

# Unveiling Perspectives: A Personal Journey Navigating the Archives for a Thesis Research as a Chicana Scholar

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**Abstract:** My aim for this project is to reflect upon the process of utilizing California State University, Dominguez Hills' archives for a thesis project to interpret the voices of the Chicanas who were (and continue to be) overshadowed during the 1970s Chicano movement. The organization was called Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional; they gave their community a voice by providing resources, leadership roles, and solutions to the problems. I was driven to use the archives to personally see their organization's logo to interpret their design choices. I utilized the CSUDH's archives to take note of the similarities and differences of the multiple versions of the logo, and I connected my findings to my own personal knowledge and histories to interpret it. The process therefore created a path to have a meaningful interaction with the past to obtain new knowledge that led to an emotional understanding. This chapter can help benefit student researchers who are using the archives to interpret the visual rhetoric of the design choices made to create an image. Readers can see how I used my own culture to connect and to understand, and therefore how a researcher's cultural resources are integral parts of interpretation.

**Keywords:** [archives](#), [Chicana](#), [logo](#), [thesis](#), [visual rhetoric](#)

**Doi:** [10.37514/PEI-J.2025.27.2.22](https://doi.org/10.37514/PEI-J.2025.27.2.22)

## Introduction

In all of my years at California State University, Dominguez Hills, I never knew where the archives' room was located. As a former graduate student in the English department, with a master's in English Literature: Rhetoric and Composition, I was not aware we even had a place containing archives until my second year in the graduate program. I have always imagined the archives being in an old musty room in the hidden basement. Of course, this may be the case for some universities, yet the archives at CSUDH are currently located on the fifth floor of the university's library. The archives' room is a room that can only be entered with the permission of the staff since they have their doors locked. The space itself appears to be spacious and new. When entering the space, you are instantly struck by two polar opposite smells of old and new. The space itself contains tables on one side and bookshelves behind them. The walls had a few paintings that unfortunately I cannot recall to describe them. One wall had only pure windows looking over the university's campus. It was a nice view to look at when I wanted a break from my research. The archives themselves were in another room that only archivists or staff were able to enter. Overall, the space appeared to be well taken care of.

**Teresa Romero** is a Chicana feminist scholar. She graduated from California State University, Dominguez Hills where she earned her bachelor's degree in English Education and her master's degree in English: Literature Option with Rhetoric and Composition Emphasis. She has previously worked as a teacher assistant and as a tutor, specializing and supporting children with learning disabilities. She currently works as a research assistant, and as an English tutor at two community colleges located in Los Angeles, where she strives to learn new ways to support students and instructors to succeed. In her spare time, she loves to explore the outdoors either on a hike or camping with her family. When she is not spending time with her family, she enjoys reading a fantasy book with a side of good coffee.

My aim for this thesis project was to go to the archives to look at the visual image of an organization's logo called Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional. CFMN was an organization established by Chicanas during the 1970s Chicano movement to provide resources, leadership roles, and, most importantly, a voice to these women. Dr. Kendall Leon, a former English professor, addresses that these women felt that their needs were not being addressed during the Chicano Issues Conference, so “. . . these women physically left and met separately” (Leon 2). During the operation of CFMN, it led to many “ideological arguments,” and “. . . the documents themselves served as foundational texts for the Chicana movements and are later reproduced and used to invent what it means to be a Chicana” (Leon 3). I went to the archives to collect data on the differences and similarities within the images of the logo with the guidance of my thesis chair, Dr. Mara Lee Grayson. The photo that I took is the standard CFMN's logo that was taken in CSUDH's archive. The photo is a black and white silhouette of a woman's profile with a flower placed on the side of her head. The flower is the most interesting aspect of the image. It is a floral motif from Jorge Enciso's book, *Design Motifs of Ancient Mexico*, the floral motif is designed in a Aztec style with layered petals, giving it an appearance of a geometric pattern.



Fig 1 CFMN Standard Logo. 2023.

After collecting the data, I prioritized interpreting the choices of the design of the (standard) logo because I did not want any scholarly works to influence my own ideas and understanding of the material. According to Dr. Lyneé L. Gaillet and Dr. Jessica Rose, “Archival research requires you to arrive at interpretations of events and ideas independently, rather than solely relying on the interpretations of others or published scholarship” (Gaillet and Rose 128). The interpretations I had for the logo came from my own prior knowledge and my understanding of my culture. The scholarships and sources were later utilized to connect

and put the puzzle of all of these ideas together. With the help of my readers, Dr. David Sherman and Dr. Roderick Hernandez, they both provided me with historical context and additional sources that validated my interpretations. Overall, the archives morphed from being a foreign space to a sacred and comforting one.

## Navigating the Sacred Space

Although I was not lost within the physical space, I was lost mentally— yet it was not an unfamiliar experience. Throughout my academic career, I have encountered this sense of lostness and (un) belonging as a Chicana scholar. I have never done this kind of research nor was I guided before entering the archives. Hence, I was left with one question that many “. . . first time often ask, “Where do I begin?” (Gaillet and Rose 128). However, this experience of the unknown was not unfamiliar. The archivist provided me with a box containing folders of artifacts related to the Chicano movement; however, I was interested in only one of the folders. Upon obtaining the folder, I began to feel overwhelmed. I did not know how to start and what to look for. I went through the folder carefully and I began to skim through letters, brochures, flyers, and newsletters. As I looked through, the overwhelming feeling started to subside and I started to lose myself within the artifacts’ words and images.

Before looking at the logo itself, I was drawn to the other artifacts the folder provided. I was not sure if it was nervousness on how to start examining the logo that caused my attention to be captured by the letters that were in the folder. Some of the letters had a faded yellowish color due to age and had a rough texture as I attempted to delicately hold it in-between my fingers. I don’t remember much about what some of these letters contain, but what captured my attention was the greeting of the letter: “Querida Hermana” (Dear Sister). The term “querida” may translate to dear, but it is a more endearing and meaningful term in Spanish. There was something special about being addressed as a sister through the lens of a reader. I felt welcomed by the letter which demonstrates the impact that these two words may have had when the organization was active. Altogether, to address their audience as a sister establishes a meaningful connection within them which creates a community of *la hermandad* (sisterhood).

Although most of the documents were faded into a yellow or brown color, I noticed the brochures and flyers utilized bright colors. They mostly looked well preserved and almost new. The only thing that suggested their old age was the faded letters within these artifacts or documents. If I remember correctly, there was a brochure that still had a shine and it felt almost smooth and soft to the touch. Most of the brochures and flyers contained bolded letters and encouragement to join and to take action: “La Mujer: Acción y Cambio” (The Woman: Action and Change). Some of the flyers and brochures contained this title. Even though the word usage is simple, it is impactful to inspire women to join their cause. As the reader, looking at the bolded letters, bright color paper, and a bold title can be overwhelming; however, it was designed to capture the attention of the reader and to send a clear message. The boldness of these documents screams their frustration that it is time to be united as sisters to create change.

Overall, there were familiar and unfamiliar sensations as I explored the artifacts. Going through each document, I was excited. I got the opportunity to touch and feel the dry, rough, smooth texture of these historical documents and smell this old musty odor that did not bother me in the slightest. Even though I got an opportunity to physically experience these new sensations, it changed to a familiar emotion of frustration and sadness. I was reminded that these women were fighting to be heard within their community and within society. Without them, the Chicano movement would not have been successful. In addition, the new generation of these women would not be where we are now. Yet, we still struggle today which reminded me of my own struggles and challenges.

Experiencing all of these new or familiar physical and emotional sensations, I had forgotten about being in a foreign space. As I looked up and out the window for a small break, I felt a sense of tranquility. I then knew that this space was familiar and sacred to me because it holds an emotional conversation between the past and the present. A silent dialogue where there are no words needed. Therefore, the archival space passed down to me a knowledge of a mutual emotional understanding that I will share with other Chicana scholars.

## **My Inheritance of Knowledge**

Before going to the archives, it was difficult to find more information about the history and story behind the organization CFMN. If there was any mention about them that I could access, they were merely a footnote. Essentially, utilizing the archives not only provided the information I needed, but also it provided a significant bonding experience.

After skimming through some of these artifacts, Dr. Grayson came to my rescue to guide me through the process of taking the information and organizing it to collect data. We agreed to create a system that divided the data into three categories: those that contain the same elements of the standard logo, those that had different elements of the logo, and those that had both elements. While looking at multiple images of the logo and categorizing them, I also was analyzing and interpreting the meaning within the design of the logo. Although I did not voice most of my thinking process at the time, my recent emotional bonding guided me to micro focus on what was hard to see. When I first saw the logo online, I was looking at it as a whole rather than taking it apart and examining each one individually. My experiences and my culture became sources to interpret the meaning of the logo: “And rhetorical feminism values emotions and experience as authentic sources of knowledge, as features of rational argument” (Glenn 35). As a rhetor, I did not realize the importance of using the benefits of my emotions as well and using them as a source to look at what is not being directly said. I could not simply use a textbook or online databases to provide that information. Thus this small significant moment in the archives became crucial to how I proceeded with this project.

From the beginning, I knew there were some Aztec and Indigenous influences with these design choices. Nonetheless, I did not know how important these influences were. I know La Virgen de Guadalupe was an essential aspect to the making of the logo. La Virgen Guadalupe was once known as *Tonantsi* an Earth goddess who was desexed from her “serpent/sexuality, out of her. . .” and she “became *Guadalupe*, chaste protective mother. . .” thanks to the confirmation of (Anzaldúa 37). There were other influential women that are also part of the image of the logo, *La Malinche* and *La Llorona*. I grew up listening to their stories. *La Malinche* is an interesting individual where many still debate today. Some may see her as the lover of Hernán Cortés and a traitor to her people, while others see her as a victim of trying to survive her predicament. *La Llorona*, the weeping woman, her story ends tragically where she will forever search for her dead children. In the end, these female icons are combined where the “. . .Guadalupe to make us docile and enduring, la Chingada to make us ashamed of our indian side, and la Llorona to make us long-suffering people” (Anzaldúa 40). Altogether these women specifically utilized these three icons to emphasize their identity as Chicanas and what it means to be an *hermana*.

I have inherited these stories to keep our cultural history alive. Given the opportunity to use these stories and connect them with voices of these women through the image of the logo, it brought me a sense of relief as a scholar and as a Chicana. It all started to come together within the archival space. It brought me a sense of hope that finally made me feel that I belonged.

## Conclusion

Being able to interact with the archives gave me the opportunity to glimpse on what these Chicana women were thinking and feeling during their frustrating and motivated journey to fight against the oppression they were experiencing. Although I was not able to understand “the work that happens in archives. . .” fully, I was able to be “. . .[informed] the ways we see and ‘reclaim’ figures” through an emotional understanding (Enoch 60). The archive itself is a sacred space that holds knowledge of different perspectives and experiences. It becomes personal when you are looking and examining the physical history of your cultural background. Within this personal connection, I felt seen and heard since I understood their experiences and I did not feel alone. Their experiences validate everything I have gone through. I don’t have anything (an object) that was passed down to me. Afterall, the purpose of having archives is to tell not just the history but also the story of our ancestors which “. . . [legitimizes] ourselves through legitimating them” (qtd. in Enoch 59). Seeing these documents made me feel that I finally have something that I can see, hold, and share to the future generations. Even though I cannot physically pass down these artifacts, I can pass the oral history and knowledge I have attained during this journey. Traditionally, oral stories are part of our culture to keep our history and stories alive. I will have my own history and story to share with future Chicana scholars.

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