

MAGAZINE

Here's the Camera. Go!

The L.A. Rebellion film movement, born at UCLA in 1969, enabled minority student directors — Black, Chicano, Asian American and Native American — to tell the world about their communities.

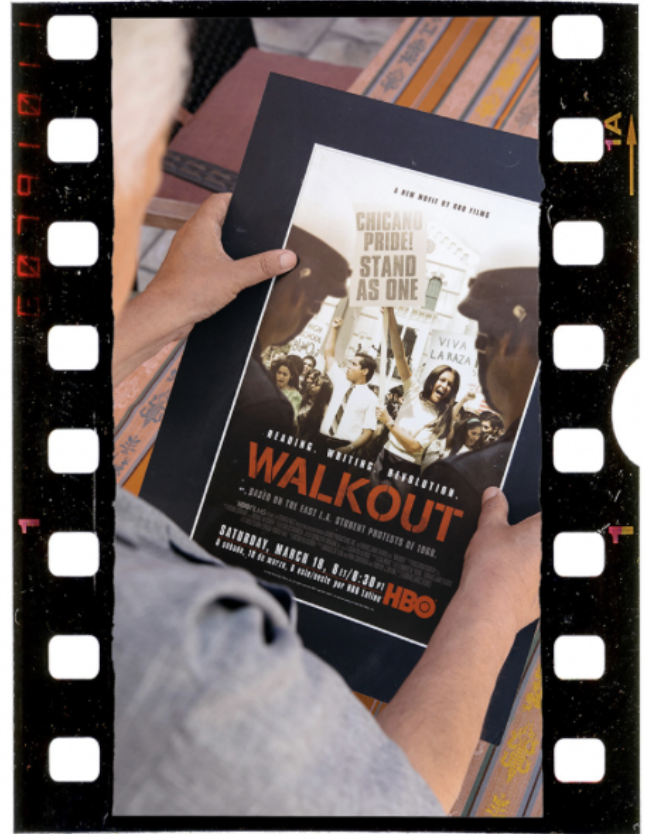
Hugh Hart | Photography by Jessica Pons | June 14, 2022

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At the end of the 1960s, a decade roiled by assassinations, race riots and war, UCLA responded to the turmoil by creating the Media Urban Crisis (MUC) pilot program. Eight months after two Black Panthers were killed on campus by rivals at Campbell Hall, Elyseo Taylor — then UCLA's only African American film professor — launched MUC with a grant from the Ford Foundation and a major assist from his student Moctesuma Esparza '71, '73. A natural-born organizer, by age 18 Esparza had already co-founded the Chicano community newspaper *La Raza* and helped organize the weeklong East L.A. walkouts. The March 1968 demonstrations saw more than 15,000 Mexican American students walk out of seven different high schools in East Los Angeles to protest inequality in education.

"I did OK as a student, but that wasn't really my gig," Esparza says. "My gig was being an organizer and seeking social justice." After Esparza went through UCLA's registration cards and learned that the roughly 30,000 students included only 40 Mexican Americans, he put together a plan with Taylor aimed at diversifying what was then called the Department of Motion Pictures, Television and Radio. The goal: train and equip Black, Chicano, Asian American and Native American UCLA students so they could make films about their communities.



Jessica Pons

Moctesuma Esparza at his home. Esparza was one of the primary organizers of the East L.A. walkouts to protest education inequality in the late '60s. He later produced an HBO film about the events.

The program helped spark what has become known as film's L.A. Rebellion, an explosive moment in visual storytelling that gave rise to some of the period's best-known Black filmmakers, including Larry Clark '81, M.F.A. '81, Richard Wells '72 and Charles Burnett, whose 1977 film *Killer of Sheep* is in the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress. Less appreciated has been the movement's inclusion of Latino and Latina, Asian and Native American moviemakers, who contributed significant work but have been largely overlooked in discussions of the L.A. Rebellion.

The 'Muccers' and Creative Crossover

In 1969, the first cohort of 13 so-called "Muccers" entered the MUC program. Among the group was self-taught photographer/activist Luis C. Garza. A Bronx native, Garza had dropped out of high school, served in the Navy, moved to Los Angeles in 1965 and found work as a community organizer while shooting photographs for *La Raza*.

“I’d come out of the Bronx a lone wolf but at UCLA, I learned how to collaborate.”

— Luis C. Garza

“I got into UCLA through the Upward Bound Program and parachuted into filmmaking,” Garza says. “Outside of my still photography, I didn’t have much of a film background when we ‘Third World’ students were thrown together. We didn’t know each other and there was a certain amount of chaotic direction, but it was the first time we had access to 16 millimeter cameras, Arriflex cameras and sound systems, which meant we could actually create our own movies! It was like: ‘Here’s the camera. Go out and do what you got to do.’”

Garza savored the Muccers’ inventive collaborative spirit. For example, he remembers how they refashioned a wheelchair as a Steadicam for a shoot on the streets of Venice that was directed by the late Danny Kwan. “The vibe was Bob Dylan, rock, Chicano movement, Chicano arts, culture, music, Black — all these influences intersecting and mixing together,” says Garza. “Coming from New York City, Los Angeles was a whole different landscape where you had this diverse but very separated population. If you’re Black, you’re in South Central. Asian, you’re in Glendora. But with the Muccers, you had all of these energies of a post–World War II, post–Korean War generation coming together at a time when Black studies, Chicano studies, Indigenous and Asian programs began to establish roots.”



Jessica Pons

Luis Garza at his home, going through memorabilia, including one of the many copies of “La Raza” for which he shot photographs.

A few months into the program, a multiracial crew teamed up to make *Requiem-29*. Produced by Esparza, the short film documented the Aug. 29, 1970, Chicano Moratorium, in which Vietnam War protestors clashed with police in East L.A. "That was part of the training for me," recalls Garza. "You're on the run, you're loading film, the police are chasing you with guns, you're snapping and shooting. It was like a baptism." *Requiem-29* became one of the 25 movies selected for the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress last year.



Jessica Pons

Garza — whose photographs will be exhibited in October at the Riverside Art Museum — left UCLA in 1971, armed with a five-minute short film he'd edited with a razor on the kitchen table of his Silver Lake apartment. He went around to local TV stations looking for a job in the camera department; instead, he was hired by KABC-TV to create a half-hour show called *Reflecciones*. He says, "We covered Vietnam, the Chicano incarceration, drugs, music, culture, Proposition 187 — a whole slew of programming. I had come out of the Bronx a lone wolf but at UCLA, I learned how to collaborate, and that's how I put together a team that managed to create 27 minutes of original footage every two weeks." Garza's Emmy-winning program alternated weekly with the Black-themed *I Am Somebody* series produced by his MUC friend Richard Wells.

Scholar Allyson Nadia Field, co-editor of *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema* (University of California Press), notes that while filmmakers of color were recruited according to strict ethnic categories, creative crossover quickly became the norm in the program, and it was renamed Ethno-Communications a few months after its inception. "This was a time of heightened political consciousness and as far as I know, Ethno was a unique experiment very specific to Los Angeles," says Field, an associate professor in the University of Chicago Department of Cinema and Media Studies. "National attention had turned to Los Angeles because of the Watts rebellion, the presence of Angela Davis on campus, the shooting at Campbell Hall. I think there was this desire at UCLA to be responsive to social concerns and reflect the city's diversity by having the film school recruit from these very clearly identified groups." Once the students found their footing, she says, "What you find is this wonderful mingling among the filmmakers that breaks down a lot of [ethnic] barriers."

In 1970, a second wave of activist filmmakers joined the Ethno-Communications program, one of whom was Eddie Wong '72, M.A. '76, M.F.A. '91. "I made Japanese and Filipino American friends for the first time at UCLA, and I got involved in the Asian American movement," he says. "A lot of that was galvanized because during the Vietnam War, we were being singled out as the enemy and we wanted to assert ourselves."

"It was like being in this cauldron of burning emotion where you felt this sense of conviction: 'This is the right thing to do.'"

— Eddie Wong

Wong, a contributor to the underground Asian American monthly *Gidra*, named after the 1950s movie monster, says, "I didn't have filmmaking experience, but I could write, so I submitted some of my poems and got in." Wong grew up in L.A.'s Fairfax neighborhood, where his parents ran a Chinese laundry. "A lot of us in Ethno wanted to learn filmmaking tools so we could tell our own community's stories," he says. "Rather than breaking into the industry and doing commercial stuff, we felt we should make our own media." To that end, he co-founded the still extant Visual Communications nonprofit with classmates Duane Kubo '74, Alan Ohashi '75, M.A. '78 and Robert Nakamura M.F.A. '75. Nakamura was a former *Life* magazine photographer who later taught at UCLA and, in 1996, established the Center for EthnoCommunications at the Asian American Studies Center.

Wong's first student short, *Wong Sinsaang*, offered a portrait of his father in the context of what it was like to grow up Chinese American in Hollywood. "It delved into the love/hate relationship I had with my father," Wong says. "He presented himself as the obsequious laundryman to his customers, but he was also an artist and scholar in his internal life."

Wong then embarked on a road trip that grew out of a documentary course taught by teaching assistant David Garcia. "Each of us picked a location and the whole class would go there in a beat-up VW bus, on the road for a week," he recalls. "You'd be the grip on one film, the sound person on the next, and then you'd have two days to direct. I took the class to Locke, California, in the Sacramento River Delta, one of the few remaining rural communities settled by Chinese, Japanese and Filipino immigrants. There were a lot of poor, older tenant farmers living on basically nothing, so that was eye-opening for the class."



Robert A. Nakamura, Courtesy of Eddie Wong

Eddie Wong behind the camera on location in Locke, California, for production class.

The trip to Locke eventually resulted in Wong's *Pieces of a Dream* documentary and exemplified a core value of the Ethno program. Describing his immersion in the program, Wong explains, "It wasn't only about the rise of Asian American consciousness. There was a real solidarity with Black, Latino [and] Native American classmates. We worked on each other's films, we'd go drinking, we went to a lot of screenings together. It was like being in this cauldron of burning emotion where you felt this sense of conviction: 'This is the right thing to do.'"

After graduation, Wong worked at Visual Communications for nine years, then served as a campaign manager and later national field director for Jesse Jackson's 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns. In 1990, he returned to UCLA to complete his M.F.A., and, six years later he became executive director for the Asian American Consortium in Public Broadcasting. Remembering the Ethno era, he says, "We were young, rent was cheap, food was cheap, gas was cheap, you could get by on a little bit of scholarship money — we had a lot of things going in our favor. And we believed — naively perhaps — that we were on the right side of history. I thought of myself as a revolutionary, so for me, the program was always more about the movement."

Filmmaking as a Tool

The program's spirit of intercultural collaboration was also personified by Sandy Osawa. A Native American raised in Washington, she ran the Head Start program on her Makah Reservation before moving to Los Angeles and teaching in UCLA's High Potential Program. From there, she joined up with the Muccers, learned the rudiments of filmmaking and clicked with her Japanese American teaching assistant Yasu Osawa, whom she eventually married. "Yasu had really strong visual talent and got into UCLA after winning a bunch of Super 8 film contests," she says.



Courtesy of Sandy Osawa

Sandy Osawa

For her class project, Sandy made a short documentary called *Curios*, inspired by an exhibit of Indian skeletons she'd seen at a Los Angeles museum. "Looking at these remnants of our ancestors' skeletons being presented in cages basically made me think about how society sees us as being dead," she says. "We filmed people walking around the museum and commenting on the skeletons. The second half was about who we are now, as Native Americans doing various things on campus. Yasu helped quite a bit in editing *Curios* by using a style of fast cuts."

Sandy and Yasu Osawa left the Ethno program after traveling over the summer to New Mexico, where they filmed reservation life in the Laguna Pueblo. In 1974, NBC produced the couple's *Native*

American Series, which included appearances by Marlon Brando and folk singer Buffy Sainte-Marie. In 1995, writer-director Sandy and cinematographer-editor Yasu made *Lighting the 7th Fire*, about Wisconsin's Chippewa Indians, which became the first full-length Native American-made documentary to be featured on PBS' POV program.

As a couple, the Osawas produced 29 film and television works, now archived at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. Speaking about Native American stereotypes, Sandy says they used filmmaking “as a tool to give society a better understanding of who we are, how we have been treated and how we *should* be treated.”

A Lasting Effect

The Ethno-Communications program continued until 1973, when its funding from the Ford Foundation grant expired. But its impact did not end there.

Chon A. Noriega, former director of UCLA’s Chicano Research Studies Center, says the program managed to diversify the department’s student body. “During the grant period, the Ethno-Communications students effectively agitated for the department to establish a policy whereby 25% of its undergrad and graduate admissions consisted of racial minorities. That basically integrated the goals of the program into the department admissions process itself. When I was hired as a professor in the department in 1992, the production students were still fairly diverse and Latino students made up a good portion of the production cohort. By the end of the 1990s, though, Prop 209 [had] changed things for the worse.”



Jessica Pons

Garza holding one of the posters that he photographed and hand-painted.

As Garza sees it, the short-lived program had a lasting effect. "Ethno was the launching pad. From there, each of us went in a different direction." Garza's fellow Mucceer Brian T. Maeda worked in TV and most recently directed *We Said No! No!: A Story of Civil Disobedience* about World War II's infamous Tule Lake internment camp, which aired last May on PBS. Ethno teaching assistant Betty Chen, profiled in *Filmmaker Quarterly* by New York University professor Josslyn Luckett, made her mark with the animated short *Portrait of a Young Girl*, based on a victim of the 1970 Kent State shooting.



Jessica Pons

And what of Esparza, the teenager who helped set the Ethno program in motion? He became an Oscar- and Emmy-winning producer on projects that included HBO's *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*, Robert Redford-directed *The Milagro Beanfield War* and Jennifer Lopez's breakthrough biopic *Selena*. Esparza, now serving on the School of Theater, Film and Television's Executive Board, credits his success to guidance from mentor Elyseo Taylor.

He recalls, "I graduated with my B.A. in 1971 and applied to other schools thinking I'd study political science or government or something. But Elyseo said I should stay at UCLA and get my master's. I said, 'Why? I'm not a filmmaker, I'm not a writer, I'm not a director. Hollywood has nothing for me.' Elyseo said, 'You misunderstand, Moctesuma. You know how to get people to do things. You're a producer.'"