

ARTBOUND

La Raza: The Community Newspaper That Became a Political Platform

By Carribean Fragoza, April 4, 2018



Artbound "La Raza" is a KCETLink production in association with the [Autry Museum of the American West](#) and [UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center](#).

The origins of La Raza magazine sound like the beginning of a joke or a story that could go in any direction: a white priest, a Cuban refugee and a young white woman and Stanford graduate walk into a church basement... However, it's the beginning of the story of the life of one of the Chicano movement's most important news publications, La Raza Magazine. Starting in its first home in Lincoln Heights, La Raza can be traced from its humble origins in a church basement, to its swift metamorphosis into an essential organizing tool, to its dissolution as a prominent political platform.

From 1967 to 1977, La Raza's ten-year publishing trajectory serves as a document of activism primarily by young Mexican Americans as well as an archive of rare, often personal portraits of daily Chicano life in Los Angeles. A closer look at the photographs, articles, poetry and art also reveals La

Raza's place within the *movimiento's* multitudinous, sometimes-conflicting, ideological and political currents.

An exhibit of La Raza photographs at the Autry Museum of the Southwest commemorates the 50th anniversary of the East L.A. blowouts, fittingly as students once again rise in protest across the country. Thousands of La Raza photographs, negatives and issues are now archived at the UCLA Chicano Studies Resource Center.

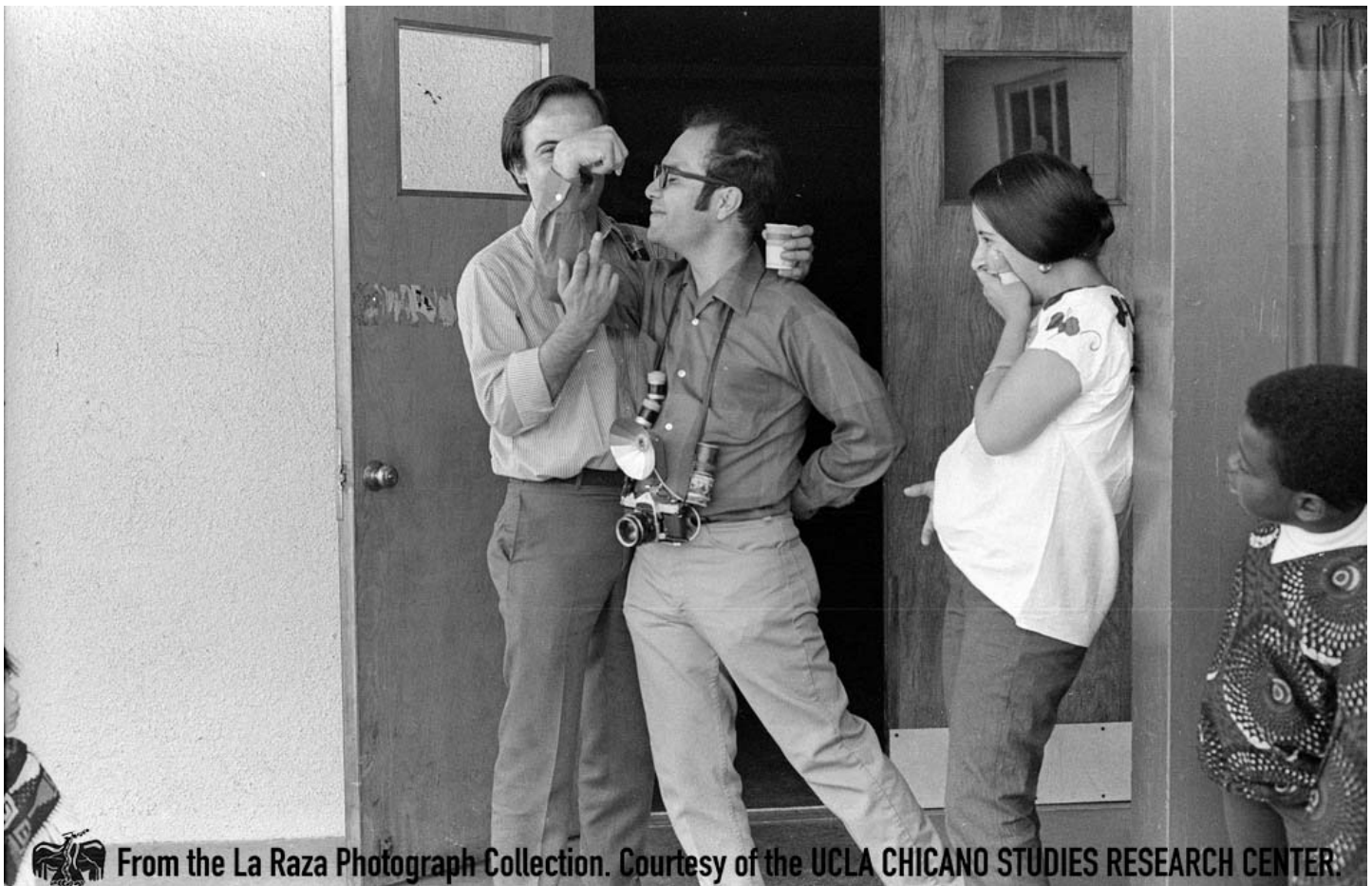
Foundations

The Church of the Epiphany sits modestly in the heart of Lincoln Heights, surrounded by homes of working-class Latino and Asian families. Wedged into the busy life of the neighborhood, the church's many doors are open to the street. Inside, long wooden pews are surrounded by the usual iconographies of Christianity, but also by vibrant paintings that sit on the floor, propped up against the polished wooden wall panels. It's an art exhibit that includes original work by prominent artists such as Patssi Valdez and Carolyn Castaño, Yreina Cervantez and [Ken Gonzalez-Day](#).

It's not hard to imagine how this church became the home of La Raza Magazine, one of the Chicano movement's most important incubators of activism, started by a priest and descendent of a wealthy East Coast family; a Cuban émigré living in the Central Valley and a young Stanford graduate, native of Connecticut. Father John Luce, Eliezer Risco and Ruth Robinson would come together to start this underground newspaper in an actual

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subterranean venue, the basement of Church of the Epiphany to activate urban youth in L.A.'s eastside.



Raul Ruiz, Manuel Barrera, Jr., Patricia Borjon were some of the active members of La Raza / Luis Garza, La Raza photograph collection. Courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center


To be clear, a church basement is not a political or historical vacuum. As the Church took growing interest in social justice during a national civil rights movement in which religious leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. emerged as heralds of equality and racial integration, Father Luce worked with Eliezer Risco to start a newspaper. He offered to give the paper a home and funds to get it off the ground.

From its earliest days, La Raza magazine was shaped by its place in history as well as by the expertise and resourcefulness of its founders. Risco kcet.org/shows/artbound/la-raza-the-community-newspaper-that-became-a-political-platform

brought his experience as an organizer with the United Farm Workers, having worked alongside Cesar Chavez and Luis Valdez for farmworkers' rights in the Central Valley. Most importantly, Risco understood the power of the printed word. Having worked on *El Malcriado*, the UFW's newspaper, he'd learned how a publication could serve as a valuable educational and organizing tool. Scholar Colin Gunckel cites *El Malcriado* as an important influencer in Chicano media that would include *La Raza Magazine*. "The UFW would be a key training ground for Chicana/o artists and activists that would carry these strategies and aesthetics to other contexts," writes Gunckel. Indeed, Risco knew how to build an audience, as well as to activate it.

La Raza was also strongly influenced by a vigorous, growing underground press movement. *La Raza*, in addition to being part of a significant network of Chicano publications such as *El Grito del Norte*, *El Popo*, *El Machete* and *La Revolucion*, also took influence from the *Los Angeles Free Press*, a newspaper founded in 1964 by Art Kunkin. "[Los Angeles Free Press] adopted a radically different format and pronouncedly graphic illustrations in its new approach to news and opinion... *La Raza* reported on many of the same topics covered by the underground press, but it did so from the Chicano perspective. *La Raza*, together with other Chicano publications, became the voice of the Chicano civil rights movement," notes historian Francisco Manuel Andrade in his 1979 master's thesis on the history of *La Raza*.



 From the La Raza Photograph Collection. Courtesy of the UCLA CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER.

Dolores Huerta holding a copy of La Raza at the La Raza office | La Raza photograph collection. Courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

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But ideas and goals are worth little without the people willing to build a vision from the ground up. Ruth Robinson stepped out of academia and into the fields of the Central Valley to fight for farmer workers' rights with the UFW. With Risco, Luis Valdez, Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, Robinson worked in nearly every aspect of organizing. When Risco moved to Los Angeles to start La Raza, he knew he needed Robinson's help. Living only a few blocks away from Church of the Epiphany, Robinson dedicated herself to operational matters: setting up a dark room to develop photographs, purchasing equipment, running the typesetter press and working with writers. She taught herself how to do it all and taught others as well.

"Risco was the think tank, but Ruth was the glue that kept the office running," says Chicana writer and scholar Anna Nieto Gomez. Though Nieto Gomez, at the time a student at California State University, Long Beach, had come to La Raza as a budding organizer, she found her voice as a writer under Robinson's diligent guidance.

"Ruth is the one who got me writing. Sometimes you need someone to say 'Do it' and to have faith and confidence that you will," says Nieto Gomez who started at La Raza with four failed semesters of remedial writing under her belt. Nonetheless, Robinson set aside a table for her and instructed her to start writing down her thoughts. Nieto Gomez started writing poetry, which La Raza published as part of a two-page spread focused on women in the Chicano movement. She would go on to write many other texts for other Chicano publications and would become a leading voice of Chicana feminism.

"I was always being told what I couldn't do. At La Raza, they told you what you needed to get done. You'd just have to figure it out and do it," she recalls.

Indeed, La Raza was a training ground not only for photographers, but also for young writers who for the first time had the opportunity to write about their communities. Joe Razo's approach was to start developing stories based on a level of urgency and research. A psychology graduate student at California State University, Los Angeles, he wanted to write stories that most immediately affected Chicanos in LA. "With research, issues start surfacing. All my training came from my psychology training, especially Maslow's theory of motivation which is based on the five levels of needs, starting with the biological ones," says Razo, noting that Chicanos were struggling with poverty, securing adequate shelter, nutrition and health care.

But it didn't take much research to know that so much of the activism that was taking place throughout the country during the 1960s was sparked by protests against the Vietnam War.

Mexican Americans rallied against the disproportionate recruitment of young black and brown men to serve as fodder in a war abroad against other historically marginalized people of color. This fed into the outrage that had been growing since WWII when Mexican Americans who'd fought alongside white soldiers returned to discrimination and inequality at home.

La Raza staff and activists focused on a racist educational system that pushed young people into military service and manual labor. However, Razo notes that while many writers were eager to contribute to La Raza, they soon realized that under Risco's editorship, La Raza needed a younger voice if it was going to reach a young audience, mainly high school teenagers.

This was something that Raul Ruiz pointed out when he started coming to La Raza to learn how to start his publications, the Inside Eastside and Chicano Student Movement newspapers. Though Ruiz was a college student at CSULA, he also knew it was necessary to target high school students. "Very few media were concerned with young people," Ruiz recalls. Though Ruiz focused on war, young people, drugs, sex and popular culture, education arose as the most important issue.

During these early years of La Raza, the groundswell of discontent grew among young people who could now clearly see the connection between their education and larger political agendas that sent them war. And though later Risco, Razo and Ruiz, along with educators like Sal Castro would come to be accused of instigating dissent among high school students, the social and political climate at the time was so explosive that even the smallest spark could set off a revolution.

CHICANAS IN THE MOVEMENT

The role of the women of La Raza has in the past been limited as far as participating in policy making decisions. She has been relegated to the traditional role of a woman and mother. She has been expected to stay home, do the cooking and care for the family. Mexican and Mexican American culture restricts her mobility as an activist. For the past six months, women of La Raza have been speaking among themselves, in conferences, both locally and nationally about the roles that they can serve in La Raza's movement for self-determination. The following article was written by a young Chicana from Long Beach who wishes to share many of the feelings of the contemporary Chicana.

What role does the Chicana serve in the Movement? Just how important is she to the Movement that is dominated by men? The men in the movement only think of her when they need some typing to be done or when their stomachs growl, they ask her to run down to the store, buy food for them, and cook

it. Naturally, she is also needed for parties and to serve as hostesses for conferences. Few girls are invited to attend conferences, and if so, only to take the minutes of the conference or attend parties afterwards.

Most men have little faith in the Chicana's ability to organize, to develop leadership, to create successful projects. Consequently, no real effort has been exerted to train and educate them to become part of the movida. No real effort has been made to make our women politically aware of the general issues in the barrios. Issues surrounding EOP, Chicano faculty, Chicano Studies, UMAs affairs, barrio politics, etc., rarely filter down to them. Only when emergencies exist do men recognize that women can contribute to the overall cause.

Once in a while, a woman decides to break this caste system. In return, she gets nothing but static. Instead of positive encouragement, she is discouraged and obstacles are placed in her way. Chicanos must apparently worry

that she might become as competitive and aggressive as the Anglo woman. They are afraid to develop her without castrating themselves.

Chicanas feel that since it is the men who have the knowledge and experience, they must train women in order to strengthen the Movement. We cannot have organizations that so narrowly involve and restrict the energies and capabilities of our beautiful brown women. The Chicano Movement cannot hope to fight against social injustices and win at the expense of their women. Hombres and mujeres must start relating to each other in such a way that she is not always on her back being a bed partner. If the relationship between our men and our women is mediocre, the movimiento will also be mediocre. We are the mothers and teachers of your children. We are the ones that greatly influence them in every aspect of life. Help us to teach them to be revolutionary Chicanos for La Causa. Help us to organize! Train us and develop us.

Chicanas reject feminist tokenism

By Maria Teron

Operation Woman Power of Los Angeles has bestowed its benevolent acceptance upon the Mexican-American woman.

This noble deed was enacted at a conference held in downtown Los Angeles last Saturday.

Upon arrival we Chicanas were registered by a variety of blondes, brunettes, and red heads who would not have recognized the difference between a batanda burrito. To them it was all "Mexican."

As we were herded into the main auditorium it was obvious it was a mixture not only of ethnic but economic groups. We composed two groups, the first being the "Adelita" Chicana. The second was the sensitized, concerned white liberal of the "blight" areas of Westwood, Brentwood, Fairfax and other well known poverty-stricken areas of West Los Angeles.

Our illustrious non-brown chairman presented the all-brown guest panel. The panel gave a brief orientation of the basic problems confronting the Mexican-American community.

We then broke for a lunch which fit into the style of the conference. The menu was tuna pie, bread rolls, salad, lemon-scrangeque and coffee.

After lunch we were split into three discussion groups. Before the groups began all the Chicanas met for a caucus. There it was decided that we would ask these Anglo groups for a contribution of efforts in the fields of scholarships and mass-media.



art by Martha Ramirez

The benevolent women from OWP ironically enough wanted OUR efforts, and OUR time to serve THEIR needs on white community committees.

The discussion groups proved to be futile and frustrating for the Chicana. It was evident that the "great white mothers" once again wanted only to exploit.

On returning to the main conference room as a whole, the Chicanas requested support on a variety of issues. Among them: support of Cesar Chavez, The United Farm Workers and "La Huelga"; Sal Castro's reinstatement at Lincoln High School; and an immediate halt to the drafting of Chicanos and a complete withdrawal of Chicanos from Vietnam.

These issues were presented to the OWP to be acted upon. As the presentation was being made the Chicanas asked how much action was going to be taken. At this time they discovered that OWP had no power to act as an organization on any of the issues.

They were later going to present them to various organizations represented at OWP.

Ah, yes once again the brown is appealed. But to the dismay of the gringos, the Chicana did not accept the tokenism. A Chicana took the microphone and said, "I feel it is the moral obligation of every Chicana in this room to walk out." The Chicanas, as true soldadas, rose and walked out of the building.

We met later at the Clellan House in Los Angeles, and evaluated the failure of the conference. Failure on the part of the OWP for not being able to manipulate us. It was also a failure on our part for not recognizing the farce from the beginning.

It did, however, strengthen us in the respect that as Chicanas we confronted a situation together and it united us all the more.

Thank you, OWP for giving us an education in the field of political awareness.

Viva la Causa!

Viva la Raza!

(Maria Teron is a sophomore sociology major.)

Juntos A Pelear Por La Causa

(el Sentimiento de la Chicana)

Chicano, dime que naciste para ser libre
Yo, tambien naci para ser libre, pero de que me sirve
De tu libertad eres duena y de mi libertad eres extrano

Chicano, te quiero con todo el alma, pero me has hecho dano.

Atravez de los anos en reina me has encarnado,
Y te lo juro, que de esta ilucion me he enamorado
Chicano te quiero con todo el alma, pero me has hecho dano.

Tus lisonjas, la mente me han escurecido
Porque ahora comprendo que en esclavitud me has tenido
Chicano, te quiero con todo el alma, pero me has hecho dano.

Chicano, a pisotear tu machismo, no vengo,
Sino a que reconozcas que las buenas ideas las tengo
Chicano te quiero con todo el alma, pero me has hecho dano.

Quiero gritar me coraje contra esta opresion!
Y aunque tu quieras o no tomare parte en la decision
Chicano te quiero con todo el alma, pero me has hecho dano.

Ahora, Chicano, la mano te pido,
Que juntos a pelear por la causa aspirio.
Chicano, te quiero con todo el alma, pero ya no me haras dano.

--D.M.L.T. (Mexican American Studies)

Te has convencido que en mi cabeza no hay lugar para la inteligencia
El sentimiento que tengo, Chicano, es que te lo he creido por tu insistencia.
Chicano, te quiero con todo el alma, pero me has hecho dano.

Two-page spread on La Mujer that Anna Nieto Gomez had worked on / Courtesy of Anna Nieto Gomez

The Kids Were Listening

"A lot happened independently, without coordination," says Razo, noting that the first school to walk out was Wilson High School, perched way on top of its hill in El Sereno. Students protested when administrators prohibited them from performing a play they deemed too controversial. News of the walkouts spread like wildfire down the hill to Lincoln High School and spread to Roosevelt and Garfield High Schools and throughout LAUSD schools where students continued to walk out for the next several days. The few days in March 1968 marked a historic event in the Chicano

civil rights movement led by college and high school students, are known as the [East L.A. Blowouts](#).



Anna Nieto Gomez and another woman inside a kitchen at Los Angeles City College / La Raza photograph collection. Courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

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As the war escalated in Vietnam and claimed more lives, Ruiz pulled out of his own youth-targeted magazines and channeled his energy into La Raza where he and Joe Razo stepped into the editor position in 1969. By then Risco had decided to return to the Central Valley, moving to Fresno where he'd rally up support for Fresno State's first Raza Studies program.

"The kids were listening to us. Then the adults started coming by because they wanted to see what we were doing." Razo says that though parents were reticent at first, after the East L.A. blowouts they understood the importance of what they were doing and started organizing too, forming groups such as the Educational Issues Committee.

"I didn't care who you were; you were welcome. We wanted to recruit everyone. Everyone was an asset," says Razo. This generated abundant creative energy and content, much of which was not attributed to an author. Driven by an acute hunger to give voice and representation to Chicano experience, La Raza became a repository for young people who developed new Chicano sensibilities and an empowered sense of identity as Mexican Americans.

La Raza staff also encouraged others to start their publications, including at college campuses, and even offered some training to neophyte journalists and activists. "We taught people techniques of organizing, but not in detail because crowds were often infiltrated by cops," says Ruiz.

Even Jane Fonda showed up to La Raza. The actress-turned-activist was already a financial supporter of the Black Panthers and took interest in

women's leadership within La Raza, says Razo. But according to Razo, they paid Fonda's criticisms little mind because they "weren't looking for money." He asserts that "the women of La Raza were not subservient," at a time when many Chicanos reacted negatively to feminist activism within the *movimiento*. Largely modeled on traditional notions of "*familia*," some believed the movement would be threatened by white women's liberation. Nonetheless, Chicanas continued to carve out their own kind of feminism within the movimiento. Writers like Anna Nieto Gomez started their own publications, such as *Las Hijas de Cuautemoc* that would come to significantly shape Chicana feminist scholarship.

Chicano Moratorium

The new editorship led by Raul Ruiz and Joe Razo marked a shift toward younger audiences, as well as a new magazine format. The Chicano Movement as a whole also entered a new phase with the events of the Chicano Moratorium. Their first issue as editors covered the anti-war marches through the streets of East L.A. that culminated in Laguna Park on August 29, 1970. "We captured it. No one else was covering it," says Ruiz who witnessed as many did, how a peaceful protest of thousands of women, men and children erupted into violence, arrests and the murder of four people, including prominent Mexican-American journalist Ruben Salazar.

"It turned out to be a police riot. The police rioted against the people. The police assaulted the people," says Ruiz recalling the scenes of violence and

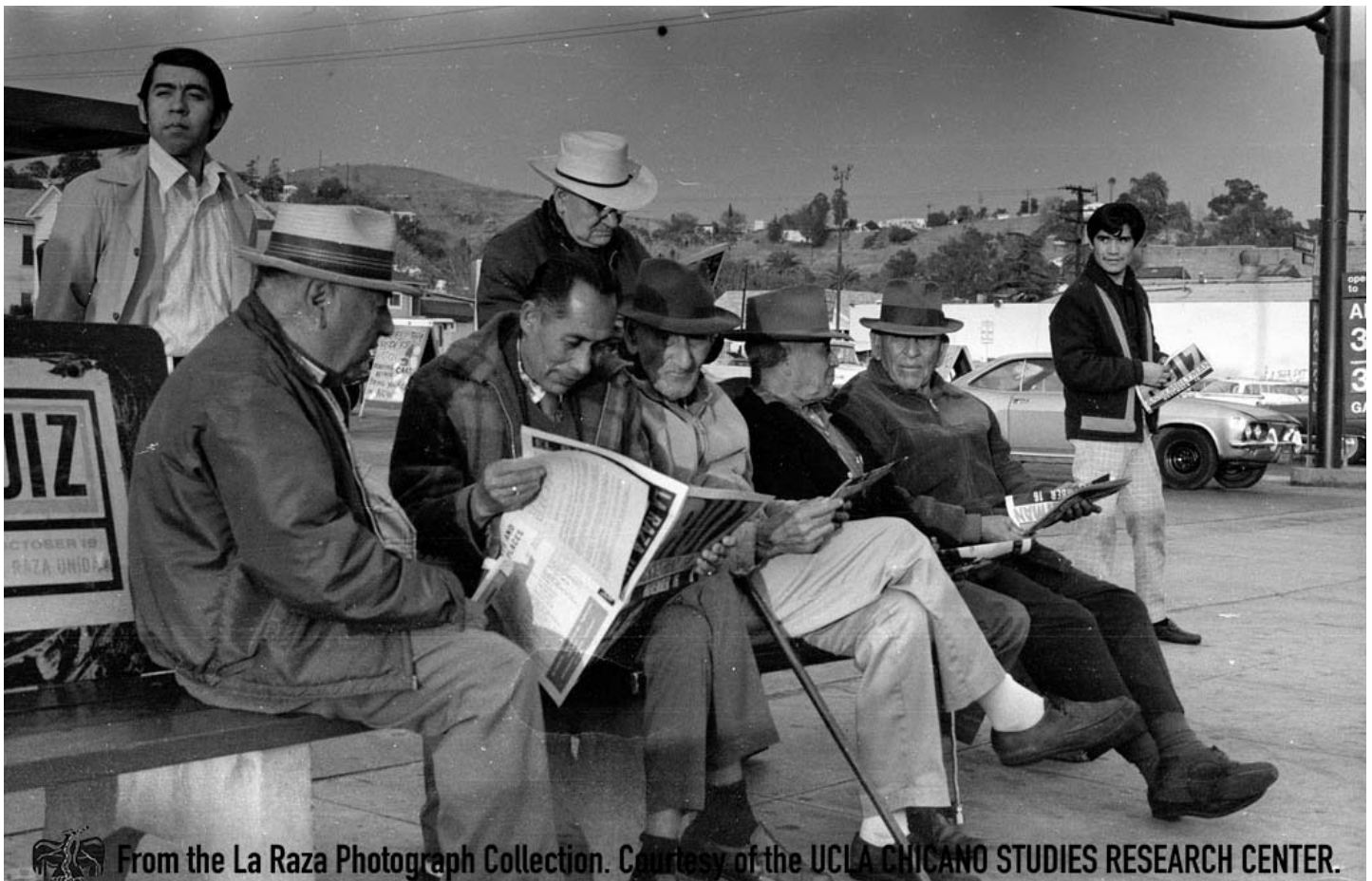
terror he and other La Raza photographers were able to capture on film. The death of Ruben Salazar, killed by a gas canister shot by police while in the Silver Dollar Saloon, provoked outrage among activists.

“In an outcome reminiscent of the photographer’s unwitting documentation of the murder of Michelangelo Antonioni’s film “Blow-Up” (1968), co-editors Ruiz and Razo took numerous photographs at the scene of what proved to be Salazar’s death behind the entrance curtain of the Silver Dollar Café at 4945 Whittier Blvd,” observes historian Francisco Manuel Andrade.

This grim turn of events transformed the tone of the *movimiento* from one of jubilant and determined defiance to one of sober and somber conviction. The consequences of their uprising had become painfully clear. Activists understood that to make lasting change beyond interrupting the status quo with walkouts and marches; they would have to focus their efforts on strategic political organizing.

Political Action

Following the Moratorium, through the next five years, the editors of La Raza magazine primarily Raul Ruiz, shifted to political mobilization. First founded in Crystal City, Texas, La Raza Unida Party was created as a third party alternative to Republican and Democratic parties that many Chicanos believed did not represent their interests. Ruiz ran for seats in the 48th and 40th Assembly Districts in 1971 and 1972 as a candidate of the La Raza Unida Party (LRUP). In 1974, La Raza and the LRUP focused on promoting a ballot proposition to incorporate East Los Angeles. For most of those years,



A group of men reading a newspaper promoting Raul Ruiz as the La Raza Unida Party candidate for California's 48th Assembly District | Manuel Barrera, Jr. La Razaphotograph collection. Courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

the magazine in its new format served as a platform on which La Raza Unida could disseminate its message. Though La Raza continued covering social activism in L.A., the Southwest and internationally, they increasingly focused on local politics and encouraged political participation from their readers. By 1974, La Raza magazine and La Raza Unida Party had become indistinguishable as a majority of LR staff were also LRUP members. Staff size reached its height in 1974 with 41 members most of which were members of LRUP. However, their efforts yielded no success.

Unfortunately, the lifeblood quickly drained out of the magazine following a string of political defeat. By 1975, staff size had shrunk to 14 members, and kcet.org/shows/artbound/la-raza-the-community-newspaper-that-became-a-political-platform

only two issues were published. No issues were published in the following year. Finally, in 1977, Ruiz had returned to grad school as Ph.D. student at UC Riverside, and many of La Raza's key members and supporters had carried on with their lives, pursuing careers and starting families. The final issues were published in 1977, a vastly transformed publication from its earliest versions. Francisco Manuel Andrade points out that though the magazine had returned to international radical movements and local topics, stories were "more factual and cerebral, less rhetorical and emotional." The voice of La Raza had become more academic and even included a list of footnotes that ran two pages long. The magazine no longer seemed directed to the young people that had taken to the streets with fists raised in protest. Instead, it seemed to speak to the general college-educated Chicano. Andrade notes: "...As a repository for scholarship in Chicano Studies [La Raza] required distribution to a new audience of readers — which it did not succeed in finding."

Legacy

Nonetheless, the legacy of Chicano activism and publishing has since remained alive on college campuses. For one, La Raza's archive has only recently come to light after decades and now lives in the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA. Archiving of ephemeral objects like newspapers proves to be challenging as they physically deteriorate and the lineage of Chicano news-making becomes spotty.



Raul Ruiz and others fold campaign pamphlets / Manuel Barrera, Jr. La Raza photograph collection. Courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

"There were always stereotypical images of lazy Mexicans. What we did was produce images of proud Chicanos," says Raul Ruiz whose photographs, along with the photos of many La Raza photographers, have come to define a visual vocabulary for "Chicanidad" for generations of young Mexican Americans. Historian Virginia Espino notes that La Raza captured then what camera phones capture on trains and on streets today. "They documented the violence that was taking place; they were bearing witness."

Espino also notes the deeply affective qualities of the photographs, "What we see in the photos is love. The photographers were in love with their subjects." She adds that La Raza had a uniquely collective approach to

publishing. "There was something beautiful about that way of learning in solidarity and elevating someone else's voice. People weren't trying to take credit. The important thing was to contribute."

But the preservation of narratives exists not only as photographs are unearthed. Without context, photographs alone tell only incomplete narratives. "There's a lot of focus on the photographs, but people should know that the focus of La Raza was primarily to organize. The organizing is what's important," says Razo emphatically.

So again the question remains: what happens when a white priest, a Cuban refugee and a Stanford graduate from Connecticut walk into a church basement? What's the punchline? A revolution? The ironies reverberate too far into history to sum up, and yet their value is too great to ignore. At the very least, they teach us about the complexity of history that while destined to repeat (or so they say), almost never fails to catch us off guard. There is a certain amount of absurdity in the most tempestuous and even violent times. All at once, it can be rationalized and opposed with equal severity. As we witness historical moments in their unraveling, we also wait for the punch line, to finally see the bittersweet irony of having lived and survived something extraordinary and terrifying. Think about how many punchlines we have today, spinning busily just above our heads, in almost every newspaper headline that comes out daily. Though these punchlines may elude us, one day we may look back and realize they be worth it.



La Raza Photograph Collection. Courtesy of the UCLA CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER.

Woman holds La Raza magazine copies at Fresno Moratorium / Raul Ruiz, La Raza photograph collection. Courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

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Special Issue: Mexican and Chicanx Social Movements

Top Image: Roosevelt High School Strike / La Raza photograph collection. Courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center