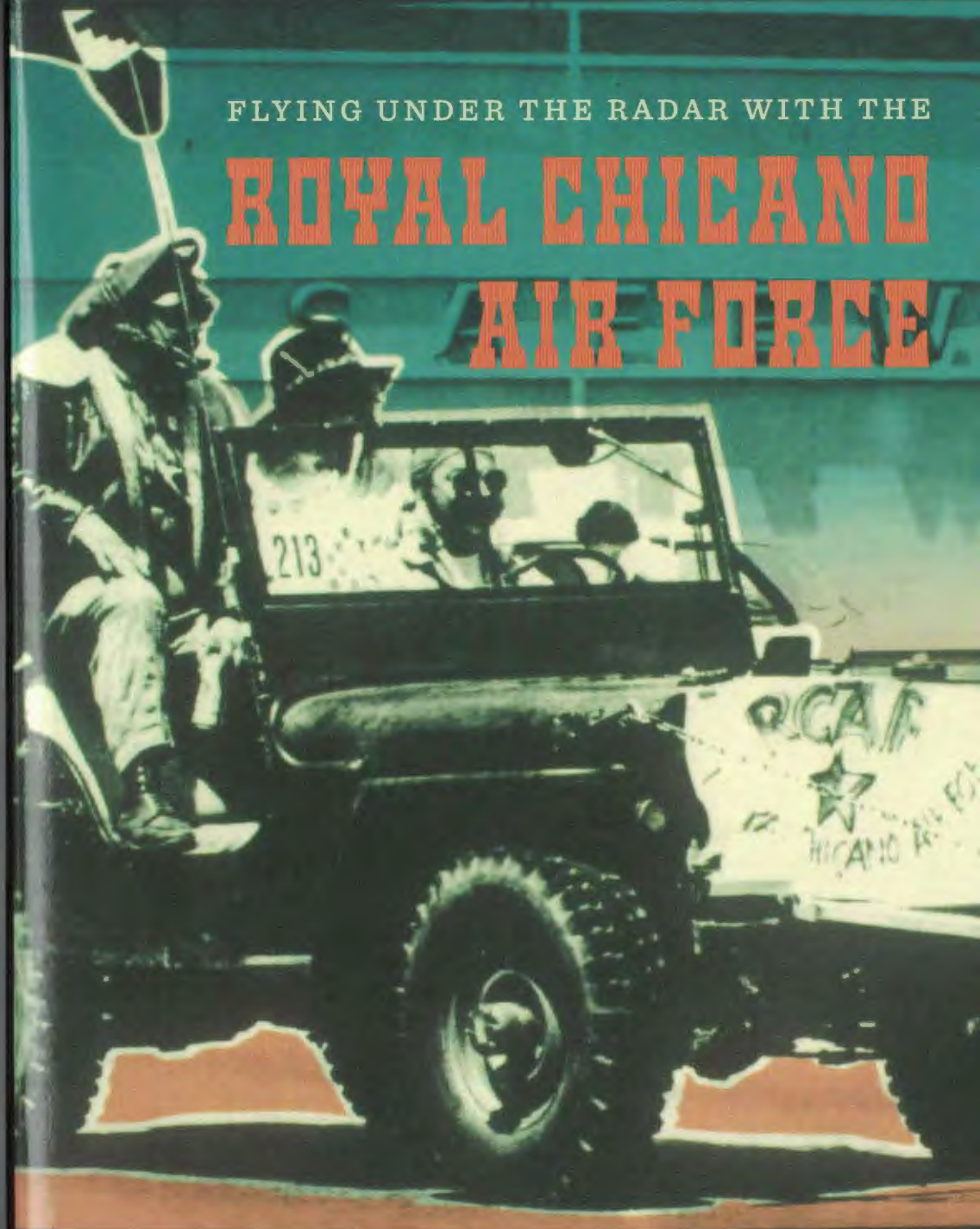


FLYING UNDER THE RADAR WITH THE

ROYAL CHICANO AIR FORCE



MAPPING A CHICANO/A ART HISTORY

INTRODUCTION

Mapping the Chicano/a Art History of the Royal Chicano Air Force

The Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF) Chicano/a art collective produced major works of art, poetry, prose, music, and performance in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first. Merging the hegemonic signs, symbols, and texts of two nations with particular but often fragmented knowledge of their indigenous ancestries, members of the RCAF were among a generation of Chicano/a artists in the 1960s and 1970s who revolutionized traditional genres of art through fusions of content and form in ways that continue to influence artistic practices in the twenty-first century. Encompassing artists, students, military veterans, community and labor activists, professors, poets, and musicians (and many members who identified with more than one of these terms), the RCAF redefined the meaning of artistic production and artwork to account for their expansive repertoire, which was inseparable from the community-based orientation of the group. The RCAF emerged in Sacramento, California, in 1969 and became established between 1970 and 1972.¹ The group's work ranged from poster making, muralism, poetry, music, and performance, to a breakfast program, community art classes, and political and labor activism. Subsequently, the RCAF anticipated areas of new genre art that rely on community engagement and relational aesthetics, despite exclusions of Chicano/a artists from these categories of art in the United States (Bourriaud 2002). Because the RCAF pushed definitions of art to include modes of production beyond traditional definitions and Eurocentric values, women factored significantly in the collective's output, navigating and challenging the overarching patriarchal cultural norms of the Chicano movement and its manifestations in the RCAF. Women painted murals, "pulled" posters, made paintings, and

designed flyers, but they also planned and staged neo-indigenous ceremonies and directed and implemented the collective's political and community infrastructure.

While the RCAF's contributions to Chicano/a and American art histories are prolific, no full-length scholarly study of the group exists to date. Further, references to the RCAF in books, articles, and major exhibitions about Chicano/a art frame the collective within one historical period—that of the 1960s and 1970s Chicano movement and, specifically, the advent of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union. The role of the UFW in the RCAF was paramount to the collective's artwork and ethos. Many members of the RCAF grew up in farmworking families amid the larger historical context of the Bracero Program, a binational policy that contracted Mexicans and Mexican Americans to work in agricultural fields in the United States between 1942 and 1964. If they were not from farmworking backgrounds, members were drawn to the farmworkers' cause as a common experience of hard work and sacrifice in a nation that benefited from Mexican and Mexican American labor but did not recognize it as an important contribution to the country.

RCAF members were also influenced by historical and sociopolitical events that coincided with the farmworkers' strike or occurred before 1965, the year observed as a starting point for Chicano/a art in the foundational exhibition *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985 (CARA)*. They served in the US armed forces during twentieth-century wars or came from families with military veterans. Several members attended art schools and universities on the GI Bill, a point of access that was further augmented by federal policies and state programs aimed at increasing the enrollment of underrepresented students.

Once in school, RCAF members were exposed to systems of knowledge, professional training, and intellectual ideas that influenced the doctrine of the Chicano movement.² Their political and intellectual awakening during the Chicano movement shaped their interdisciplinarity as artists and cultural producers. They relied on a fusion of formal choices that developed at the crossroads of institutional access; movements for political, labor, and educational reform; and calls to end the Vietnam War.

Still, there were other spheres of influence on the RCAF. From the sit-ins and marches of African Americans in the early 1960s to the rise of the Black Power movement, RCAF members experienced calls for global solidarity with indigenous peoples, a campaign that originated in the Third World Liberation Front. Older RCAF artists encountered the working-class

and populist imagery of the 1930s and 1940s cultural front, a term Michael Denning (1998) uses to bring together labor movements, the politics of the Popular Front, and the interracial and multiethnic efforts of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). From collaborations between artists and labor leaders to art classes held “in union halls, and exhibitions of work about or by CIO union members,” the cultural front created “a pluralistic visual culture exceptional for the time” (Ott 2014, 883, 886). The RCAF advanced this visual culture of labor, both in content and form, signaling the continuation of the democratization of the arts in the United States.

Like numerous Chicano/a artists in the 1960s and 1970s, RCAF members also participated in self-directed studies of Mexican muralism and the graphic arts of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, adopting the visual vocabulary of an earlier era of politicized art tied to populist uprising. Reconnecting with Mexican history, the RCAF recovered border ballads and folk heroes from the nineteenth-century annexation of northern Mexico by the United States. They also privileged pre-Columbian imagery and spiritual concepts in their art as a cultural foundation for a shared Chicano/a identity. Pre-Columbian imagery in RCAF art reflected political solidarity with indigenous peoples who had been historically colonized or were enduring civil wars in the mid and late twentieth century. Crossing multiple borders, from the intellectual and historical to the geopolitical, the RCAF made art that catalyzed the decolonization of the Chicano/a mind.

The RCAF remained committed to decolonial thought and collectivist values in the content and form of their art throughout the late twentieth century and well into the twenty-first. But their art did not stall or stagnate; rather, it evolved due to the diversity of their biographical experiences. RCAF members came together as an art collective not through a desire for aesthetic uniformity based on one political cause. Each member freely associated with diverse political ideas and racial-equality movements and pursued a range of educational and professional interests.

A central example of the free association that informed the group's interdisciplinarity concerns the origin of the RCAF's name. Frequently bypassed in scholarship—either spelled out to clarify the collective's acronym or listed side by side with the “Rebel Chicano Art Front,” which was the first name of the Royal Chicano Air Force—the RCAF's name has never been a major point of scholarly inquiry. But it reflects the complexity and diversity of experiences that members brought to the collective in tandem with a shared commitment to the Chicano movement. In what follows, I historically

analyze the RCAF's name to signal the breadth of events and sociopolitical factors under which members not only created art but created a Chicano/a art collective.

Who, What, Where, When, and Why: How a Rebel Chicano Art Front Became the Royal Chicano Air Force

My analysis of the RCAF's name is a conceptual mapping of the collective's founding, as opposed to a chronological account. It is also not the first attempt to explain the diverse milieu that shaped Chicano/a art through a mapping paradigm. In fact, the title of this section echoes Shifra Goldman's (1993) essay "How, Why, Where, and When It All Happened: Chicano Murals of California," in which she uses frank language to lay bare the diverse elements that influenced Chicano/a art in California (Cockcroft and Barnett-Sanchez 1993, 16). Recognizing a range of political, aesthetic, and cultural influences that shaped different types of Chicano/a art collectives, Goldman moves in and out of historical events, political movements, and regions of California to tie together a multifaceted overview of Chicano/a art.

Goldman's impulse to map rather than chronologically order Chicano/a art history resounds in my mapping of the RCAF's name, because both draw on a theoretical tradition in Chicano/a art of reconfiguring signs, symbols, and texts from several epochs to rethink the geopolitical borders that had bifurcated Mexican Americans' historical consciousness and social reality. It is also a theoretical tradition that RCAF artists helped create. Aerial and terrestrial views of land are important metaphors in RCAF art, articulating a call for the decolonization of the Chicano/a mind by reimagining colonial histories implicit in geopolitical boundaries.

In 1975, for example, RCAF artist Rudy Cuellar reimagined the Western Hemisphere in *Announcement Poster for Día de la Raza*. Foregrounding a table setting in yellow, with a plate, a saltshaker, a knife, a bottle, and an overturned shot glass, Cuellar uses blue paint to depict the oceans that surround the North and South American continents. Blurring the distinction between water and the cosmos with white specks made during the printing process, he gives an impression of a night sky replete with stars. The poster literally rethinks the traditional image of the Western Hemisphere through the space of imagination, inviting viewers to sit at the table, imbibe, and envision the

A similar reconfiguration of the Western Hemisphere is present in RCAF artist Juanishi Orosco's *L.A.S.E.R.I.U.M.* south wall mural, originally created in 1984 and renovated in 1999. *L.A.S.E.R.I.U.M.*, which stands for *Light Art in Sacramento, Energy Resources In Unlimited Movement*, comprises two murals that take up the length of a pedestrian tunnel in downtown Sacramento.³ Following a series of images that visualize geological, spiritual, and political change over time, Orosco depicts an indigenous woman giving birth behind a setting sun. Her hair cascades below her, transforming into the North American continent and connecting to South and Central America as well as to Cuba. Upon the viewer's discovery of the map within her hair, the image of the hemisphere becomes less of an aerial view of land and water and more of an allegory about the people to whom Mother Earth gives birth (see plate 2).

Cuellar's poster and Orosco's mural demonstrate two of the mediums the RCAF used to communicate an alternative history of the Western Hemisphere. Disrupting the discursive traces of colonial history in our everyday lives through murals and posters (as well as through songs and poems, which I explore later), the RCAF established the conditions for the theories and words we currently use to interpret and articulate the complexities of the human experience within geopolitical borders based on colonial rule. Members worked and produced on multiple front lines, from farmworker protests and community centers to prisons and university classrooms. Subsequently, the collective comprised multilingual members engaged in a diverse discourse of ideas that included institutional terminologies for artistic production, the colloquial speech of disenfranchised communities, and the terms and slogans of intersecting civil rights movements.

Crafting a verbal and visual vocabulary for Chicano/a audiences and, over time, a broader and more bilingual audience for Chicano/a art, the RCAF added words and text to their posters and murals that reflected the spellings of oral pronunciations. In doing so, they played with the duality of meanings between words in English, Spanish, and caló—from "Aztlán," "Califas," and "Sacra," to the uniquely Chicano/a word for all three, "Sacraztlan," which refers to Sacramento. "Sacra" is Chicano/a shorthand for "Sacramento," a Spanish word that translates to "sacrament" in English. It is not coincidental that Rudy Cuellar's poster *Lowrider Carrucha Show* (1979), an advertisement for a car show, depicts a lowrider lifting off into celestial space. A caption reads "hecho en Aztlán" and announces the location as "Sacra Califas." The poster became something more than advertisement when it

declared the event was located in a sacred place, reframing Sacramento as Aztlán—a Chicano/a homeland (see fig. 0.1).

The theoretical choices RCAF artists made in their art further explain Goldman's impulse to map Chicano/a art history. In order to concretize the intellectual complexity of the signs, symbols, and images that abound in Chicano/a art, Goldman draws on the basic questions of journalism, which are formulaic but intended to gather and disseminate the facts of a news story. In doing so, she replicates the philosophy of the RCAF, whose members wanted to communicate information to viewers who were disenfranchised and excluded from US society and, secondarily, to express a Chicano/a positionality to audiences with power and privilege. This is the unassimilable element of Chicano/a art, whose practitioners in the RCAF were institutionally trained but used such training to cultivate a specifically Chicano/a worldview.

The aesthetics of their message continues in the twenty-first century in both artistic intervention and scholarship (Romo 2001, 2010). One need only glimpse Jesus Barraza's poster *Indian Land* (2004), which he designed with Nancy Hernandez, to see a connection with RCAF artwork. Barraza presents a map of the Western Hemisphere in red block color, with the poster's title following the contours of the landmass. The simple image and bold title interrupt the geopolitical borders that guide our understanding of the Western Hemisphere, continuing the RCAF's decolonial message in a new century (see fig. 0.2).

The artistic remapping of geopolitical space also extends to scholarship on Chicano/a art in the twenty-first century. Chon Noriega and Pilar Tompkins Rivas (2011) conceptually remap "Chicano Art in the City of Dreams," offering a "History in Nine Movements" to account for Mexican American and Chicano/a artists in Los Angeles from 1945 to the present.⁴ Noriega and Tompkins Rivas address the impact of political thought like Marxism and psychological methods like free association on Chicano/a artists to reveal the "space between the aesthetic and the instrumental" in which they produced art (2011, 75). By accounting for the local and the global, Noriega and Tompkins Rivas position Los Angeles's Chicano/a art history at the center of American art history, foregrounding its powers of aesthetic absorption and political and cultural synthesis. Their conceptual mapping reveals that while Chicano/a art was and is always happening within dominant culture, it also disrupts the dominant culture's assimilative forces and



Figure 0.1. Rodolfo "Rudy" Cuellar, *Announcement Poster for Lowrider Carrucha Show* (1979). Screenprint. Royal Chicano Air Force Archives. The California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives, Special Collections Department, the University of California, Santa Barbara Library.



Figure 0.2. Jesus Barraza and Nancy Hernandez, *Indian Land* (2004). Screenprint. Courtesy of Jesus Barraza.

reconfigures its codes of citizenship, laws, and cultural norms by exposing margins, contradictions, and uncredited appropriations. The mappings of Chicano/a art history that Goldman and Noriega and Tompkins Rivas provide textually echo the visualizations of the Western Hemisphere in RCAF art and twenty-first-century depictions like Barraza and Hernandez's *Indian Land*. Seeing and thinking differently about the spaces and times in which history is ordered and historical consciousness is arranged allows for different perspectives of the world from the sky and ground. From aerial views to terrestrial ones, Chicano/a art is both hemispheric and regional, global and local. The story of the RCAF's name makes this point especially clear.

Who the RCAF Was: MAEP-ing the RCAF's Membership

In 1969, a critical mass of Chicano/a students and teachers arrived on the campus of California State University, Sacramento (CSUS). Several of them formed the RCAF, which from its inception was an intergenerational organization. The biographical experiences of the RCAF's members factored into the collective's original name, the Rebel Chicano Art Front, and the

eventual one. Many of the Chicano/a students at CSUS were aware of an earlier Chicano art collective called the Mexican American Liberation Art Front (MALA-F), founded in Oakland, California, by four Chicano artists, including Esteban Villa and José Montoya's brother, Malaquias Montoya (Romo 2011, 40–50). The Sacramento students decided on the name Rebel Chicano Art Front (RCAF) because of its resonance with the MALA-F and the larger sociopolitical milieu.

Esteban Villa and José Montoya were older than most of the students who arrived at CSUS and constituted the RCAF. To make their arts education possible, both men served in the Korean War, along with RCAF member Sam Rios Jr., who pursued an anthropology degree at CSUS followed by a master's degree. Military service created more life opportunities for Mexican Americans in the mid to late twentieth century; sometimes it was not a choice at all due to drafts during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. While older RCAF members experienced service in the Korean War, younger members, including Armando Cid, Juanishi Orosco, and Hector González, served during the Vietnam War.⁵ Like their older colleagues, each of those who served in the armed forces in Vietnam used the GI Bill to pursue higher education.

In addition to the GI Bill, an innovative program for Mexican American college students developed by faculty at CSUS in the late 1960s also made higher education possible. Funded through a grant from the US Department of Education in 1967, the Mexican American Education Project (MAEP) began in 1968 (Morris 1973, 1). The largest program of its kind in the nation, the MAEP aimed to improve education for Mexican American children by training teachers and administrators in public schools serving Mexican Americans ("General Description," n.d., 1). The Experienced Teacher Fellowship Program earned graduate fellows an MA in social science, and in the MAEP's second year, a Prospective Teachers Fellowship Program culminated in a bachelor's degree in education for undergraduate fellows (1). Both programs subsidized students who otherwise would not have been able to attend college without the grant (5). At the time of the MAEP's founding, "the CSU system only had 30 Mexican American graduate students in the entire system" (Campbell 2005–2006, 7). Every year of the MAEP's existence, from 1968 to 1973, it "produced 25 graduate students . . . in Sacramento alone" (Campbell 2010).⁶

In 1969, José Montoya met MAEP director Clark Taylor, an anthropology professor who, according to Montoya, was "the brains that put the program together [to] train us on how to become agents of change. That was the

word, 'agents.' The notion that wherever we came from, once we got our MA degrees, we were to go back and begin advocating for change" (José Montoya, interview, July 5, 2004). Introduced to terms like "agents of change" in an academic setting, future RCAF members absorbed these concepts into their political desires to transform social reality for Chicanos/as through art, education, and infrastructural support. As agents of change, the RCAF artists used several categories of art to streamline their collective identity as a Chicano/a art front and later as a Chicano/a air force, a name that added humor to their community operations in the midst of the Chicano movement's denouncement of foreign wars, educational exclusions, and labor injustice.

The graduate cohort of MAEP fellows was full once Montoya was accepted, but he spoke to Taylor about his colleague Esteban Villa, who was teaching art at a Northern California high school. MAEP administrators hired Villa as an art consultant. Sam Rios Jr. pursued his undergraduate degree in 1969 at CSUS before taking courses with MAEP students toward a master's degree.⁷ Future RCAF member Juan Carrillo entered the MAEP in the same year as Montoya. Like Rios Jr., Carrillo grew up in San Francisco, earning his bachelor's degree at the University of California, Berkeley, and participating in the Third World Liberation Front that began at San Francisco State University and spread to the Berkeley campus.

After graduating from CSUS in 1966, Joe Serna Jr. served in the Peace Corps in Guatemala, returning to Sacramento in 1969. He began teaching courses for the MAEP and the university's government department while pursuing doctoral studies at neighboring University of California, Davis. When the MAEP launched its undergraduate fellows program in 1969, Sacramento Brown Beret Irma Lerma Barbosa was recruited by MAEP instructors, becoming an agent of change who worked on a breakfast service for Chicano/a children modeled after the Black Panther Party's free breakfast program.

The centrality of government support for educational initiatives like the MAEP coincided with grassroots efforts for change during the US civil rights era. The relationship between top-down and bottom-up strategies for sociopolitical and educational reform is an important point to make in regard to RCAF history because it counters nostalgic notions of "the sixties" that romanticize white student activism against the Vietnam War while maintaining the American mythos of exceptionalism. Government support of equal opportunity programs and allied professionals created real

pathways to higher education for a Chicano/a generation in Sacramento that, in addition to contributing to a distinctly American field of art, participated in structural changes to education and public art policy. MAEP graduates like José Montoya and Olivia Castellano became faculty at CSUS. Esteban Villa transitioned from the MAEP's art consultant to an instructor in the Art Department. Sam Rios Jr. became the director of Chicano studies at CSUS in 1972, teaching in the Department of Anthropology and serving as a longtime professor of ethnic studies. Juan Carrillo became an official at the California Arts Council, retiring in 2005 from his position as the council's director. Joe Serna Jr. served on Sacramento's city council for eleven years and then as Sacramento's mayor from 1992 until his death in 1999. The MAEP catalyzed a generation of Chicano/a educational and political leaders in Sacramento who impacted local governance, educational policy, and public art protocol.

Amid the arrival of MAEP students and instructors, a handful of Chicano/a undergraduate students, like Ricardo Favela, enrolled at CSUS between 1969 and 1972. Luis González began studying poetry in the English Department in the early 1970s, taking courses with MAEP graduate Olivia Castellano (Romo 1993, 1). Originally from Sacramento, Celia Herrera Rodríguez studied art and ethnic studies at CSUS in the early 1970s (L. Pérez 2007, 150–159). Juan Cervantes and Rudy Cuellar gained access to CSUS through the Equal Opportunity Program, which was initiated in 1968 through the Harmer Bill, legislation that "gave rise to the EOP Program at 'Sac State' and in all of the CSU in 1969" (Student Academic Success and Equal Opportunity Program, n.d.). Future RCAF members were also enrolled in nearby junior colleges; Luis González's brother, Hector González, enrolled nearby and then transferred to CSUS, while Juanishi Orosco studied at local junior colleges after military service.

The RCAF was also joined by trained artists pursuing graduate degrees or returning home from graduate and undergraduate programs in the arts. Armando Cid trained at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, following his active duty in Vietnam and received his master's degree in art and printmaking at CSUS ("Armando Cid: Just Having Fun" 2002). Max Garcia took courses at the Art Center in Pasadena, along with film classes at UCLA and the University of Southern California, before joining the RCAF in Sacramento in the 1970s (Juan Carrillo, conversation with author, January 31, 2015). Lorraine García-Nakata first studied sculpture in 1974 at CSUS, leaving Northern California between 1976 and 1977 to pursue sculpture as a major at the University of Washington. Likewise, Stan Padilla

joined the collective around 1972 after earning his BFA and MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute and teaching at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, California (Stan Padilla, conversation with author, January 12, 2016).

In addition to artists, the RCAF was joined at its inception and over the years by numerous organizational members. Many were students and activists in Sacramento's Chicano/a community. These members were central to the cultural, educational, and community programs for which the RCAF is largely credited and remembered. They included Jennie Baca, Clara Cid (Favela), Gina Montoya, Lupe Portillo, Rosemary Rasul, David Rasul, Freddy Rodriguez, Terezita Romo, Juanita Polendo (Ontiveros), Sam Quiñones, Josephine Talamantez, Melinda Santana (Rasul), and many others.⁸

Thus a diverse body of Chicano/a students, teachers, artists, and organizers came together to form an art collective. As the Rebel Chicano Art Front, the RCAF began staging art shows in which they brought together their work as students and professors and also displayed art by their students from the Chicano/a community. Withholding individual names, members discovered that the acronym confused their growing audience. People thought they were the Royal Canadian Air Force and not the Rebel Chicano Art Front. The mistaken identity was rephrased as the Royal Chicano Air Force and embraced by the group for several reasons. Since a large contingent of the RCAF were military veterans, their previous experience with military protocol and jargon led to innumerable wordplays and puns as well as quasi-militant performances of a Chicano/a air force, which RCAF artists also reproduced in photographs, posters, and murals.

In addition to military experience, the inspiring but often volatile environment of the 1960s and 1970s informed the group's enthusiasm over its unintended name. In the late 1960s, Americans of color faced intolerable levels of social, political, and educational exclusion, sparking demands for revisions to US history and curriculum changes in public schools to include the unacknowledged contributions of marginalized communities (Cockcroft and Barnet-Sanchez 1993, 9). Chicano/a communities in California, Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico became major sites of the Chicano movement, organizing around political campaigns for labor rights, equal access to education, land rights, and an end to the Vietnam War, which reflected a disproportionate death toll of Chicano soldiers. Chicanos/as implemented tactics similar to those of African Americans and other marginalized communities through their awareness or involvement in the broader civil rights movement.

Within the diverse milieu of civil rights and political protests, the RCAF fit somewhere between calls to action amongst a generation of disenfranchised Americans and mainstream perceptions of dangerous activism exploding in US cities. The air force identity helped the group respond with a sense of duty to the urgent needs of Sacramento's Chicana/o community. But, as an art form in itself, the air force identity was creatively ambiguous, or a space for the collective to visualize and articulate a counternarrative to the militarized wars of nation-states and the assumptions of racial-ethnic militancy in the media (Ontiveros 2010). Infusing it with humor, the RCAF performed the air force persona as something beyond colonial power and violence, offering the Chicano/a community a grassroots means of survival, visibility, and inspiration.

What the RCAF Made: "The *colectiva* versus the individual"

Chicano/a artists in the 1960s and 1970s approached art in a way that differed from the status quo of the art world, particularly in regard to the idea of the art collective. The RCAF destabilized belief in individual genius and in the value of art made by a single artist, instead choosing to make art for people's sake. Exemplified by the collective's early art shows at CSUS, their collapse of professional hierarchy in university exhibitions reveals one of the ways in which RCAF members redefined military protocol and illuminates a facet of the collective that is often misunderstood. Because of their community focus and support of the United Farm Workers (UFW) through labor activism, poster production, and other union materials, like UFW flags and pamphlets, the RCAF is typically regarded as a Chicano/a art collective that worked outside official art channels.⁹ But members of the RCAF were very much institutional insiders, as their education and training reflects.

The decision to circumvent individual authorship and institutional hierarchy in art shows and university-related projects was an informed choice by the RCAF. By doing so, the group confronted structural inequality by proposing an alternative approach to art education within the university that centered on building Chicano/a community infrastructure. As a major producer of community murals and silkscreen posters, two principal visual mediums during the Chicano movement (S. Goldman 1984, 50), the RCAF employed methods that innovated a key concept for academic fields in Chicano/a studies through their practice of real inclusion. Taking what they learned at the

university, like becoming agents of change, the RCAF immediately gave it to others, teaching barrio youth, the elderly, the incarcerated, and each other.

In regard to muralism, the RCAF was part of a visual campaign to symbolically reconfigure barrio space using words, images, and symbols of a collective consciousness (Cockcroft and Barnet-Sanchez 1993, 9). Many RCAF members worked directly with each other and with community residents on murals and had no government support in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In a local context, RCAF muralism reflected the tenets of the Chicano movement, unfolding as part of a national civil rights campaign with international influences. Members learned about 1930s and 1940s murals sponsored by the US Works Progress Administration (WPA) during art school and at universities, for example. They recall learning to a lesser extent about early twentieth-century Mexican muralism, but they pursued the subject on their own, studying the artistic processes of transforming the political, cultural, and social ideals of the 1910 Mexican Revolution into images on the walls of Mexico's seats of power.

Although RCAF muralists simultaneously studied and developed a transnational art history to support the intellectual and political grounding of their artwork, RCAF murals in the late 1960s and 1970s nevertheless differed greatly from state-sponsored murals in Mexico and WPA murals in the United States. The United States had never before witnessed a mural movement like that of the 1960s and 1970s, catalyzed not as a top-down political campaign for national cohesion or as an employment opportunity in response to a national economic crisis (Barnet-Sanchez 2012, 243–244). Community murals of the 1960s and 1970s were the creative outbursts of people who had reached the threshold of marginalization in the cities and towns of the nation-state. Often facilitated, but not individually created, by trained artists, community murals were the street art of disenfranchised people making themselves visible on their walls as they protested in their streets.

The community mural movement was also multifaceted, bringing together people who were institutionally separated by class privilege and societal inequalities. White and middle-class university students who were active in New Left organizations that mobilized against the Vietnam War participated in mural making during the 1960s and 1970s (Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft 1998). The RCAF represented all demographics of community muralism, including students and professors, UFW members and com-

extended the art of making community murals to university students who were not Chicanos/as. They did so by developing curricula and community spaces in the early 1970s, which provided training and support to local people and incentivized community art making for non-Chicano/a students.

As early as 1969, the RCAF began painting with local youth, untrained artists, college students, and each other using resources that were available to them through their jobs or from the university. Their murals in Sacramento were numerous and include *Emergence of the Chicano Social Struggle in a Bi-Cultural Society* (1969–1970), painted by Esteban Villa, RCAF members, and students in the gymnasium of the Washington Neighborhood Center. Armando Cid and students painted *Para la Raza del Barrio* and *Reno's Mural* (ca. 1976) on the walls of a popular bar that hosted an inaugural Chicano/a poetry series. RCAF artists also created Chicano/a murals on CSUS's campus in the 1970s, the majority of which were removed by university officials. They responded to the administration's censorship by spontaneously making murals as a form of protest, as well as by negotiating access to public walls through official channels. The RCAF was able to do so, once again, because of the diversity of the group's membership.

The RCAF created the groundwork for public art in Sacramento as the community mural movement exploded across the United States. While mural making as a public art form eventually benefitted from the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts, following the termination of WPA mural programs, government funding came only after communities mobilized and artists of color painted murals without official sanction.¹⁰ Community murals, then, were a preexisting path or a phantom infrastructure in cities like Los Angeles during the 1980s and 1990s, when public art projects like *Biddy Mason's Place: A Passage of Time* were installed in the downtown district. The Biddy Mason memorial recovered the forgotten history of an enslaved African American woman who successfully petitioned for her freedom.¹¹ But decades before, and on a much larger scale, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* offered “a panorama of the social struggle and disenfranchisement of diverse racial and ethnic groups” (Mesa-Bains 1991, 133). Located in the Tujunga Wash drainage canal in the San Fernando Valley, *The Great Wall* set a precedent for a diverse public art tradition in Los Angeles. Chicana artist Judy Baca directed *The Great Wall*, managing the enormous undertaking through the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), which she founded in 1976 (133). While the grassroots origins of community murals cannot be overemphasized, the public art infrastructure they

created—including design negotiations, fund-raising, and the coordination of mural teams—informed the municipal channels that came later.

In Sacramento, the RCAF paved the way for government sponsorship of public art. In 1977, the RCAF's collaborative approach to murals in Chicano/a neighborhoods led to municipal support through the Art in Public Places ordinance that coincided with the founding of the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission (SMAC). Prior to the municipal entity and ordinance, the RCAF founded an organization to preside over their murals and other programs called El Centro de Artistas Chicanos, incorporated by 1972.¹² Like SPARC, El Centro de Artistas Chicanos was a nonprofit organization through which the RCAF received and allocated funds and worked with SMAC and the Art in Public Places ordinance. The RCAF created massive public artworks in the late 1970s and 1980s, an era during which scholars claim the political and culturally nationalist imagery of earlier murals had ended due to government funding and oversight (Cockcroft and Bernet-Sanchez 1993; Harris 2000). But for the RCAF, a collective that had developed between the university and the Chicano/a community, government subsidy did not alter the political or cultural intentions of their murals.

The RCAF continued to collapse institutional hierarchy and individualism in their officially sponsored murals. They were able to maintain a collaborative process for mural making because the RCAF never enforced aesthetic uniformity in their group. Esteban Villa remarked on the RCAF's creative diversity over decades of production, asserting that it was a collective of like-minded people who expressed themselves in diverse ways. "The *colectiva* versus the individual," he explained, "was okay because even though we're a collective, you can identify my style of art against José's, Juanishi's, Cid's, Cervantes, Max Garcia. . . . We're all the same, but different, and it works. It's like the word 'Chicano.' . . . They want to use 'Hispanic,' but there's no need to do that. You have to keep the word and start reshaping history" (Esteban Villa, interview, January 7, 2004). Using the Spanish word for "collective" in conjunction with the English phrasing "versus the individual," Villa code-switched to express an alternative space for Chicano/a art, one based on political and cultural values that encompass artistic differences as processes of fusion and diffusion. He also positioned this space against individualism, which he perceived as a Eurocentric value in American art as well as in contemporary nomenclature like "Hispanic."

Villa's claim that there was room for different styles in the RCAF reflects the staying power of the original goals of the Chicano movement for RCAF

members. Guiding documents like "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" (1969) called for a united cultural arts community that was in service to the Chicano movement, but it did not profess a unified aesthetic. Making art accessible, educational, and occupational for the Chicano/a community was a point on which the RCAF artists came together and stayed together in a multifaceted collective as they built alternative structures that were necessary to fulfill community needs and their artistic goals (Martínez 1997, 229).

Where the RCAF Made Art: The Art of Building Relationships

In addition to making murals, the RCAF was a prolific producer of silkscreen posters. Poster art also pertains to where they made art, if RCAF history is mapped relationally. Making art for people's sake, the RCAF developed a primary audience that was simultaneously local, regional, and international, as members of the collective made art in relation to each other, Sacramento's Chicano/a community, and the tenets of the Chicano movement. But they also made art in relation to American art, poetry, literature, and history. From university classrooms and campus walls to the front lines of UFW protests and the windows of barrio bookstores, RCAF art exemplified a world of relations.

Aware of mainstream trends, institutional traditions, and canons, members of the RCAF pushed genres and mediums beyond conventions and established definitions. RCAF artists used Pop Art techniques in murals and posters, for example, but they did so not to critique the social alienation provoked by mass production and consumption in popular culture.¹³ Instead, they adapted color-blocking, repetition, and cropping as formal elements of Chicano/a art rooted in a political desire for societal transformation. RCAF artists retooled the American advertisement culture with which they had grown up in the 1940s and 1950s, and from which Pop Art emerged, to communicate a culturally nationalist Chicano/a worldview and a working-class aesthetic centered on labor activism. Color was (and is) very much a choice in Chicano/a art, aligning with the political positions of the Chicano movement. Like the red, white, and black colors of the UFW flag, RCAF artists fused similar political messages asserted in color with the aesthetic formalism and color theory they learned in college; they redefined the meaning of national and international symbols through color to visually allegorize the Chicano/a origin story in the Western Hemisphere.

Further, like the locations of their early murals, the RCAF's posters were made outside traditional spaces of art production. The RCAF "pulled" posters in Volkswagen vans and donated spaces and operated art and cultural programs where they not only taught people how to silk-screen and create murals but also served breakfast to children. RCAF artists didn't use canvas or expensive acrylic paints in the early 1970s. Instead, they made posters with squeegees and cut stencils from linoleum. They produced work on scrap paper left over from UFW campaigns or materials "borrowed" from CSUS's Art Department. While stock photographs were cropped and reconfigured by Chicano/a artists like Rupert Garcia in the San Francisco Bay Area, RCAF artists rarely used preexisting pictures, but drew most of their images by hand (Ramón Favela 1986, 12–13). When they did use photographs for silkscreen work, they were photographs taken by RCAF member Hector González. Hector documented the collective as they worked on behalf of the UFW, painted murals, and performed the air force persona. His brother, Luis González, along with Ricardo Favela, Rudy Cuelar, Armando Cid, and Max Garcia, developed a photograph-to-serigraph technique that pushed the aesthetic boundaries of silk-screening, using the form to document the history of the Chicano movement alongside RCAF history.

In doing all of these things, the RCAF anticipated the pop-up artists of the twenty-first century, practicing a do-it-yourself philosophy on the front lines of labor protests and events concerned with community engagement and social responsibility. RCAF posters announced the location of real meals for children, as opposed to depicting accessible foods as debased objects, like a soup can repeated ad nauseam. They iconicized Chicano movement leaders through portraits of César Chávez and Ruben Salazar, as well as images of leaders in Sacramento's manifestation of the Chicano movement. Yet in their advertisement posters for community access to meals and events, as well as in their politically inspiring portraits of Chicano movement leaders, they innovated design concepts that fused the verbal with the visual, building an architecture of Chicano/a identity through a collection of images that are now as recognizable as a Campbell Soup can. From Posada-inspired *calaveras* (skeletons) to the face of César Chávez, the angular eagle of the UFW, and the power fist, the RCAF created a visual culture that abounds in the twenty-first century.

The relationship between words and images in RCAF art is an important component of the architecture they built for Chicano/a identity, and



it speaks to the oral and aural environment in which Chicano/a culture experienced a renaissance. While the fusion of text and image in RCAF art pertains to the fact that many members were musicians and poets, it also suggests a theoretical location for their art because it resonates in scholarly remappings in the 1990s that proposed a south-to-north trajectory for American cultural studies as opposed to the standard east-to-west orientation (Saldívar 1997). José Montoya and Luis González merged their knowledge of Mexican corridos, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century story songs, with the modernist poetry they encountered in college (Saldívar 1997; Limón 1992). The modern long poem in the United States explored the world drawn closer after two world wars through references to other languages and graphic allusions to desolate landscapes and individual alienation (Villanueva 2000, 705). José Montoya's "El Sol y los de Abajo" (1972) fused elements of the corrido with the long poem, laying bare the bicultural reality and mental landscape of Chicanos/as through its epic structure and length. Along with Rodolfo González's "Yo Soy Joaquín" (1967) and Luis Valdez's "Pensamiento Serpentino" (1971), Montoya innovated a poetic tradition in the United States by foregrounding how bilingual people speak. Chicano/a poets did not merely reference languages amid a century of war in the United States; rather, they embodied their bilingual voices that had been shaped by war and diaspora.

The "third world" experience that Chicano/a poets like Montoya poeticized broke with the Mexican American tradition of military service as a pathway to national belonging or recognition of citizenship. Instead,

Figure 0.3. L: Armando Cid, *Sunburst* (ca. 1976) on posterior facade of Washington Square Apartments before removal in 2008. R: Armando Cid, *Olin* (ca. 1976) on anterior facade of apartments and in disrepair in 2007. Author's photograph.



Chicano/a poets adapted pre-Columbian ideas like “tú eres mi otro yo” (Valdez 1994, 173) and reframed the Chicano/a generation as “branches of the same tree” with indigenous peoples like the Vietnamese.¹⁴ References to pre-Columbian civilizations, cultures, and languages in RCAF art were ways of talking about political, intellectual, spiritual, and cultural decolonization amid the Chicano movement, which was marked by battles over access to public space and native land rights.

Emblazoning a mural with pre-Columbian symbols was more than an act of cultural affirmation; it transformed space, underscoring real and figurative locations where RCAF art happened.

Through pre-Columbian imagery, RCAF artists connected local experiences of spatial encroachment and invisibility to historical forces of colonization. The Chicano/a community in Sacramento’s Alkali Flat, for example, a dense Chicano/a neighborhood in the 1970s, confronted the second phase of a multidecade redevelopment plan.¹⁵ In response to the city’s rezoning of their neighborhood, Chicano/a activists and residents formed the Alkali Flat Project Area Committee and secured an existent public park, renamed Zapata Park, a new residential building called the Washington

Figure 0.4. “Fiesta de Maíz.” First Annual Celebration of Chicano Cultural Ceremonies. Pyramid made by Rodolfo “Rudy” Cuellar. Royal Chicano Air Force Archives. The California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives. Special Collections Department, the University of California, Santa Barbara Library.

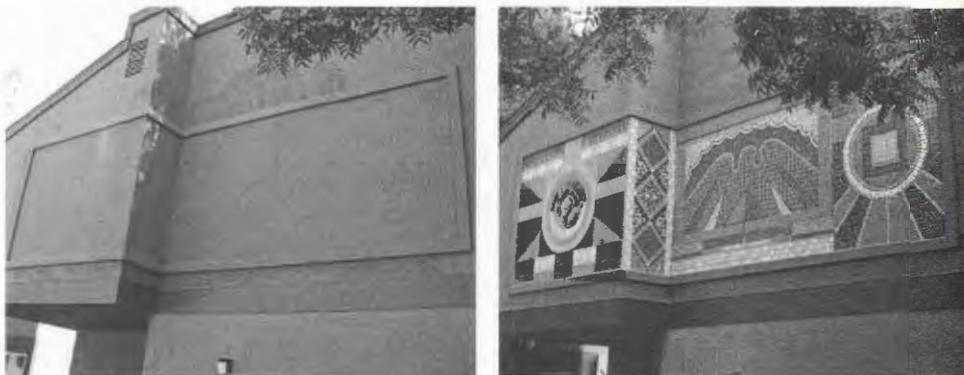
Square Apartments, and an elementary school that emphasized community involvement and cultural activities (R. Villa 2000, 192–193).

Residents in the Alkali Flat included RCAF members like Armando Cid, who worked with local Chicano/a youth to create murals on the posterior and anterior facades of the Washington Square Apartments. The murals were vivid tile mosaics entitled *Olin* (ca. 1976) and *Sunburst* (ca. 1976).¹⁶ “Olin” (which is also spelled “Ollin”) means “movement” in Nahuatl, an indigenous language from Mexico known in the United States as the language of the Aztecs. The symbols and names were selected by Cid to honor the Aztec sun deity Ollin Tonatiuh, or “Movement of the Sun.”¹⁷ But Cid’s adaptation of pre-Columbian symbols commemorated real changes brought about by the movement of people against larger political and economic forces of urban redevelopment. The murals visualized a connection for Chicanos/as to a pre-Columbian past while also expressing Chicano/a “nativeness” to a neighborhood (see fig. 0.3). *Olin* and *Sunburst* made an appropriate backdrop for the Fiesta de Maíz, a Chicana/o reenactment of a pre-Columbian ritual at Zapata Park. The performance was a political gesture, responding to social-spatial injustices by visibly celebrating the Chicana/o community’s victory over gentrification (see fig. 0.4).

Cid’s murals and the Fiesta de Maíz offer context for José Montoya’s poem “El Padre Nuestro and the Park” (1975). Offering a quiet glimpse of a park that he discovers in his barrio, Montoya proclaims,

And here it’s been,
This park—so near
My house—casi kitty-corner,
Como quien dice—
This simple, yet
Majestic park!

...
On a cold December
Morning,
I witnessed that sun
Ahí en el parque
Engaged in a battle
For dominion with
The fog! (1992, 112)



The Chicano/a community's struggle for dominion over its neighborhood is playfully implied in Montoya's observation of the morning fog's transition into a warm, sunny day. The verse suggests that the transformation to which he bears witness is literally the dawning of a new day for Chicano/a residents who protected green space in their barrio. The visual, poetic, and performative work of the RCAF attests to a literal and figurative mapping of Chicano/a space in Sacramento.

The RCAF's cognizance of spatial issues, expressed through multiple modes of art, had far-reaching implications for Chicano/a history, both near to and far from the group's location in the Western Hemisphere. The murals, ceremony, and poem dealt with access to public space as a need for visibility in the historical consciousness of the nation and would echo in the theoretical paradigms of the 1990s. As the new millennium approached, and in the shadow of the five-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's discovery of the "new world," scholars proposed cultural remappings, "alter-Native" perspectives, and decolonial imaginaries for US history and cultural studies (Saldívar 1997; Gaspar de Alba 1998; E. Pérez 1999). I argue that the scholarly trend began in the artistic creativity of 1960s and 1970s Chicano/a artists who visualized, poeticized, and performed alternate mappings of space, memory, and nativity to disrupt aerial views of "the West" and "the frontier" through on-the-ground interventions on regional hegemony (see fig. 0.5).

Figure 0.5. L: Former site of *Sunburst* on posterior facade of Washington Square Apartments and before reinstatement of Cid's design by Josephine Talamantez in 2009. Photo by Stephanie Sauer. R: Reinstatement of *Sunburst* following August 2010 rededication ceremony. Photo by Janell Lacayo.

When the RCAF Made Art: 1969 and Counting

The RCAF was active between 1969 and the first decades of the twenty-first century, completing mural renovations and new works in 2001 and 2003 and holding a retrospective exhibition at CSUS in 2007. In 2012, RCAF members restored their murals at Chicano Park in San Diego, California, that they had originally created in 1975. Still, many members continue to collaborate, produce, and identify as RCAF artists. Deciding when the RCAF ended is as slippery as determining when it began. Accounting for nearly five decades of art and cultural production is a daunting task, particularly with regard to a Chicano/a art collective that responded to multiple historical events, including the 1960s and 1970s civil rights era, foreign wars following World War II, and political and institutional setbacks for Chicanos/as and US Latinos/as in the 1980s and 1990s.

Another obstacle to overcome in deciding when RCAF art history begins and ends pertains to the periodization of Chicano/a art established by scholars and inaugural exhibitions. While there have been national Chicano/a art shows and regionally important ones in the twenty-first century, the conversation started by *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985* (CARA) in the 1990s and the periodization reflected in its title continues to frame and, indeed, reify Chicano/a art as a thing of the past. Certainly, the periodization of Chicano/a art gives larger audiences the necessary contexts to appreciate the origins of a uniquely American art; but the periods are also problematic because of the distinctions they pose between the political, the instrumental, and the aesthetic.

In 1984, Shifra Goldman observed that as the Chicano movement evolved, Chicano/o artists became more conscious of "the changing perception of the Chicano role in the United States, and in the international arena" (50), which shaped the periodization of Chicano/a art history. The "history of Chicano poster making, like that of street muralism," Goldman wrote, "can be divided into two periods: from 1968 to 1975; and from 1975 to the present" (50). She restated the periods with Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (1985) in *Arte Chicano: A Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography of Chicano Art, 1965–1981*.¹⁸ The primary distinction between the periods concerns the political content of artwork, or lack thereof. The "latter period," Karen Mary Davalos (2008, 118–119) comments, is typically "described as

less political or confrontational than the former.” Davalos takes issue with the periodization because it does not account for the political consciousness that Chicana/o artists embodied throughout their lives, and instead homogenizes a Chicano/a artistic worldview and blurs different beliefs, values, and commitments of the artists. She cites Yolanda López’s 1978 poster *Who’s the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?* as an example of political Chicana art made after 1975 (2008, 34–35). *Who’s the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?* is a satirical rebuttal to nativist movements in the United States and continues to talk back to racism in the twenty-first century.

But the periodization of Chicano/a art responded to institutional recognition in the 1980s, which affected the production of Chicano/a art and, particularly, silkscreen posters (Romo 2001). In the early 1970s, RCAF serigraphs were signed with the collective’s acronym. Entrenched in a working-class perspective of production, RCAF members divided the labor of the silk-screening process to such a degree that it is difficult to determine in the twenty-first century who designed letters, drew images, or printed a series of posters (Juan Carrillo, Rudy Cuellar, and Esteban Villa, conversation with author, February 3, 2013). Names of individual artists began to appear on RCAF posters around 1975 and widely by the 1980s. Yet, alongside the appearance of posters signed by individual RCAF artists, the group continued working collectively on posters for community events, political campaigns, and grassroots art shows into the twenty-first century.

Like the complexity of assigning periods to RCAF posters, early RCAF murals were political in content as well as in execution because the artists merged the aesthetic with the instrumental. Manifesting a political choice ingrained in the collectivist philosophy of the group, the RCAF created murals with an array of people from the university and the Chicano/a community. Early RCAF murals often included the names of individual artists along with the RCAF signature, reflecting the diversity of the collective’s artistic styles and a pedagogical choice to recognize the contributions of students and community members. *Para la Raza del Barrio* (ca. 1976), for example, a mural created by Armando Cid and his students, features their names written around a power fist and UFW eagle.

Para la Raza del Barrio also demonstrates that the RCAF continued to create political murals after 1975. Nevertheless, the idea that Chicano/a art was less political by the mid-1970s seems to apply to RCAF murals created with municipal funds because of their seemingly neutral content. By the late 1970s, the RCAF was negotiating sanctioned public art in Sacramento

through the city’s official channels, first with *Metamorphosis*, a large butterfly mural completed by 1980 and funded through the Art in Public Places ordinance managed by SMAC. But the RCAF was involved in the creation of both of these official channels, which makes the periodization of their public art, according to what is political and what is not, more complex.

While the RCAF upheld the doctrine of the Chicano movement from the collective’s inception and long after the 1970s, members interacted with civic, academic, and political administrations before and after 1975; sometimes, they were the actual officials or part of administrative bodies that presided over Sacramento’s public art. Armando Cid’s *Olin* and *Sunburst* murals, for example, created at the Washington Square Apartments, were funded with redevelopment money secured by the Alkali Flat Project Area Committee and the Sacramento Concilio, Inc. Cid’s murals are colorful tile mosaics, but they were readable pre-Columbian symbols for Chicano/a viewers in the 1970s, communicating a political victory for residents of an endangered neighborhood.

The problem the RCAF poses for Chicano/a art history is how to talk about a vanguard Chicano/a art collective in a way that accounts for all of their art over time, noting the historical and sociopolitical events to which the group immediately and theoretically responded. Perhaps a more accurate way to map when the RCAF made art is to consider when Chicano/a art started for RCAF members. For many of them, it began before 1965 and in the histories of their families. RCAF members also conveyed that their Chicano/a identities are rooted in indigenous ancestries in the Western Hemisphere and in migration stories that disrupt geopolitical and intellectual borders between the United States and Mexico.

The Chicano movement’s connection to an indigenous past was, and continues to be, an intellectual and political claim for Chicanos/as; but it is also a real part of RCAF members’ ancestry. The disconnect between indigenous heritage before Spanish conquest and after the Mexican-American War (1846–1848) is the lament of Luis González’s poem “When Your Mother Asks You Who You Are” (1975–1976). Painted directly onto a mural of the same name inside a Chicano/a and farmworker service center, González’s poem was unconcerned with the colonial histories of nation-states. Instead, the poem spoke directly to the people who ate in the dining hall. He reminded them that despite disruptions to their family histories and cultural knowledge in the aftermath of wars, annexation, and colonialism, “The sun is still your father,” and “The land is still your mother.”¹⁹

Together with indigenous ancestries that transgress geopolitical and academic borders, RCAF members shared family histories that precede or coincide with the Bracero Program in the United States. Most RCAF members were born and raised in California or were born elsewhere but arrived in California with their families, who migrated for work or because of military drafts and wars. Armando Cid, for example, was born in Zacatecas, Mexico, in 1943 and journeyed with his mother to Sacramento, California, by way of El Paso, Texas, and Fresno, California (Josephine Talamantez, conversation with author, January 11, 2016). Juan Carrillo and brothers Hector and Luis González were also born in Mexico.²⁰ José Montoya, who was born in New Mexico, resettled with his family in California's San Joaquin Valley during the 1940s. Irma Lerma Barbosa was born in Nevada and moved as a child to Northern California. Some members recall childhoods spent working in agricultural fields or canneries in rural towns, while others grew up around the railroad yards of Roseville, California. Still other members were raised in Southern California or the San Francisco Bay Area. Working-class realities, shaped by early and mid-twentieth-century migrations between Mexico and the United States, informed the RCAF's development of visual and poetic themes of family, migration, and war, all of which shaped a Chicano/a consciousness. In the twenty-first century, RCAF art documents the evolution of that process—from fragmented encounters with pre-Columbian and Mexican histories to more complex adaptations of imageries over time and fusions of the artistic methods that members learned in college.

Returning to the story of the RCAF's name, firsthand accounts of the group's air force identity are continually present throughout decades of artistic production. The RCAF not only visualized the air force persona in posters and murals, but also in drawings, impromptu performances, and photographs. They built a vocabulary and collection of air force-inspired refrains that mythologized the group during the Chicano movement and avoided overly determined understandings of the air force identity by mainstream media and non-Chicano/a audiences. In the telling and retelling of air force stories, RCAF members participated in a collective consciousness in which they now "autopilot" memories of standing guard at UFW events or winning a float competition in a small-town parade after they accidentally drove into it.

The RCAF's desire to preserve their history through an air force mythology reflects an archive of memory that they embodied and performed in the absence of institutional recognition (Taylor 2003). But, in addition to

an embodied archive, members also intellectualized RCAF history through institutional channels and traditions. Several members earned master's degrees that focused on historical relationships between Mexican and Chicano/a art. They infused Chicano/a art concepts into the classes they taught at the university, in community centers, and for prison programs, underscoring the connection between art and activism.²¹ In the late twentieth century, RCAF members deposited an extensive collection of art and historical records at UC Santa Barbara's California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives and, in the twenty-first century, donated smaller collections to California State University campuses in Sacramento and San Jose. Despite these academic records, the RCAF continues to fly under our radar.

Why It Matters: The Importance of RCAF History in the Twenty-First Century

The institutional absence of RCAF art history directly relates to Chicano/a art's absence in American culture writ large. In 2003, the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA commissioned Rita González (2003) to produce a survey of index citations for ninety-three midcareer US Latina/o artists. The survey reveals what the absence of ninety-three artists in American art history means, because it connects the void of institutional knowledge and scholarship on US Latino/a artists to the lack of awareness in mainstream American consciousness. Many of the artists González recovered identify as or were Chicanos/as, and she titled the study an "undocumented history" because "despite significant accomplishments, Latino artists have yet to be adequately integrated into art historical scholarship" (2003, 2). Canvassing standard art history texts and art historical finding tools,²² González found few artists on her list "had more than one article published about their work; and more often than not the few articles published consisted of brief exhibition reviews. In comparison, searching for one hundred of the most exhibited non-Hispanic artists would yield thousands of entries" (2).

The general lack of awareness of the RCAF's contributions to US culture, art, and history is significant because the art they made and taught characterizes the art of the twenty-first century. From posters of civil rights leaders with slogans like "Si se puede" and symbols of the power fist, to the militant fashion of student and youth organizations, Chicano/a art has never been more popular than in the twenty-first century. In many ways, social media has further democratized the arts, from modes of production to

dissemination. In the best of circumstances, art cooperatives like Jesus Barraza and Melanie Cervantes's Dignidad Rebelde in Oakland, California, produce downloadable posters of people killed by the police in the United States and of state suppressions, like the kidnapping and murder of forty-three students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers' College of Ayotzinapa in Guerrero, Mexico. In the 1960s and 1970s Chicano/a artists, among other artists of color working for the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement, the Young Lords Party, and the Third World Liberation Front, created posters of political prisoners and slain civil rights activists. Portraits of *Los Angeles Times* journalist Ruben Salazar, for example, who was killed by law enforcement during the 1970 Chicano Moratorium march, were exhibited in the *Ruben Salazar Memorial Group Show* at San Francisco's Galería de la Raza shortly after his murder (Ramón Favela 1986, 22).

In other circumstances, 1960s and 1970s civil rights art is appropriated without credit or knowledge of the artwork's original context. In 2007, contemporary street artist Frank Shepard Fairey was criticized by Mark Vallen for his appropriation of 1960s and 1970s posters, including Rupert Garcia's *Down with the Whiteness* (1969), which reappears as *Power to the Posse* in Fairey's 2006 retrospective book, *Obey: Supply and Demand: The Art of Shepard Fairey*. No credit was given to Rupert Garcia for his original work (Vallen 2007). Fairey also used an unsigned poster, *Liberate Puerto Rico Now!*, created by the Young Lords Party in 1971, for *Wage Peace: Obey* with no mention of its source (Vallen 2007).

Down with the Whiteness and *Liberate Puerto Rico Now!* reveal interracial, multiethnic, and cross-cultural influences among artists during the 1960s and 1970s civil rights movement, despite persistent mainstream portrayals that it was exclusively an African American experience. The power fist, for example, is predominantly perceived as a Black Power icon, and it most definitely was, but the power fist and adaptations of hands with chains were disseminated through posters and underground press and were colored brown and yellow. They were also depicted as skeletal, and sometimes the closed fist was opened with its fingers extended. While the differences may seem trivial, they reflect interracial alliances and exchanges of political, intellectual, and aesthetic ideas between disenfranchised peoples in the United States who are continually positioned as being at odds with each other.

Debating the integrity of a twenty-first-century street artist turned commercial brand in contemporary consumer culture is not why I mention

Fairey's artistic appropriations. Rather, who made what, when, where, and why is quickly disappearing from US mainstream culture, and history is repeating itself. While Chicano/a art scholars and historians may know of the individual artists and the contexts of their work, Chicano/a art was made for people's sake. Fortunately, it has been collected by librarians and archivists in the late twentieth century; but it is largely underused by academics who teach the students with whom the art continues to resonate.

When Chicano/a art is taught, posters like Malaquias Montoya's *Murió Una Muerte Natural* (1969–1970) surprise viewers with their relevance to contemporary human crises. Montoya's image of an upright, silhouetted body resembles a chalk outline of a recently killed man. An American flag pierces the man's shoulder, and his gaping mouth suggests an inaudible cry. The poster protests the Vietnam War but resonates in ongoing tragedies in communities of color across the United States. The title, written in Spanish, is bitterly ironic: to die a natural death.²³ Montoya's poster testifies to the horrific reality of social injustices, and reveals the game-changing power of the pioneering images and hybrid forms of art that characterized the verbal-visual vocabulary of the Chicano movement. The creative forces unleashed during an era of mass mobilizations against war and for civil rights offer a "narrative of how a society arrives at its present" (Ontiveros 2014, 2); in the case of Malaquias Montoya's poster, the work reveals a history of institutional oppression and a history of resistance to that oppression (see plate 3).

Some argue that despite a lack of historical context for Chicano/a art, it continues to inspire audiences through the feelings it conjures. The sensory experience of art is an essential part of its ability to resonate with intergenerational audiences over time. Randy Ontiveros (2014, 2) contends that regardless of the invisibility of the Chicano movement as a major event in US history, Chicano/a art overcomes the absence because it is not governed "by linear time," but rather it "possesses a different chronology." Shaped by imagination and "more attuned to the subtle ways in which the past shapes the present," Chicano/a art, Ontiveros writes, "revolves around the senses, it allows individuals and collectives to *feel* their relationship to the past more intimately" (2; emphasis in original). But Chicano/a art can only do so when it is taught—and not only in universities and specialized courses, but in public schools and at the elementary and secondary levels. It must also be part of museums' permanent displays—and not shown once every five to ten years in national and special exhibitions.

Moreover, the history of Chicano/a art and the people it places at the center of American art, history, and culture, quite simply, should be known. The biographies of 1960s and 1970s Chicano/a artists matter because the genres and mediums they entered and expanded pushed the creative and intellectual boundaries of what it means to be American. Much like jazz, hip-hop, and street art, Chicano/a art happens *here* because of *here*—that is, in a nation of peripheries where music, styles, and languages converge, where hegemonic tastes mix and fuse with peripheral ones, and where the exclusions of the nation-state force cultural innovation. This is a process that Lucy Lippard (2000, 5) deems a “mixed blessing” for artists of color, who historically have been “drawn to the illusory warmth of the melting pot, and then rejected from it.”²⁴ Despite institutional exclusions and academic segregations, artists of color “developed or offered sanctuary to ideas, images, and values that otherwise would have been swept away in the mainstream” (5). Moving the periphery of American art history to its center asks audiences to consider the paradox of being both at the center and margins of a mainstream culture. By learning about art that has not been central to American art scholarship but is central to the art happening in the United States, viewers reconsider notions of quality as they learn how cultural margins take shape and how artistic peripheries are constructed.

RCAF artwork contributes to the story of how the United States arrived at its present and, hopefully, how it continues to work toward a more perfect union; but without historical knowledge of the collective, the full impact of RCAF art is not possible. In 1975, for example, Rudy Cuellar and Enrique Ortíz created *Bilingual Education Says Twice As Much* (Rudy Cuellar, conversation with author, February 3, 2015). A clever witticism for Chicano/a viewers, the poster’s message certainly resonates with contemporary language rights issues amid campaigns to end ethnic studies programs. Cuellar and Ortíz combined pre-Columbian speech scrolls with a caption in English.²⁵ The speech scrolls float up between the profiles of two indigenous people (see fig. 0.6). A major claim of Chicano/a students during the Chicano movement was the right to reclaim the languages that had been native to them before the Spanish conquest, colonial rule, and the US annexation of northern Mexico. But in the historical moment of the poster, the demand for bilingual education does not pertain to indigenous languages; it pertains to the right to speak Spanish. The institutional denial of Spanish is interpreted by Cuellar and Ortíz as part of a longer removal of people’s native languages through centuries of competing colonial orders. The poster’s call

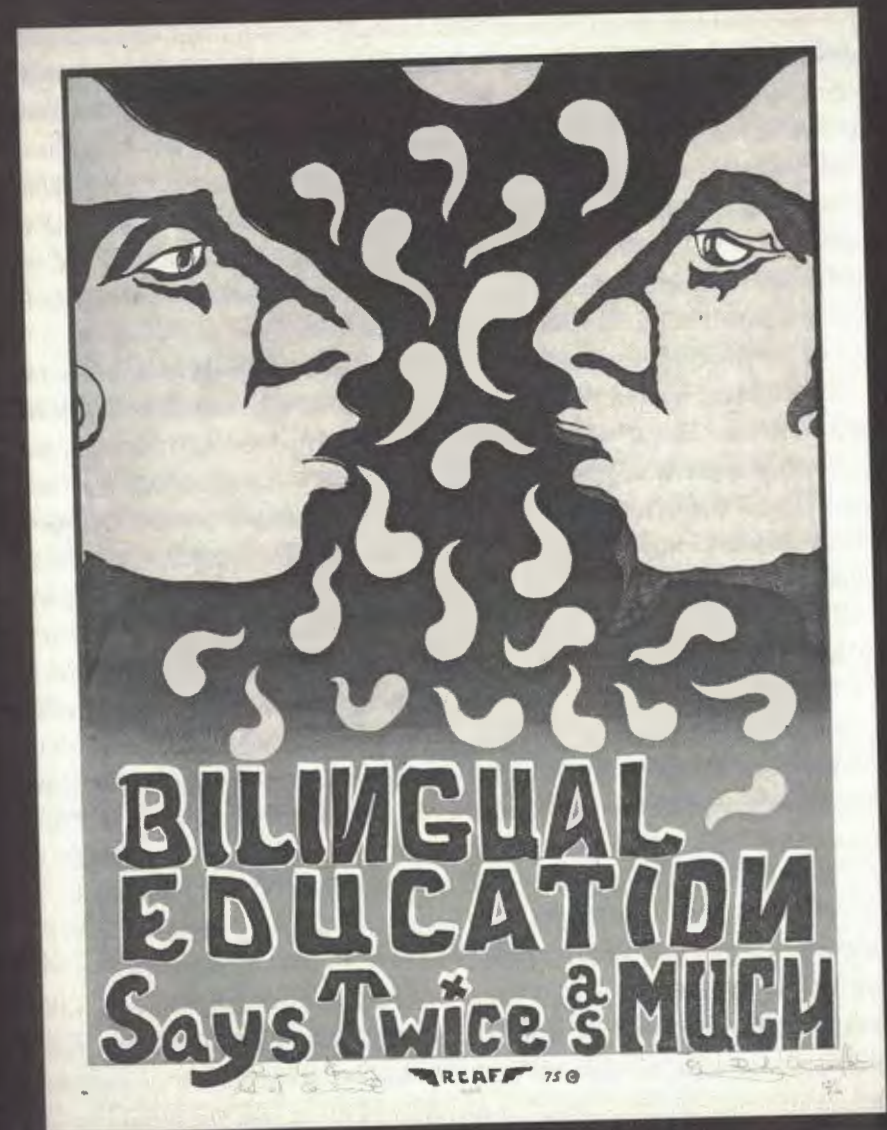


Figure 0.6. Rodolfo “Rudy” Cuellar and Enrique Ortíz, *Bilingual Education Says Twice as Much* (1975). Screenprint. Galería de la Raza Archives. The California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives. Special Collections Department, the University of California, Santa Barbara Library.

for bilingual education reflects the Chicano/a development of a self and group consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s that embraced all fragments of an indigenous, European, and US heritage—and with no apology. Reflecting on the historical and cultural mixtures that Chicano/a art comprises, José Montoya remarks, “We have taken our *indigenismo*, and we have taken everything that makes us a mestizo, everything that makes us a Mexicano, and went with Chicano” (LaRosa 1994). Boldly claiming the mixtures that compose Chicanidad, *Bilingual Education Says Twice As Much* conveys that Chicano/a self-determination was a decolonial act.

In the twenty-first century, Cuellar and Ortíz’s poster serves as a record of Chicano movement history in Sacramento. As I have outlined in this introduction, several RCAF members were educated through the Mexican American Education Project (MAEP) at CSUS, which concluded in the spring semester of 1974. Former MAEP curriculum developer and codirector Dr. Duane Campbell explains that in 1976, “when bilingualism [became] law in California,” the MAEP moved to the School of Education. Between 1972 and 1975, he continues, “bilingualism and bilingual education in the MAEP was nebulous.” After 1976, it was taught in the School of Education, and bilingual education became “a department in 1994 at CSU Sacramento, one of three in the state at that time” (Campbell 2010). Thus, the poster chronicles the moment in which the MAEP ended and bilingual education began, becoming institutionalized prior to English-only legislation in California that dismantled important gains of the US civil rights movement.

A Map Key

By coming full circle in my introduction, or starting with the MAEP and returning to it through an interpretation of an RCAF poster, I demonstrate my approach to RCAF history, which considers historical contexts of the group alongside biographies of its members. Throughout the book, I foreground analyses of RCAF artwork and move in and out of a linear sequencing of the collective’s history because RCAF art tells stories that reflect multiple fusions of cultural and political content and aesthetic forms. I refer to historical events and personal reflections by members not to essentialize RCAF art or limit its potential for meaning. Instead, I seek to enrich the experience of looking at RCAF artwork in the twenty-first century. Moreover, by “RCAF artwork,” I mean all of it—posters, murals, poetry, photography, and

performances. By “RCAF art work,” I detach the art object from the creative process to refer to the labor of all members who taught, planned, directed, and coordinated community operations and programs.

In chapter 1, “Building a Verbal-Visual Architecture: The RCAF’s New World Mestizo/a Art,” I begin with an analysis of a poster made by RCAF artist Luis González that depicts José Montoya standing in an agricultural field in Northern California. The chapter asks how González constructed an image that includes elements of third world consciousness, UFW activism, music, slogans, and heroic allegory. I answer by offering multiple and intersecting historical contexts that led to the poster’s production. The building of a verbal-visual architecture for Chicano/a artists in the 1960s and 1970s involved the creation of identities formed in protest and poetry alongside the creation of community arts infrastructure, or the spaces in which they made and displayed new ideas through artwork that reflected a wide range of traditions and techniques. In addition to alliances between Native American and Chicano/a artists, I suggest an aesthetic of Afro-Chicanidad to characterize collaborations between black and Chicano/a artists, which are part of the history of political and intellectual exchanges that took place throughout the entire twentieth century. The chapter builds the theoretical and historical groundwork for the verbal-visual architecture that the RCAF erected in the 1960s and 1970s, resonating in the decolonial methods by which artists of color, scholars, activists, and students continue to push back against the status quo.

Chapter 2, “Performing *La Mujer Nueva*: Chicana ‘Art Work’ in the RCAF,” begins where chapter 1 leaves off, addressing the patriarchal structure of the Chicano movement’s call for decolonization. The controversy that RCAF murals caused at Chicano Park in 1975 is presented in Marilyn Mulford’s documentary, *Chicano Park* (1988). The film offers insight into the implicit *carnalismo* of the Chicano movement (Arrizón 2000), and within the RCAF in particular, by focusing on José Montoya’s disapproval of his female colleagues’ “solo flight” to Chicano Park to create a mural. Especially important to RCAF history are the interviews in the film with Josephine Talamantez, a longtime Chicano Park advocate and an RCAF member. While not made clear in the film, Talamantez exemplifies the Chicanas who worked in the RCAF toward a Chicano/a decolonial consciousness. To document both the visual art and what I call the “art work” of Chicanas in the RCAF, I turn to the experiences of Irma Lerma Barbosa, a foundational Chicana

RCAF artist. The chapter transitions in and out of her story, through her art and art work, to examine the labor and contributions of other Chicana RCAF artists, like Lorraine García-Nakata. By rethinking definitions of art and art work, as well as what counts as evidence in historical analyses of the Chicano movement, I remix the RCAF's historical record, discerning the Chicana voices in the group (Blackwell 2011). Doing so counters interpretations of the RCAF as an all-male collective, which I explore through the exhibition *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985 (CARA)*. While historical interpretations of the RCAF typically omit Chicana participation in the RCAF, Chicana “art work” was directly at the center of all RCAF production and, in the twenty-first century, exemplifies the conceptual turn toward community arts practices.

After recovering histories of Chicana art work in the RCAF, I revisit hero construction in Chicano/a art in chapter 3, “Heroic Foundations: Chicano/a Heroes in Family, Farmwork, and War.” The chapter begins with a close reading of a poster by Ricardo Favela to rethink the role and relevance of heroes in Chicano/a art in light of the absence of Chicano/a history from the historical consciousness of the United States. Following the inaugural decades of the Chicano movement, scholarship in the 1990s returned to the periodization of Chicano/a history and its major figures, critiquing the patriarchal structure that excluded women and queer people of color who participated in the creative and political activism of the era. But heroization in RCAF artwork reveals a far more complex theoretical framework for understandings of the Chicano/a family, military service, and political claims to indigeneity that informed academic paradigms in the 1990s.

The breadth of RCAF artistic production over four decades also poses art historical connections between Chicano/a murals and contemporary public art controversies in the United States. Chapter 4, “Between the Aesthetic and the Instrumental: Free Association, Collectivism, and Making Space for Chicano/a Art,” explores the RCAF's theory and praxis of the Chicano/a art collective as they moved between Chicano/a neighborhoods, a university campus, and commercial and official spaces. The chapter begins with two archived letters written by RCAF members serving in professional capacities and acting on behalf of an RCAF colleague who had painted a mural in the city illegally. The letters foreground the free association of members and the role those associations had in the RCAF's navigation of Chicano/a art production over four decades and amid larger changes to public art

protocol in the United States. The tensions the RCAF posed for the status quo through the Chicano/a art collective pertained to the political milieu of the Chicano movement, which drew upon Marxist ideology, the New Left, and Chicano/a cultural nationalism. The RCAF's art history reveals the role of Chicano/a artists, and all civil rights-era artists, in shaping a national public art culture.

The final chapter, “From Front to Force: The RCAF's Air Force Persona and the Performance of an Archive,” begins with the story of one of the RCAF's most familiar images, *Huelga! Strike!—Support the U.F.W.A. (1976)*. Created by Ricardo Favela, the central image is based on a photograph that shows RCAF members acting out the group's air force persona. Adapted several times for different events, the poster and its reincarnations document the air force persona's evolution, including the political urgency of the 1960s and 1970s to which it immediately responded, and its anticipation of Chicano/a performance art and other theatrical modes. Comparing the RCAF's air force performances with those of Asco, a Chicano/a art collective in Los Angeles, I also explore a theatrical production by the RCAF Band in conjunction with El Teatro Campesino to foreground the local milieu in which the RCAF developed the air force persona.

As the conclusion, this chapter poses the RCAF's articulation and, really, reiteration of the air force persona over several decades as the origins of the group's embodied archive (Taylor 2003). Members had to carry their history with them and perform it for many years in the absence of a collection at CSUS, the university at which the RCAF took shape. The chapter, then, explores the RCAF's transition from a self-contained archive to an institutional collection at UC Santa Barbara's California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives. The collection of posters, murals, and photographs of various RCAF activities—available online through Calisphere, the Online Archive of California, and partnering institutions—is still unfolding in its potential as students and scholars begin to examine and interpret the art. The online accessibility of the RCAF's collections makes possible in the twenty-first century a virtual Chicano/a art environment, extending, once again, the reach of the group's posters and performances and allowing for comparative analyses of Chicano/a murals previously separated by regions and different publications.

Finally, I want to make a point about the absence of several artworks to which I refer in the book. Receiving artist permissions to reprint art is

complex and difficult in the twenty-first century. The art represented here, and the work analyzed but not represented, reflects the blood, sweat, and tears of real people's lives, a point that often gets forgotten in scholarship, mine included, that seeks to celebrate, interrogate, and reconsider the ideas that Chicano/a artists presented to the world. But the accessibility of RCAF images online is an opportunity to learn how to use online tools that can further disseminate and democratize the viewing experience of Chicano/a art.

BUILDING A VERBAL-VISUAL ARCHITECTURE

The RCAF's New World Mestizo/a Art

Again, there was no *nada*—no *cultura* that we could identify with. Nothing to identify with and no teachers, and no interest by other professors. So it was kind of like being in the middle of the desert again. There was nothing there. Chicano art didn't exist.

Esteban Villa,

interview, January 7, 2004

In 1975, Luis González created *Hasta La Victoria Siempre, c/s* (Until Victory, Always), a silkscreen poster based on a photograph of José Montoya, his Royal Chicano Air Force colleague and an art professor at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS).¹ The photograph was taken by Luis's brother, Hector, who recalled that when he "worked with José in his Barrio Art Program . . . he would always ask me to document the farm-workers movement" (Hector González, e-mail to author, September 7, 2011). On the day the photograph was taken, Hector González and José Montoya were in Yuba City, California, assisting a strike for the United Farm Workers (UFW) union. Taking several shots of Montoya and the workers who walked out of the fields, Hector González captured Montoya in a militant pose, one hand holding a large UFW flag and the other holding a bullhorn. Luis González transferred the photograph onto a poster and constructed a background made up of two phrases, "viva la huelga" and "viva la mañana" (mañana). The phrases, which mean "long live the strike" and "long live tomorrow," run into each other, building the environment in which Montoya