

# CHICAN@S



Our Background  
& Our Pride  
by Nephtali De León



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OUR BACKGROUND AND OUR PRIDE

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*Illustrated by the author*

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*La Virgen de Guadalupe,*  
original art by Nephtali de León









## Introduction

### El Gigante Dormido is awake

(The Sleeping Giant is awake)

When this book first came out almost forty years ago there were only two other known books with the title or the word “Chicano”; one was written by Armando Rendón. It was titled *Chicano Manifesto*. The other book was titled *Chicano*, written by Richard Vásquez. They were both in California. I was in Texas. These three books joined other expressions in what would become a whirlwind of Raza creation.

A cascade of letters soon followed such as *The Revolt of the Coackroach People* (1973), by attorney Oscar Zeta Acosta, “Brown Buffalo,” who mysteriously disappeared in 1974 like poet Federico García Lorca of Spain disappeared during the Spanish Civil War in 1936. History was repeating itself.

Our books came out in the heyday and spontaneous headiness of Chicano activism, when plans of liberation were being created such as “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,” and schools and centers of liberation were in their highlight throes of confidence and buoyancy such as the “Crusade for Justice” headed by Corky González in Denver, Colorado.

There was “El Centro de la Raza” in the Mission District of San Francisco, with similar actions in San Diego’s Balboa Park, and “El Tigre” de Tierra Amarilla in New Mexico, Reyes López Tijerina, had made news by making a citizen’s arrest of the local sheriff, in order to reclaim stolen lands of his community’s patrimony.

Our books came out as an action against and reaction to the particularly institutionalized enforcement of a white supremacy syndrome that underlined a historical occupation of native homelands. The political and cultural phenomenon

that these publications would be part of was to have repercussions at least for the next half century, as pressing events continue to unfold.

Other Chicano literature and expressions had begun to appear. Prior to such books as Ricardo Sánchez' *Canto y Grito Mi Liberación* (I Sing and I Scream My Freedom) *Chicano as an art form had never existed before in the millennial history of our people*. Chicano literature and art came into being fully blown and grown, if in an adolescent stage, in the late 1960's and early 1970's. One can make the analogy of Huitzilopochtli who leaps into the world from his mother's womb, Coatlicue, (She of the Serpent Skirt), Mother Earth, fully armed and ready for battle. Singlehandedly he vanquished the Huitznahua, the four hundred warriors (metaphor for the countless stars) that threatened to kill his mother.

A new art form, a new expression in the vast horizon of civilization's evolution is watershed worthy. This book was a modest contribution to a momentous new birth; a new esthetics of a resurrected people. Together, as if timed and tuned by an ancestral time clock, la Raza gave birth to a totally new art form that defied art and esthetics itself. Close to half a century later, since its first arrival fully committed and defined, the art form still escapes most critics and reviewers.

To deal with Chicano esthetics one has to talk about politics. "La Raza Unida Party" was founded by José Angel Gutiérrez, with Mario Compéan, Carlos Guerra, Alberto Loera, and others on January 17, 1970, at Campestre Hall, in "Cristal," Crystal City, Texas.

This aspect of Chicanos, their politics, would also have repercussions unto the present days. After a brief sunshine spot in the politics of at-large-elections, their most promising luminary would end up in federal prison for decades, where he still remains. Ramsey Muñiz, an attorney and fiery speaker and standard bearer of his community, inspired many across the state of Texas in his bid for the governorship of the state. Overnight he got more than 200,000 votes for a platform and a political party, "La Raza Unida," that had never existed before, and had no funds to support it. He slept in people's homes during his meteoric campaign, as the people instantly saw that he was one of their own. The federal government arrested and accused him of trafficking in drugs and gave him two consecutive life terms and in 1994, sentenced him to life in prison with no chance of parole (conditional release). The government gave him a death sentence—to die in prison. They also took away his lawyer's accreditation to prevent him from practicing law. His platform words were simple, "Mexican Americans..." (a more accepted way back then to say

Chicanos)—“Mexican Americans have had it with the lies! ¡Ya basta!” (Enough!). To the people he was an activist liberator, to the government he became a threat in his ability to lead and inspire the national community to stand for its rights. Honed down to his essence, he continues to emerge from behind his prison cell with his native identity. True to his ancestral spirits no chains have broken him. Now, almost eighteen years later, in a letter to this writer he says, “I have never felt freer in my life nor have I ever felt as strong.” He signs his letter with his native name, *Tezcatlipoca*. In the mythic pantheon of Aztec creation, Tezcatlipoca is the “Smoking Mirror,” the black obsidian mirror, where the ancient shamans saw the future. This writer has been present at gatherings of tribes that have bestowed upon Tezcatlipoca (as he remains in prison) the mantle of being the present “*Huey Tlatoani*,” the “Speaker of the Word,” of the Mexica Chican@ Nation of Aztlán. One of his most recent reflections has been, “*The Mexica cultural prophecies are centered on the concept of transformation. We are promised a new human beginning. It will not merely be a metaphor, but a concrete achievement that will awaken all the people of the world.*” In Aztec Mexica tradition the “Huey Tlatoani” is the supreme leader of the nation. This charismatic leader of the Chicano people remains in a federal government prison after eighteen years, never having committed a crime against anyone.

This is so presently real there is a “freeramsey” movement on the internet. It is not uncommon for an occupied people to have their leader in prison.

One has to remember that Chicano expression was not born out of, or supported by, academic training or based upon any western tradition. Chicano esthetics and world view came from the back street survival haunts, from the many turfs under attack in the inner city and trails of our migrant ways.

Neither academia nor the back streets from which it gained its most forceful insight, spirit and direction, have completely understood its particular difference and contrast with all other previous art forms. If all art is about esthetics, Chicano art transcends esthetics.

Chicano art is a nation building block, as no other art form has ever been before. Chicano esthetics operates on a wide scale of human activities: it is art, philosophy, weapon, shield, umbrella, and in shaping culture, the politics that shape a nation. Chicano art is a standing presence reaching out in multi-action towards peace. For the communities throughout Aztlán under siege, it is also a torch-light in the darkness of colonial occupation.

Chicano is not an adjective or noun for a passive art form. Chicano, like the word, did not come alone (*la palabra no vino sola*). Chicano is more like a verb. It was born in the cauldron of a movement.

### *Chicano presence*

Chicano presence as a movement came and went like a fast meteor in the political landscape. It sank fast in the horizon of social movements, casualties of which there have been many in the history of the United States. What makes this different is that while the actual reflection of a named movement was quickly shot down by concerted federal forces pulling all its strings from the top level, often bringing chaos, murder and destruction to a peaceful movement, the movement continued, in a more muted form, but with more numerous numbers! The movement itself was based on centuries of resistance and protest, also destroyed by violence and continued persecution by arms and hard politics. What all these centuries had not produced was the coming together of all the *angst* of a people reaching out for freedom and a sense of itself, an unequivocal definition, an expression of its identity in the word Chicano. This self concept would trigger and blossom into a fully developed blast of culture and societal expressions proper of any nation and people with a sense of themselves; that is, all the vitality in its art forms appeared overnight, such as in poetry, literature, drama, sculpture, visual art, film, music and dance. The fast-lived six to eight years that the movement lasted (1968-1975, not hard and set dates) left an irrevocable and deep print on the American society, one that is still unshakeable no matter what anyone does that wants to make it disappear. Just as still waters run deep, so does ancestral blood run deep, and it is this reality that continues to live on in cultural center after cultural center in community after community all across the country today.

One has to remember that the Chicano movement was neither planned nor organized as a cohesive front with agreed upon strategies and chain of command. It came into being in desperation of a people whose time had come. It reproduced itself as manifested and directed by local leaders in each community, and had the distinct flavor of its regions. It also had the generalized mantle of “ancestral memory” and the common denominator of centuries of persecution and repression. As such the individual communities understood each other and supported each

other whenever possible. This distinctive regionalism but natural empathy and blood-line cohesiveness would result years later in the first ten years of the twentieth-first century in a borderless communal sense of identity where the banner cry would be, “Todos somos Arizona” (We are all Arizona), in reference to the racist laws introduced by the government of that state; SB 1070 and HB 2281. SB (Senate Bill) 1070 authorizes police to stop any brown persons and ask them if they are citizens. HB (House Bill) 2281 wishes to erase Raza Studies programs in schools and deny teaching rights to anyone with a “non-American” accent. Both laws are presently being challenged in court. They were responded to by massive protests all across the country by a people disgusted by such institutionalized racist declarations passed into “laws.” This is the institutionalized expression of centuries of punishment for children that spoke Spanish or other (Chicano Aztec-Náhuatl) in the classroom and openly reflected their culture. These “laws” also reflect the outlaw attitude against a people whose homeland has been illegally occupied for centuries.

There was a national response to Arizona’s unjust “law” SB 1070. Busloads of Raza would take off from different parts of the country organized to support the people of Arizona in a show of force. “Todos somos Arizona” (We are all Arizona) became the cry of the day. Raza once more became organized in many cities. This ability to organize over night shocked the nation a few times earlier, when out of nowhere millions of people demonstrated in over fifty American cities at the same time. People gathered as Raza, Latinos, Hispanics, Chicanos, natives all as one people. As recently as 2010, twelve young Chican@s students chained themselves to the doors of the State Capitol Building in Phoenix, Arizona. There were protests in other cities all the way to Washington, D.C. There were many arrests.

On May 13, 2010, a group of Raza, joined and supported by a contingency of the Black community, took off from the City of Dallas, Texas, to Phoenix, to support their extended family in Arizona. They started out with thirty-five people and two buses and ended up with seventy people and three buses. This particular group was organized by Dallas attorney Domingo García. Support also came from Chicago, Los Angeles, and other localities. Opposition to these laws continues as I write the introduction to this book.

The latest report in the news is that more than twenty other states want to pass similar laws to those of Arizona, Texas being one of them. Texas State Representative Roberto Alonzo, an attorney from Dallas, was recently quoted in a

national television interview as saying, “these laws are all in the wrong, we are in the right.”

The blatant injustice caused a Texas school counselor, Andrew Goldsmith, to say, “The president should declare a moratorium on all arrests and deportations until a comprehensive immigration law is put into effect.”

Much has changed since the writing of this book. Things have escalated in violence on both sides of the border. In the United States there is a declared war against ten million Raza. There is an executive presidential order for them to be caught, apprehended and deported. In effect there is a summary judgment against ten million people, face unseen, declared criminals while their services are actively sought-after as they are the hardest working people and the best providers of human energy, know-how and quick adaptability. They, who are hounded as criminals, are the human energy that has kept the American economy from collapsing.

High tech spy machines, air born drones and increased number of armed patrols swarm the border. The arresting craze has created an inhuman chain of events breaking up families as was done with the black slave families creating the wealth to pay for America’s occupation of the gold-street-paved-heaven, made up of cotton and tobacco blood... This episode of American history is so brutal and harsh as well as deceitful. While the human slave labor of the American fathers (invaders) toiled under the whip, or hanged from a rope, their Euro-illegal masters were writing lofty words about “All men are created equal...”

The words sound equally hollow to this very day. There were twelve American presidents who were slaveowners, including the father and first president of the country, George Washington. The 2000 U.S. census reports that 90% of the people that bear the last name of Washington in America today are from the black community! This is ironic as the slaves were not allowed the dignity of a last name. The great educator and leader, Booker T. Washington, born a slave in 1856, was simply, Booker. His first experience with school was not as a student, but as a book carrier for a white student. How can anyone born anywhere in the world be born a legally constitutionally adjudicated “*slave*”? Only in America. Those humans who desired freedom were declared criminals breaking the law! To say that punishment was brutal is an understatement.