

Brenda Sendejo

***The Chicana Movement in Austin:
A Lasting Legacy of Activism and Feminism in Central Texas***

This paper is inspired by a talk that I gave in August of 2022 as part of the *Chicano/a Art Movimiento y Más en Austen, Tejas 1960s to 1980s* exhibit for Mexic-Arte Museum. The goal of this essay, and my work, is to amplify the often underrepresented and silenced experiences, voices, and contributions of Chicanas active in the Chicana/o movements in Texas.

Texas was a key site for Chicana activism and the development of Chicana feminist thought in the U.S. This essay explores some ways in which Chicanas participated in social justice efforts in the Austin area. Women contributed to the formation of bilingual education and ethnic/feminist studies, the cultural arts, literary and spiritual productions, electoral politics, and community-based organizing and institution building in ways that are felt today. While this brief essay cannot offer the entire story of Chicana participation in the movement in Austin, it aims to provide a glimpse into Chicanas' influence in the Texas movimiento.

As the exhibit shows, Chicanas contributed to the creation of more inclusive histories and cultural productions of both the civil rights era and city of Austin, ones in which the Chicana/o/x community is part of the story. One only has to look around at our city to see the continued impacts of movement era Chicanas including Sylvia Orozco, founder and director of Mexic-Arte Museum, and Cynthia and Lidia Pérez, co-founders of and La Peña Latino Arts Organization in downtown Austin. My own family recently relished in the opportunity to participate in La Pastorela at the Mexican American Cultural Center, an initiative conceived of by many Austin community members and some former movement participants, including

Martha and Juan Cotera. The continued environmental justice activism of Susana Almanza and PODER (People Organized in Defense of Earth and Her Resources) is evident around the city, as with the removal of the Holly Street Power Plant in East Austin. These are but a few of the many efforts of Chicana and Chicano movement participants to claim space and insist upon visibility in a rapidly gentrifying and Central Texas city with a rich movement history.

The Chicana movement would emerge within the context of the larger Chicano movement with a swell of writings, art, and other cultural productions around identity, gender and sexuality, and spirituality. Women wrote about their experiences in the male-dominated Raza Unida Party and subsequently, Chicana feminist thought and the field of Chicana Studies emerged. Chicanas were committed to amplifying the voices, histories and experiences of their familias and communities, responding to omissions of women's histories and experiences in movement and larger historical narratives and in college curricula and through bilingual and bicultural education initiatives. Chicanas active in the Austin Chicana movement were from Austin, others would come to Austin to attend school at The University of Texas at Austin and other campuses, and some came for a short time and then moved on. Some took part in one movement initiatives, others in several with overlapping activist endeavors over the course of the late 1960s, 1970s, and even into the present day, as they continue on a path of justice and liberation.

The University of Texas at Austin was the site of a vibrant student movement with active MAYO (Mexican American Youth Organization) chapters and emergence of organizations such as Mujeres Artistas en Suroeste (MAS), founded in Austin in 1977 by artists Santa Barraza, Nora González Dodson, and Modesta Barbina Treviño. MAS was comprised of a group of artists

which also included Carmen Lomas Garza, Sylvia Orozco, and others (María-Cristina García, “MUJERES ARTISTAS DEL SUROESTE”). Santa Barraza and Carmen Lomas Garza were artists from Kingsville whose work, along with many other artists from the Austin movement such as Chicanas Sylvia Orozco, Mary Jane Garza and others, reflect their Chicana/o heritage and history. Both Garza and Barraza speak of how impactful their movement experiences were in healing from the wounds of racism they endured growing up in South Texas. Barraza is known for works that reflect her indigenous, Chicana, Tejana, and Catholic identities, intertwined with an awareness and consciousness of her spiritual ancestry and cultural heritage. Her artwork portrays Nahuatl and Mayan codices where she articulates a connection to her pre-Columbian past and Tejana ancestry. Garza’s writings and art works depict pride in her Mexican American upbringing with childhood memories of family and friends engaged in a wide range of activities seen in Mexican American communities. A bilingual book of Garza's paintings and short stories titled *Family Pictures/Cuadros de familia* depict scenes such from her paintings such as the Tamalada, Birthday Party, and Conjunto, which were made into life size environments for a national children’s exhibit called *In My Family/En mi Familia*. The aforementioned sisters Cynthia and Lidia Perez of La Peña Gallery and Sylvia Orozco of Mexic-Arte Museum are contemporaries of Barraza’s and Garza’s who illustrate the continuity of Chicanas’ commitments to Latina/o/x and Chicana/o/x cultural arts, histories, and experiences and their inclusion in mainstream society.

Community involvement was central to efforts to develop UT’s Center for Mexican American Studies and Chicanas were at the forefront, including political activist, community organizer, and intellectual Martha Cotera and Raza Unida Party leader and staunch advocate for

bilingual education, María Elena Martínez. Cotera, along with fellow RUP member Evey Chapa contributed to these efforts, through their work with the Chicana Research and Learning Center, through which Chapa and Cotera would develop and disseminate materials on Chicanas and get them into the hands of Chicana graduate students in need of such materials in order to teach the first course on Chicana history in Texas. These included doctoral students at the time, Evey Chapa, Chicana-Nez Perce scholar Inés Hernández-Ávila, and Gloria E. Anzaldúa.

Women in the Austin area also played a key role in electoral politics during the movement in Austin, as previously noted. La Raza Unida (RUP) was the third political party that formed to raise awareness of and contest the racial, economic, and gender inequalities experienced by ethnic and racial communities and women in public and private sectors of American society. RUP participants mobilized and organized for their political, civil, and electoral rights. The initiatives on RUP's platform included ending segregation, examining electoral laws that excluded racial minorities and increasing representation of racial minorities in local and state politics. La Raza Unida had a high representation of women in their local and state offices. Women were active members of RUP from its inception and held leadership positions at the state and national levels of the party. María Elena Martínez served as vice chair from 1974-1976 and the first woman to lead a political party in Texas as RUP state chair from 1976-1978. Mujeres por la Raza Unida, the women's caucus within the statewide Raza Unida party was formed in 1973 in order to promote Chicanas in public office and Chicana leadership within the Chicano movement, an effort to counter the male-dominance within the party. Evey Chapa was central to writing a party platform that attended to issues affecting la familia, la Mujer, and quality (Orozco, Cynthia, "MUJERES POR LA RAZA"). Caucus members included

Maria Elena Martinez, Inés Hernández-Ávila, and Mujeres founders Ino Álvarez, Evey Chapa, and Martha Cotera, who were also RUP founders (Acosta, Teresa Palomo “LA RAZA UNIDA”). Women in Mujeres, including Evey Chapa and Martha Cotera are credited for bringing feminism into the political realm (Sendejo 2018).

Chicana feminist thought emerged out of the movement era in the form of writings such as journals, newspapers and newsletters, and as previously noted, within the context of the women’s caucus and electoral platforms as with RUP. It was also represented in art with women’s representations and issues as well as art used for covers of early Chicana/o journals such as *Hojas* published by the first Chicano University, Juarez Lincoln. Martha Cotera wrote over 100 works documenting Chicana history, including the ground-breaking feminist works including *Disoa y Hembra: The History and Heritage of Chicanas in the US* (1976), which present historical analyses of Chicanas’ feminist, spiritual, and political legacies. In 1977 Cotera penned another key feminist text that also marked the emergence of Chicana feminisms as a field: *The Chicana Feminist*. *The Chicana Feminist* is comprised of important speeches and essays about Cotera’s experiences with and observations on feminism and sexism within the Chicana/o Movement and racism and classism within the Women’s Movement.¹ *The Multicultural Women’s Handbook* (1977) and *Mujer Chicana Bibliography* (1976) were early intersectional works that examined race, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class--compiled resources on women of color histories and experiences that were the first of their kind.

Other Chicanas involved in the Austin movement include Austin native Susana Almanza, who continues to be involved in social justice causes today. She currently serves as the

¹ See the Chicana Por Mi Raza Digital Memory Collective: <https://chicanapormiraza.org/>.

Executive Director of the environmental, economic, and social justice grassroots organization People Organized in the Defense of Earth and her Resources, (PODER), which she co-founded in 1991. Almanza was one of many movement activists involved in overlapping initiatives during the movement, including engaging in indigenismo and reconnecting to her Indigenous past through participation in the danza conchera group Xinachtli, in which Inés Hernández-Ávila took part as well. Susana was also an active member of the Brown Berets along with other women such as Joanne Salas (Chicana Por Mi Raza). The Brown Berets' grassroots organizing was aimed at protecting youth, the rights of citizens, and creating positive changes in people's lives and on institutional policies. The issues that the Brown Berets worked on during the 70's and early 80's continue in East Austin and around the nation: immigrant rights, police brutality, prison reform, housing and education. According to Almanza women in the Brown Berets advocated for families and women's roles as leaders beyond domestic responsibilities. At the statewide level Brown Berets addressed representation of women and programs related to women and families. Almanza's activism has continued since the movement period—she is heavily involved in community organizing and has led many successful efforts to fight environmental racism in Austin. As she noted, “environmental justice is another movement to correct injustice in society.”²

In addition to their many contributions to movement initiatives these Chicanas have left yet another legacy: one in which they encourage us to think and feel differently about history and the potential and possibility for justice and liberation. This is captured as well in the

² “Activism & the Brown Berets of Austin 1970 - 1980's with Susana Almanza and Sabino "Pio" Renteria” an interview by the Austin History Center in 2018.

Chicano/a Art Movimiento y Más en Austen exhibit: vital knowledge, excavated histories, and consejos/advice that can serve us in the continued fights for inclusion and visibility and in countering alienation and facilitating belonging. The lives and work of movement Chicanas feed the spirit, nourish the soul, and continue to inspire individual and social transformation.

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