us knew she had been ill for years (she wouldn’t let us forget it, actually), and thus we were more than willing to pay her respect by listening to the very end. But even general histories involve the passage of time and age, and so burying a sixty-one-
year-old legend felt different than accepting the death of a thirty-five year old we only knew as a friend for a few years, or finding out at the age of twenty that you’re HIV-positive long before any pharmaceutical promises for longevity.

Teresita herself, we can argue, helped us along in our mourning for her years ahead—"I’m an old lady now," she said, six years before her death. She also warned her AIDS social workers months before she died that she did not want to be cremated (as she was not), probably an unthinkable act for a historical pervert who refused to give up on Catholicism (despite the contradictions) and who had her own ideas of what the burning of bodily evidence meant for queer historical memory. Weeks before she died, as she grew sicker, she took the dress she wanted to be buried in to yet another social worker and the few photographs she had of her life. These were the remaining photos she had rescued from her multiple relocations over the decades—from the boy-child she was in 1940s Los Angeles to the regional transgender star she became in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s—to make sure people knew there was a visual record left of what she had achieved. Teresita did not give us the privilege not to identify with her AIDS-related death or to ignore her historical significance, but neither did she burden us more with the guilt for remaining alive after her memory. I want to believe, for I knew Teresita quite well, that she herself knew that all these pieces—the last dress she would wear, the remaining photographs, her own body—surely would be part of the (visual) record of the photographs, the oral histories we would tell, and the feelings we would recall after her death, all of which we have. Perhaps Teresita never had a state-sanctioned passport that would give her a national identity, as a technology of verification that legitimized her in the national imagination, to borrow Craig Robertson’s fitting analysis. But she did actively produce the truths of her life and of her multiple identities as she specified in detail how it was that she wanted to be re-membered as a queer citizen of history. As a living archive, Teresita made her self accessible, negotiating her own needs and interests with those like me who valued her experiences and analyses. There were no "restrictions" per se in my research relationship with Teresita, not at all like those described by Jeff Sahadeo in this volume, yet we both knew there was a serious investment we both had to one another for making the archival-like qualities of her oral history matter after her death.
(above) Long-term friend and neighbor Sergio Iniguez looking on at the late Alberta Navaerez/Teresita la Campesina during her wake in San Francisco's Mission District, July 17, 2002. Photo by and courtesy of Luis Alberto de la Garza C.

(below) Mariachi Los Cachorros, which accompanied Teresita's live performances for years, playing during her interment, Colma, California, July 18, 2002. Photo by and courtesy of Luis Alberto de la Garza C.
To excavate queer lives and queer desires requires careful considerations, beginning with the fact that they are not the priority of mainstream historicizing and archiving practices. “Where do lesbian and gay lives appear in the public record,” Graeme Reid asks, “and how are these lives and experiences represented? Of course, how lesbians and gay men appear in the public record is not unrelated to where they appear.” Teresita was one to straddle multiple sites for her life to be “recorded”—she was arrested several times for sex work, but was also photographed many more times by folks in her respective communities (Latino, transgender, queer) and audio and video recorded as well. But, with no automatic repository for queer Latino archives in the region, most of these artifacts are scattered and unorganized, often made visible only at the moment when an academic researcher and/or community-based historian makes it a priority to bring them together for public display, consumption, and interpretation. Teresita’s own death created yet more of these archives, with the many photographs and living narratives during the wake, her internment, the Catholic mass following, and several fund-raising community activities that brought hundreds of friends and admirers to celebrate collectively one last time the life of this pioneering queer historical pervert. Where these photographs and related records eventually find a permanent home remains one of the critical tasks at hand for the survival of her memory. These and other records too will attest to her commitment to talking archives: the process of narrating the lives of those who passed on and the meanings that archives communicate back to those committed to listening.

Surviving Archives of Queer Latino Desire

Teresita used her life in critical, meandering ways. Toward the end, enunciating a complex general history of Latinidad and queerness in the last six decades of twentieth-century U.S. history, she allowed us to appreciate her queer racial desires. This community mourning we did for her as we did for others in the 1990s has meant the loss of bodies and desires. Narrators mourned the death of their friends, their lovers, their sisters, and their brothers, even all those unknown queers. What began to die also as part of the times of AIDS was a sexual consciousness and politics of liberation. Latina lesbians mourned too the periodic loss of what they were barely
beginning to achieve, their own social and political spaces of the 1970s and 1980s, reduced to monthly nighttime venues and house gatherings. Queer Latinos, most tired of AIDS, sexual repressions, and ambivalence, had to mourn one another. Bisexuals became an even more embattled identity given the automatic, reductive assumption that they were the bridge of AIDS between straights and queers. The transgender community, MTF Latinas who built public culture through performance, were deeply ravaged by AIDS and often discarded in Latino health agencies and the gay community generally. Female-to-male (FTM) transgenders could hardly mourn as they were only beginning to occupy the space of citizenship and visibility. Caretakers of the dying queer, many of them later dying themselves, knew they were holding on to historical pieces: 1960s gay and lesbian escapades into straight Latino bars; racial escapades into the white gay liberation movements; forging political and social visions in the 1970s and 1980s; surviving the multiple challenges of AIDS to the present.

What we call homophobia is as “American” as racism and patriarchy, and overcoming the intersection of these forms of oppression can be a daunting life-long struggle, one that must include the records of those fights. Teresita made it to the age of sixty-one, a combination of all the lessons learned in the battlefields of her life: against blood family, bashers in the streets, the police state, mental and health agencies, and at least one acquaintance who simply yet viciously mocked her by referring to her as “he,” disrespectfully saying “Tereso.” Teresita “made it,” but not seventeen-year-old MTF transgender Gwen Araujo, who, finding herself at a party on October 3, right across the bay from San Francisco in the city of Newark, became one of thirty transgenders murdered and reported in 2002. That most alluring record of pre-to-post linearity of Stonewall liberation can ring quite hollow even in this queerest of U.S. cities.

The actual benefits of our notions of “progress,” “democracy,” and “equal citizenship,” we queers know, get distributed unevenly. Teresita knew it and complained about it for decades (and sang about it too); Gwen knew it and died very early with her knowledge. Their respective lives, long and short, serve as archival traces of where we have been historically and why we may be where we are at today. Their two lives alone are sufficient to understand the need for historical and political labor that theorizes gender, sexuality, race, and evidence across history with the bodies and the voices of the living and of the dead. The passing of their bodies requires from us the commitment to record and understand the
evidentiary qualities of their lives, to be courageous enough to gauge the shapes and voices of the living archives they embodied.

Notes

This essay is dedicated to the memory of the late Alberta Nevaerez, better known as Teresita la Campesina, whose life and work as a "historical pervert" gave much evidence to queer Latino history and culture in the San Francisco Bay Area for four decades. The essay benefits from the discussions with several audiences in 2003 at the University of California, Santa Barbara; Williams College; the University of Illinois, Urbana / Champaign; and Washington State University, Pullman. I thank Antoinette Burton for critical feedback, the anonymous readers for their suggestions, and Luis Alberto de la Garza C. for technical support and for providing several images included here. A University of California MEXUS dissertation completion grant in 1999 and a 2001 UC President's Postdoctoral Fellowship provided financial support to carry out a great deal of the research for this discussion.

1 Conscious of its historical specificity in the late 1980s and 1990s, I nevertheless use the term "queer" as a descriptive shorthand to refer to "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender" ("lgbt") identities and politics. While the term generally conflates multiple non-heterosexual gender and sexualities, it does serve well with its political edge, its perverse and outrageous quality specific to "in your face" political currents of the time, instead of the more (homo)normative "lgbt." In addition, "queer" functions in this discussion about a historical actor and subject, Teresita, who herself used it strategically to narrate her life and to analyze and critique homophobia, stigma, and social exclusion.

2 Although he became the first openly gay president of the city's board of supervisors, Ammiano was, in 1999, not the first openly gay candidate for mayor in the city; he was, however, the first one who appeared to have had a realistic chance of winning. In the final count, he captured 40 percent of the votes, compared to the winner and first African American mayor of the city, Willie Brown, who was reelected with 60 percent. The Peruvian lesbian activist Lucrecia Bermúdez also made one unsuccessful run for mayor in 1999 and three additional ones for the board of supervisors in 1996, 1998, and 2000. In none of these occasions was she able to garner sufficient support to make it close to runoff elections. In 1977, Harvey Milk, on his third run for the position, became the first openly gay supervisor during the first citywide district elections. Fellow supervisor Dan White, a former police officer, assassinated both Milk and the then mayor George Moscone on November 27, 1978, in City Hall. See Randy Shilts, The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982). As early as 1961, José Sarriá, self-described as being of

3 Lola Beltrán died on March 25, 1996, at the age of sixty-two, after more than forty years of singing in which she recorded nearly eighty albums.


6 Tina M. Campt, Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 86.


8 Avery F. Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 20; emphasis in original.

9 Another San Francisco gay activist and Chicano cultural worker, Valentín Aguirre, also recorded video interviews with Teresita, as part of his video Wanted Alive: Teresita la Campesina (1997). Additionally, weeks before Teresita’s death, the lesbian filmmaker Veronica Majano video recorded Teresita at the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts, as Teresita, visibly sick, admired black-and-white portraits of her taken in the 1980s by the late gay Chicano activist Rodrigo Reyes.


14 Mario T. García, Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

16 I discuss the personal impact Teresita had in my life, and I on hers, through an analysis of blood and queer familial relations in “Teresita’s Blood,” *CORPUS: An HIV Prevention Publication* 2, 2 (Fall 2004): 2–9.


21 This was the case for the “¡Con la Boca Abierta!” [Mouth Wide Open!] two-day queer Latina and Latino conference at the University of California, Berkeley campus on April 11–12, 1997 (for which I served as principal coordinator), when Teresita performed and narrated part of her life story as part of a panel of queer elders, “Veteranas y Veteranos.” About 350 women and men attended this regional gathering, mostly queer but also heterosexual, from high school students to those in their sixties. The audio, video, and print records are in my possession, to be processed and archived in the UCB campus.


27 I thank Luis Alberto de la Garza C. for sharing with me several of the stories of blood families and/or landlords discarding the belongings of queer Latino San Francisco residents following their deaths from AIDS-related complications.


29 Long-term Berkeley resident Luis Alberto de la Garza C. and I helped coordinate fund-raising events following Teresita's death, and Luis took it upon himself to create a collection of hundreds of photographs of these events and the people involved. It has generally been efforts like his, by individuals in the community working independently, that have created any records and archives of their queer lives and those around them. These community members include Danny Arcos, Virginia Benavidez, Ana Berta Campa, Maria Cora, Diane Felix, Juan Pablo Gutierrez, Silvia Ledesma, Karla Rosales, the late Hank Tavares, and Carlos Díaz Todd. For an analysis of one example of these grassroots archiving efforts, see Luis Alberto de la Garza C. and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez, "Queer Community History and the Evidence of Desire: The Archivo Rodrigo Reyes, a Gay and Lesbian Latino Archive," in Lillian Castillo-Speed and the REFORMA National Conference Publications Committee, eds., The Power of Language/El Poder de la Palabra (Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 2001), 181–98.

30 A groundbreaking video documentary using oral history and queer Latina and Latino community archival footage is Karla E. Rosales's "'Mind If I Call You Sir?': Masculinity and Gender Expression in Latina Butches and Latino Female-to-Male (FTM) Transgender Men," conceived and produced by Karla E. Rosales, directed by Mary Guzman, 30 minutes, 2004.

31 See the Web site http://wwww.rememberingourdead.org.