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¡La Lucha Continua! Gloria Arellanes and Women in the Chicano Movement

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*"**East of East**" is a series of original essays about people, things, and places in **South El Monte and El Monte**. The material traces the arrival and departures of ethnic groups, the rise and decline of political movements, the creation of youth cultures, and the use and manipulation of the built environment. These essays challenge us to think about the place of SEM/EM in the history of Los Angeles, California, and Mexico.*

"So we moved here to El Monte, and I remember all the neighbors were white," recalled Gloria Arellanes in a 2011 interview conducted by the UCLA Library Center for Oral History Research. [1] This was extremely different from East Los Angeles, where she was born in 1941. Growing up in El Monte was not easy, she explained. Unlike East Los Angeles, where ethnic solidarity and family had sheltered her, in El Monte, discrimination and racism were omnipresent. It was not uncommon for her to hear disparaging comments about Mexicans: "that we were lazy...We're dirty. In those days...[Y]ou couldn't show your culture, and we didn't have a culture. We didn't even know our own culture." A child of a Mexican American father and Native American Tongva mother, she wrestled with her racial and cultural identity. Arellanes attributes this to the intense Americanization she encountered at school. "I remember coming home one time telling my dad that I was an American, and he says, 'No, you're a Chicano.'" Gloria Arellanes laughingly recalls how this brought her to tears. "No way, no, no, no. I'm American," she bawled to her father.

It is difficult to imagine that Gloria Arellanes ever denied her Chicano and Tongva heritage. In the heyday of 1960s social movement activism, she went on to become one of the most influential activists of the Chicano Movement. She is best known for her participation in the Brown Berets, where she became the only woman to hold a major leadership position and the motor behind the organization's establishment of a free health clinic. As a self-proclaimed advocate for the underdog, Arellanes has dedicated her life to a diversity of projects for community improvement. Yet little is known historically about this important figure and about the connections she helped to forge between El Monte and national social movements. A humble and selfless person, she has happily remained outside the spotlight. There is no doubt that Gloria Arellanes' activism and that of other women in the movement has been overlooked in historical renderings of this period, which have centered on heroic male figures. [2]

Gloria Arellanes and the Context of Youth

"I was born in East Los Angeles at the Mayo Clinic over there on Soto Street, and we lived in the Maravilla projects probably the first five years of my life," remembered Arellanes. Like many Mexican Americans in

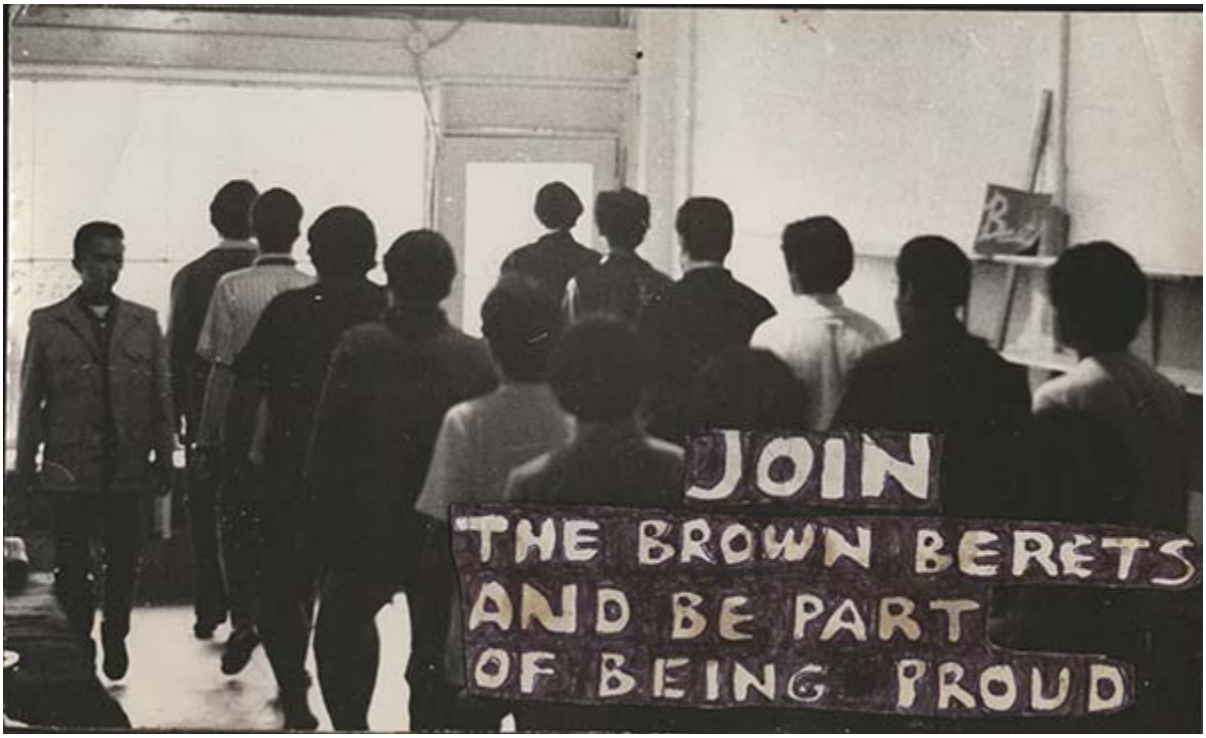
Southern California, her family had deep roots in East Los Angeles. Her childhood was all about family: "My mother came from a family of sixteen. My father's family was fourteen," she recalled. Her father came from a middle-class family that migrated from Chihuahua and settled in Los Angeles by way of Texas. Arellanes warmly remembered how, at the height of the Great Depression, her grandfather helped to run a food distribution program that brought fresh produce and other staples to barrios like East Los Angeles. Despite being labeled a communist for his efforts, he went on to run a successful family business. As Arellanes explained: "They were ironsmiths, and so my grandfather on my dad's side had this shop in East Los Angeles right there on Mednick and Dozier." Through this successful business venture, her grandparents achieved some degree of economic mobility, buying a house that Arellanes remembers as "this big, big huge property, a two-story home...They had the first residential phone in Los Angeles, and I remember it was a big black heavy thing, and you had to dial."

Then one day her father relocated the family to a brand new home in El Monte, using benefits from the G.I. Bill. Gloria Arellanes' family joined the waves of Mexican Americans who moved from Los Angeles to the San Gabriel Valley in search of new opportunities. Southern California's post-WWII Mexican American population boom transformed many cities like El Monte. [3] However, El Monte's predominantly white residents did not stand idle while the city underwent historic racial transformations. Arellanes recalls how the city's Nazi Party spearheaded vigilante attacks targeting Mexicans. Youth confronted racial tension in school, like many other neighborhood spaces, as it became a site for the policing of Mexican American youth.

According to Arellanes, racial conflict escalated into full race riots in El Monte High School, in which Anglo and Chicano students harassed and picked fights with one another. "I'm very tall and I'm big boned, so people were very afraid of me, period, so nobody wanted to fight with me anyways," she proudly recalled. Additional policing by local authorities exacerbated tensions between white and Chicano youth, but it also created solidarity among Chicanos, who had to stick together for protection.

In high school Arellanes helped form the Mexican American Youth Council, which, under the guidance of an Anglo counselor, created an organizational space for young Chicanos to cultivate solidarity and craft their own agendas. This initial form of organizing convinced her of the need to develop a politics around race that not only valorized Chicano culture but also disproved the harsh stereotypes about the group. Most importantly, it motivated her to participate in community projects intent on defending and caring for the Chicano community.

The Brown Berets



Flyer used for recruiting Brown Berets. Courtesy of CalState University Los Angeles.

"[Before the movement] I cruised Whittier Boulevard," Gloria Arellanes laughingly admitted. "Yes, that's what we did, and that's how I came in contact with the East L.A. community, cruising Whittier Boulevard for many, many years." She remembered how one day, she and her friends wound up in a new space called La Piranya coffeehouse. Intrigued by youth activities there, they entered thinking it was a party. Once inside they were greeted by other youth who immediately tried to recruit them into the new organization. As she recalled: "There was something there that attracted us, and so I wanted to know more." Arellanes and her friends were fascinated with the organization's leaders and their commitment to the community. "So we kept going back, and eventually I said, Okay, I'm going to join, and we joined," she casually recollected. This encounter with early Chicano movement organizing, by way of the Brown Berets, forever changed her life.

The Chicano movement was an epochal transformation in a long history of Mexican American mobilizations.[4] Unified by a strong valorization of Chicano culture, activists forged a new style of politics centered on mass protest and more radicalized mobilizations. This new generation of activists was inspired by Cesar Chavez and other Mexican American heroes and selectively borrowed from both the African American civil rights movement and Black Power mobilizations. Though this period is framed in academic literature as purely militant and radical, the bulk of the movement's goals were actually quite moderate. The Brown Berets, for example, is historically identified as a paramilitary organization that led the Chicano armed struggle, though by privileging these masculinist and radical images, such analyses overlook the expansive grassroots organizing and community care focus that undergirded the organization's formation and subsequent mobilizations. Movement participants called for basic human rights such as fair and equitable education and employment, demanded resources for the Chicana/o community, and denounced abusive treatment from law enforcement. [5]

The East Los Angeles chapter of the Brown Berets was formed through the meeting of different youth activist organizations and leaders that converged at La Piranya coffee house. Created in 1967 with the help of local Catholic Church leaders, La Piranya drew prominent civil rights leaders and neighborhood youth from activist circles. [6] It was here that the Berets drafted an agenda for the improvement of the Chicano community that came to be known as the Ten Point Program. [7] Their mission was expansive, including demands for unity within the Chicano community, equitable wages and resources, and community control over policing. [8] Only one point stressed the right to bear and keep arms. As historian Lorena Oropeza argues, the "Beret's militancy -- and notoriety -- derived primarily from their speech rather than their actions."[9]

La Piranya Cafe. Photo courtesy of CalState University Los Angeles Special Collections. Gloria Arellanes Papers.

Politicizing Community Care

As a new generation of youth activists, the Brown Berets initially encountered resistance from neighborhood residents. They realized that militancy and radicalism further distanced them from the community they sought to help. As Arellanes recalls of their early outreach to the community: "So we go in there in our Brown Berets, we didn't have our bush jackets yet, and we had some kind of a flyer for some event. I remember people getting [the flyer] -- they would look at me, 'Chicano?' and they'd get the paper and wad it up and throw it down on the floor." Aside from distrusting the Berets' revolutionary aesthetic, older residents did not understand why youth chose to call themselves "Chicanos" -- which was a pejorative term for older residents. [10] Despite their deployment of a militia style, the Berets were primarily committed to protecting and caring for the East L.A. community. "We were trying to say we feel there should be better schools, our kids should be able to go to school, we should have health services and different issues that most communities had," Arellanes detailed. "It took a long, long time to gain people's confidence in us."

The Berets quickly improved their reputation in the community by establishing the Barrio Free Clinic. The clinic was opened in the evenings and had full health services, including a pharmacy. It was staffed by numerous volunteers, including many white nurses and doctors, and was coordinated by Arellanes. While she was initially reluctant to take on the responsibility because of her concerns about the white professionals who were involved, the clinic became her pride and glory. In July 1969 she became the official clinic director. "The clinic became my passion because it really addressed a real need in the community," Arellanes proudly remembered.

Barrio Clinic.Photo courtesy of CalState University Los Angeles Special Collections. Gloria Arellanes Papers

The Barrio Free Clinic was among the first free clinics established in a low-income, Spanish-speaking community. [11] The Berets presented the clinic as a community-driven project that provided health services in the absence of state social welfare programs in urban barrios. [12] Here clients could avail themselves of a variety of programs designed for Spanish-speaking residents, including sex education and reproductive health counseling for youth. [13] It was also a cultural center of sorts and its walls were adorned with a multiplicity of movement posters and murals to cultivate cultural pride. The clinic, along with the major Brown Beret efforts of transforming Chicano youth, demonstrates a much more complex vision of the organization. In addition to serving as the armed vanguard of the Chicano revolution, the Berets deployed diverse strategies to achieve community welfare. [14]

Another example of the movement's numerous lines of struggle included the Brown Berets' participation in the **Poor People's Campaign** in 1968. Organized by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian

Leadership Conference, the Poor People's Campaign fundamentally called for the federal government to change conditions for the nation's poor. For Arellanes, participation in this campaign helped her understand that the fight for social justice was national and multi-racial in scope. Brown Beret participation in the campaign connected El Monte and Los Angeles to other geographies of struggle and allowed participants to see the commonalities among Chicano, African American, and Native American communities. As Arellanes nostalgically remembered: "To me, that was the biggest experience I had in terms of meeting diversity and people from other parts of the country, because you're raised in an area, you don't leave it, you don't travel, you don't take vacations."

Women and Politics in the Chicano Movement

Like other 1960s and 1970s political movements, Chicano mobilizations were not free of internal divisions and contradictions. Many of the most contentious points revolved around the militancy or insufficient radicalism of certain organizations. Another major point of contention was the movement's misogyny. As Chicana feminists have argued, women in the movement played a foundational role in building community institutions but rarely received recognition for their work. Gloria Arellanes, for example, revealed the pivotal role women played in maintaining the clinic. As Arellanes recalled, "While we were doing that clinic...the men were not involved in it...They let the women do it." Many of the female clinic volunteers alleged that male Berets were disrespectful of the clinic. Gloria Arellanes clarified: "[The men] started wanting to party there when the clinic was closed and hang around when I had patients with children." As the clinic's director, Arellanes ordered men to stay out of the clinic if they were not there to help. "I was very protective of that clinic," she explained, "I was Mama Bear there. You don't mess with my clinic or my clients or my patients or my services."

Arellanes garnered attention because of her outspoken nature. Appointed minister of finance and correspondence in Spring 1968, she transgressed many barriers that blocked many other women in the movement. The Brown Berets used titles such as "minister" for leadership positions as a way to emphasize the militaristic and hierarchical nature of the group. She attributed her entry into predominantly male spaces to her candid ability to command attention through her voice and body: "I was very large in stature, very large. I weighed close to 300 pounds, I'm five-foot-eight, I was very big, and I was very bigmouthed." However, despite this, she lamented the fact that as the only female Brown Beret minister, she was continually shut out of decision-making processes. For Arellanes the title of minister meant nothing because she was primarily given administrative tasks. As she deemed it, she served primarily as the organization's "glorified secretary." Nonetheless, Arellanes continued to voice her opposition to discrimination of women. As she told interviewer Virginia Espino: "I saw the abuse the women got, and I fought for them." According to Arellanes, men expected the women to do all the cooking and cleaning without ever giving them credit for their contributions. This created irreparable conflicts among the leadership and eventually women from the East L.A. Brown Berets left the organization. [15]

Photo of Gloria Arellanes in Brown Beret march. Photo courtesy of CalState LA Special Collections.

Despite her gendered consciousness, Gloria Arellanes never described herself as a feminist at the time of her organizing. She recalled how the men disparagingly called them "women's libbers," implying that the women betrayed the Chicano cause by embracing feminism. At that time the Chicano movement overwhelmingly considered feminism as a White woman's political project. As she argued: "[A]t that point in time, white women's liberation was take your bra off, burn your bra. They were still activists, but we couldn't relate to that. Culturally it was just not something we wanted to do or thought it was liberating to do that." Arellanes critiqued the white women's liberation movement for its narrow focus on individual rights of women. At that time she along with other Chicanas were focused on the liberation of the entire community. "It was liberating for us to see our community come up, be organized, go to school and get better housing and health, get jobs," she recalled. "Stop the police harassment, the brutality that went on, the racism that went on."

Conclusion

Gloria Arellanes's participation in the Brown Berets and the larger Chicano Movement was not without struggle. She confronted gender discrimination and single-handedly raised two children as a single mother. Despite all the struggles she encountered in the movement, she was forever positively touched by her activism: "I had fun with the Brown Berets...We were all young...We protested. We went to marches. We went to rallies. We were always trying to recruit new people, so you're always meeting people and talking and talking and talking and traveling up and down the state to other areas that were interested in setting up Brown Beret groups, and that was always a lot of fun and interesting."

Arellanes's oral history and her robust activism help us to see how movement practices unfolded across geographies, such as El Monte, that do not automatically fall into the register of the Chicano movement. She also shows us the interrelationship between the struggles of Chicanos and other racial groups, such as African Americans and Native Americans. Inspired by the Chicano movement valorizations of indigenous culture, Arellanes also became involved in a movement to reclaim her native American Tongva heritage by collaborating with different Native American groups and recreating Tongva ceremonial practices. She continues to be a proud resident of El Monte and throughout her life has engendered diverse projects of community care. She transferred her commitment to social justice to her work in Los Angeles County and later in the Los Angeles Sheriff's department. Through her everyday struggles to defend and advocate for Chicanos and other minorities, Gloria Arellanes is a living legacy of the Chicano Movement. Her story demonstrates that we need to interpret the Chicano Movement not as a historical artifact, but as a living movement and a continued struggle. As 1960s and 1970s activists commonly assert: "¡La lucha continua!"

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[1] Gloria Arellanes, interview by Virginia Espino, La Batalla Esta Aqui: The Chicana/o Movement in Los Angeles," UCLA Library Center for Oral History Research, University of California, Los Angeles, Sessions 1-6, Accessed September 11 2014, http://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu. All quotes of Arellanes in this article are taken from the UCLA interview

[2] For and extensive analysis of the central role Chicanas played in the movement, see: Dolores Delgado Bernal, School Resistance and Grassroots Leadership: Providing an Alternative History of the 1968 East Los Angeles Blowouts," PhD Diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1997; Maylei Blackwell, analysis of the central role Chicanas played in the Movement (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Lorena Oropeza, ¡Raza Si! Si! University of Texas Press, 2011); Lorena Oropeza, Chicano Movement Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[3] Many different factors led to this post-WII population surge. Historian Ernesto Chavez attributes this increase to the baby boom among Mexican Americans and other groups. Another major factor was a sweeping change in immigration policy set forth by the Immigration Act of 1965. In stark contract from previous restrictionist immigration policies, this reform established the principle of formal equality in immigration, which opened the door to greater number of non-European migrants. As a result of this reform, increasing numbers of migrants from Latin American and Asia alike migrated to the United States. For an extensive analysis of immigration reform and the making of the modern United States see: Mae Ngai, Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[4] Historian Ernesto Chavez makes an important argument about seeing the long duration of the making of a Chicano movement that interacted with a long tradition of Mexican American organizing. For an extensive analysis of this history see: Ernesto Chavez, "¡Mi Raza Primero!"(My People First!): Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[5]Lorena Oropeza, ¡Raza Si! Si!: Chicano Protest and Patriotism During the Viet Nam War Era (Berkeley: University of California

Press, 2005), 49.

[6] Ernesto Chavez, "¡Mi Raza Primero!(My People First!): Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 44; Dionne Espinoza, "'Revolutionary Sisters': Women's Solidarity and Collective Identification Among Chicana Brown Berets in East Los Angeles, 1967-1970, Aztlan 26, no. 1(2001): 17-58, 23.

[7] Ernesto Chavez, "¡Mi Raza Primero! (My People First!): Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978): Nationalism, Identity of California Press, 2002), 49. This Ten Point Program was specifically modeled after the Black Panther Party mobilizations. For an extensive analysis of the Black Panther Party and its projects of community care see: Alondra Nelson, Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

[8] Ibid.

[9] Lorena Oropeza, ¡Raza Si! Si! , Chicano Protest and Patriotism During the Viet Nam War Era (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 137.

[10] For a discussion of the term or redefinition of the identity category see: Lorena Oropeza, ¡Raza Si! Si! (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 82-92.

[11] Other Brown Beret chapters also experimented with other social welfare programs including free breakfast programs. The Black Panthers were the pioneers in these types of mobilizations including similar community clinics. For an analysis of the Black Panther's relationship to projects of community healthcare see: Alondra Nelson, Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). For an analogous example of Mexican American community institution-building endeavors see also: Juan Herrera, "Unsettling the Geography of Oakland's War on Poverty: Mexican American Political Organizations and the Decoupling of Poverty and Blackness," Du Bois Review 9, no. 2 (2012): 375sity o

[12] Dionne Espinoza, "' Solidarity and Collective Identification Among Chicana Brown Berets in East Los Angeles, 1967-1970," Aztlri 26, no. 1(2001): 17-58, 36.

[13] As Arellanes goes on to explain, this was a controversial point in the clinic. The clinic was initially funded through donations from the local Catholic Church, which vehemently disapproved of the sex education programs. Therefore, Arellanes had to find alternative sources of revenue to help support these services.

[14] In her interview with Gloria Arellanes, Virginia Espino refers to this movement practice as "straddling different lines" of struggle, see: Gloria Arellanes, interview by Virginia Espino, La Batalla Esta Aqui: The Chicana/o Movement in Los Angeles, addling different lines" of struggle, see: Gloria Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles, Sessions 1-6, Accessed September 11 2014, http://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu.