

# HISTORY OF RED-BROWN JOURNALISM AND COMMUNICATIONS: OR THE ART OF STORY-TELLING

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## ABSTRACT

My point of reference for Mexicans and Chicanas/Chicanos is maize culture, which is metaphorically 7,000 years old—when scientists estimate that corn was created in Southern Mexico. This essay, however, tends to concentrate on what is referred to as Chicano Journalism—a journalism associated with the 1960s-1970s. In one sense, Chicano or Chicana journalism refers to a style, however, it also refers to publications that had their apex during that era. Thus, that style of co-mingling Spanish and English, of being irreverent and politically left and in pursuit of justice has not gone away. At the same time, some publications from that genre continue, particularly on the internet.

KEY WORDS: Maíz, indigenous, culture, Chicano movement, Chicano and Chicana journalism.

## RESUMEN

La base para mi investigación sobre los mexicanos y chicanos/chicanas siempre ha sido la cultural del maíz, que metafóricamente tiene unos 7,000 años de existencia, y que es cuando los científicos estiman que el maíz aparece en el sur de México. Sin embargo, en este ensayo me concentro en lo que se conoce como periodismo chicano, que normalmente está relacionado con los años sesenta y setenta del siglo XX. En cierto sentido, el periodismo de chicanos y chicanas se refiere a un estilo en particular, pero también se refiere a publicaciones que tuvieron su apogeo en esa época. Además, ese estilo de mezclar español e inglés, de ser irreverente e izquierdista y buscando justicia no ha desaparecido del todo. Al mismo tiempo, algunas publicaciones de ese género todavía continúan, especialmente en la internet.

PALABRAS CLAVE: maíz, cultura, indígena, movimiento chicano, periodismo de chicanos y chicanas.





Over the past few years, I've been teaching a class at the University of Arizona that I created, titled: "The History of Red-Brown Journalism and Communications."<sup>1</sup> When many people hear the title, many assume that it is a class related to Latino Journalism. They believe this because it coincided with the Voices of Justice Project—a project that celebrated 200 years of Latino Journalism in 2008.<sup>2</sup>

As a journalist and columnist of 39 years, my view of Red-Brown Journalism is a bit more expansive. If I were teaching strictly about the pre-Colombian era, perhaps a more appropriate title to the class would be: *in tlili in tlapalli*, "the red and the black." In the Nahuatl (Aztec) language, this refers to the writing of the Aztec-Mexica.<sup>3</sup> But my view of writing is even more expansive than that.

Part of my view derives from the historiography I employ. My point of reference for Mexicans and Chicanas/Chicanos is maiz culture, which is metaphorically 7,000 years old—when scientists estimate that corn was created in Southern

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<sup>1</sup> In the United States, the color Red within the context of racial/ethnic politics connotes American Indian or things American Indian. The color Brown, on the other hand, connotes Mexicans/Mexican Americans or more broadly, Latinos/Latinas. Within this context, Brown is also synonymous with La Raza.

<sup>2</sup> The Voices Project is a joint project by Accion Latina, based in San Francisco. It can be accessed at the following site: <<http://www.eltecolote.org/voices/>>.

<sup>3</sup> The writers of this genre were referred to as the possessors of the red and black Ink.

Mexico.<sup>4</sup> It is estimated that writing developed perhaps initially among the Olmecs some 3,000 years ago (Florescano, *Historia*). While this makes up my worldview regarding writing or the “written word” in the Americas, my classes do in fact tend to concentrate on what is referred to as Chicano Journalism—a journalism associated with the 1960s-1970s.<sup>5</sup> In referring to the Chicano Movement, some scholars have given it the set dates of 1965-1975, though most historians do not assign specific start and end dates to this movement.<sup>6</sup>

This is not a case of either/or. Within that context, for me, ancient methods of communication fall within the red-brown journalism paradigm. For thousands of years, in the Americas, many systems of communication developed—from knotted strings to amoxtlis or codices and from petroglyphs to Wampum belts. These systems communicated astronomical data, migration information and information related to planting seasons, the location of water, historical information, etc. The United States is a rich repository of petroglyphs and intaglios, many of which report constant migrations (Orozco; Figueroa). Whereas others might not view this as journalism, my journalism background tells me it is, because similar to modern journalism, ancient methods of communications also communicated useful and timely information.

For example, in the central and southern parts of Mexico, the *escrituras-pinturas* or painted-books were known as *pop* in Maya or *amoxtli* in Nahuatl. They were written/painted by peoples from Teotihuacan, Maya, Toltec, Nahuatl and Mixtec peoples. We now know that similar to the Maya, the Nahuatl and Mixtec forms of writing were actually phonetic and not simply pictographs. We know this through the works of Joaquin Galarza, who spent 40 years deciphering these writing systems (Galarza).

Another form of writing was the *quipu* or *khipu*. Long thought to be an amazing method of mathematical accounting by ancient peoples of the Andes, it is now known that they were also actual [non-Western] books or repositories of memory and historical events. The peoples of pre-Aztec Mexico also used a similar device called the *Nepohualtzinzin*. They are used nowadays by some as calculators (Florescano, *National*).

Similarly, Wampum belts are traditional places where history is stored by Six nations peoples (Boone and Mignolo). A note regarding the pre-Colombian era

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<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, 1848 has been used as the marker for the creation of the Mexican American population. Others, particularly feminists have pushed it back to 1519 or even 1492, marking the beginning of “mestizaje” or the mixture of this continent. My adherence to the beginnings of maiz culture comports more with the idea of maiz as a marker for cultural origins on the American continent.

<sup>5</sup> In one sense, Chicano or Chicana journalism refers to a style, however, it also refers to publications that had their apex during that era. Thus, that style of co-mingling Spanish and English, of being irreverent and politically left and in pursuit of justice has not gone away. At the same time, some publications from that genre continue, particularly on the internet.

<sup>6</sup> Carlos Velez, in *Border Visions*, is one scholar that sets the parameters of 1965-1975.



is that with the arrival of Europeans to the Americas, most indigenous systems of communication were destroyed, diminished or badly misinterpreted, generally up until the present era, when Native peoples began to write for themselves in Western publications. The reason for this was twofold: 1) the belief that they were demonic, and 2) that indigenous peoples were not smart enough to be capable of creating a phonetic system of communication (Galarza).

It is important to remember that the arrival of Europeans was in and of itself a news event; the reporting and reaction to the European invasion, including their arrival into what is today the United States, were recorded. When Cortes arrived on Mexican shores, they were met by Moctezuma's emissaries. Tlacuilos or writers/painters were permitted to record on amoxtli papers, the arrival of the Spaniards. Moctezuma had the news of their arrival within hours.<sup>7</sup> Also, the Lienzo de Tlaxcala records the arrival of Europeans into New Mexico... along with the arrival of Tlaxcaltecas, as they accompanied the Spaniards on this and other colonizing endeavors.

During the Spanish colonial era, Europeans began to rank communication systems as advanced, primitive and even, demonic. Bishop Landa in 1562 held an Auto de Fe in Mani Yucatan, This event was a three-day book-burning predicated on the idea that the books and related objects were "things of the devil" (Landa). Of course, things "Western" always equaled advanced in the colonial era and these biases continue even to this day. This is one major reason why it has taken up until the modern era to decipher these writings.

Because of time and space, this is not the proper forum to go into details of how knowledge by indigenous peoples of these communications systems actually survived. Suffice to say that the cultivation of maize as a technology had a large part to do with this, plus, the oral tradition, pre-Colombian calendrical systems, ceremony, poetry, song and danza were other places where the same knowledge was transmitted and stored. All of these supplemented the written traditions that have been a part of the Americas since time immemorial.

For Latinos in the United States, the early era of Western-style journalism begins in the early 1800s through the 1900s. The first known Spanish-language newspaper in what is today the United States was *El Misisipi*, published in 1808 in New Orleans (LATINOTECA: <<http://www.latinoteca.com/>>). As such, the year 2008 marked the bicentennial celebration of 200 years of Latino journalism. After *El Misisipi*, hundreds more publications followed.<sup>8</sup> Many writers from the 1800s and 1900s functioned not simply as journalists, but also as human rights champions and also as community intellectuals (because no tradition of college existed). Many of these first newspapers assisted Independence movements against Spain.

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<sup>7</sup> Cortes states that upon their arrival, Moctezuma's envoys painted him and his people and sent the paintings back to Moctezuma (Cortes).

<sup>8</sup> The first known American Indian publication in the United States was the bilingual newspaper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*, first published in 1828.

Later Mexican journalism in the United States was more typified by *El Clamor Publico* of Los Angeles, circa early 1860s. *El Clamor*, published and edited by Francisco Ramirez, fought for the rights of Mexicans, including land rights.

At the turn of the 20th century, *Regeneracion* carried on the tradition of fighting for the rights of Mexicans, though it was also part of a movement that advocated revolution in Mexico before the 1910 Revolution. The publication reemerged more than 50 years later in the 1960s, led by Francisca Flores.

*La Opinion* newspaper in Los Angeles, which has been publishing since the 1920s, is an example of a newspaper that has spanned several eras. *La Opinion*, founded in 1926 in Los Angeles, was moderate, but did fight for the rights of Mexicans. It is the largest Spanish-language newspaper in the country. It was founded by the Lozano family and it continues in the hands of Monica Lozano. It began publishing during an era when the Mexican communities of the United States were hard hit by repatriation campaigns (Balderrama and Rodriguez). This was followed by desegregation and anti-discrimination battles, through the Chicano Movement militant era, and it continues to publish today in what might be dubbed the anti-immigrant era.

The era that I was a part of was the Chicano journalism era (though I continue to write), an era characterized by a brand of militant and unapologetic form of journalism from the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>9</sup> In effect, this form of media didn't simply document this movement; it was part and parcel to the Chicano Movement. This ushered in an era that resulted in the explosion of Raza oriented newspapers and magazines throughout the United States. Most were English-dominant or bilingual. The primary characteristic of this media at the time was their militancy and their preaching of Brown Power! The importance of Brown Power cannot be overstated. Prior to the Chicano Movement era, people of Mexican descent generally played up their Spanish roots at the expense of their indigenous roots. In legal cases, in cases of desegregation, lawyers argued that Mexicans should be treated fairly—because they were white—as opposed to simply be treated as fully human.<sup>10</sup>

This is what differentiated the Chicano Movement era, from previous eras. Activists from this era were both unapologetic about their indigenous roots, and in fact publically celebrated their mixed roots. This “primary process” or political volcanic eruption of the 1960s, was reflected in their publications—including their titles (Turner). This idea of a primary process was first applied to the Mexican Independence Movement of the 1800s, but also to the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. Accompanying this idea of a primary process was also the concept of “principio”

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<sup>9</sup> My initial foray into Chicano media was reading *La Raza Magazine* and *La Gente Newspaper* in high school, then later writing for *La Gente* when I enrolled at UCLA between 1972-1976.

<sup>10</sup> In “When Discrimination Was the Color Brown,” Gonzales and Rodriguez cite nearly a dozen court battles, prior to *Brown v. Topeka* (1954), in which Latinos triumphed. However, in many of the battles, the victories were predicated on the idea that Latinos were white and thus should be treated as such. An example was *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove School Board of Education*, 1930, *Lemon Grove Ca.* (Gonzales and Rodriguez).

or a return to the root (Florescano, *Historia*). In the case of the Mexican Independence Movement, the Mexican Revolution and the Chicano Movement, this root was the Aztec-Mexica as typified by the resistance by Cuauhtemoc to the Spanish invasion. This explains the predominance of Aztec-Mexican imagery and iconography in Chicano Movement-era publications, imagery that was inherited from the earlier movements.

If the Chicano Movement begins in 1965, so too its publications. However, several prominent newspapers preceded that era: *La Carta Editorial*, began publishing in 1963 (publisher, Francisca Flores) and *El Malcriado* in 1964 (United Farm Worker's movement). Most of the publications associated with this movement were "left" and militant. While some were affiliated with organizations, many were fiercely independent. Tired of being misrepresented, they ushered in not just militancy, but also, the cultural desire to "tell our story."

The following were Chicano Movement era newspapers and also members of The Chicano Press Association circa 1969: *El Papel* (Albuquerque), *El Chicano* (San Bernardino, CA), *El Deguello* (San Antonio, TX), *The Forumeer* (San Jose, CA), *La Voz Mexicana* (Wautoma, WI), *Carta Editorial* (Los Angeles), *La Revolucion* (Uvalde, TX), *El Grito del Norte* (Española, NM), *El Yaqui* (Houston, TX), *Bronze* (San Jose), *Chicano Student Movement* (Los Angeles), *Lado* (Chicago), *La Raza* (Los Angeles), *Infierno* (San Antonio), *El Malcriado* (Delano, CA), *La Raza Nueva* (San Antonio), *Inside Eastside* (Los Angeles), *El Gallo* (Denver, CO), *Compass Houston*, TX), *La Verdad* (San Diego, CA), *Nuestra Lucha* (Delray Beach, FL) and *El Coraje* (Tucson, AZ).

Other major movement newspapers from that era were *Regeneracion* (Los Angeles), *Hijas de Cuauhtemoc* (Long Beach, CA), *El Tecolote* (San Francisco, CA), *La Gente de Aztlan* (UCLA), *El Popo* (Cal State University at Northridge), *Si Se Puede* (UC Santa Barbara) and *Sin Fronteras* (Los Angeles). This is just a small sample of newspapers because during that era, virtually every city with a Mexican/Latino population had a Movement newspaper.

What appears to have been the common story or common denominator of the newspapers of that era were stories about struggles for dignity, justice and equality, in the streets, in the courtroom, in the classroom and in the factories and the fields. Not ironically, many struggles were about fighting stereotypes and complaints about the lack of proper coverage in the mainstream media, whether in advertising or the little or big screens.

As such, much coverage was dedicated to mass protests, rallies, marches, pickets, strikes and boycotts. Much of this protest coverage involved struggles against police brutality, school walkouts for educational equity, farm worker organizing efforts, and then later, marches against the Vietnam War. In effect, they served to document their own movement. Today, most of these newspapers are in "special collections" section of libraries.

All if not most of these newspapers also were responsible for the cultural explosion or the cultural [indigenous] rebirth of Mexican and Latino peoples. Art and poetry—known as Floricanto—were part and parcel to many if not all of these newspapers. Floricanto was the Spanish translation for *In Xochitl—In Cuicatl—*

Flower and Song. This in part is what produced this indigenous cultural explosion that resulted not just in the publishing of this form of expression, but also, national and international Floricanto and Canto al Pueblo art and poetry festivals.

While the explosion of Chicano journalism was indigenous and organic, it also was influenced by worldwide events, in particular, the uprising in Mexico in the late 1960s. Enriqueta Vasquez, author of *Enriqueta Vasquez and the Chicano Movement*, affirms that *El Grito del Norte* in Northern New Mexico was co-founded by New Mexico Chicana/Chicano activists, along with several Mexican political refugees.<sup>11</sup> Mexican political refugees were active politically in the United States in many other cities, including Los Angeles, Chicago and San Antonio, Texas.

Chicano Movement era publications were influenced not just by the Mexican student movement, but also by other national and other worldwide movements and events. Yet they did not simply get influenced by these movements; they covered them, and in many cases, developed relationships with them. For example: The Movimiento Nativo Americano or Native American Movement (1961-1963), led by Jack Forbes—foremost American Indian scholar, had a profound effect on the Chicano Movement. Forbes, who grew up among Mexicans in Southern California, argued that Mexicans/Chicanos were Native American. He did this nearly 10 years before the unveiling of *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan*, the document many view as the foundational document of the Chicano Movement. The later American Indian Movement also influenced and cross-pollinated with the Chicano Movement on political, land and cultural issues.

The Cuban Revolution ideologically influenced many of the revolutionary Latin American movements in the 1960s, including the Chicano Movement. In part, the primary contribution may have been the iconography of the Che Guevara poster: beret with red star. Che signified the unity of the continent with the slogan: “Somos Uno porque America es Una—We are One because America is One.”

Latin American Movements were also influenced by liberation theology; the Chicano Movement was no different. For example, “the preferential option for the poor” was the guiding ideology of priests and nuns who worked with the farm worker’s movement.

The Black Power or the Black Liberation Movement absolutely influenced the Chicano Movement, ideologically, but also directly. Several prominent Chicana activists were active members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. This included Betita Martinez, who went on to co-found *El Grito del Norte*, and Maria Varela, a human rights activist in Northern New Mexico.

Unbeknownst to people of this era is that the United Farm Worker’s Movement never saw itself as part of the Chicano Movement, though it actually trained

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<sup>11</sup> While repression against political activists in Mexico was common, the most famous act(s) of repression occurred on Oct 2, 1968 at Plaza Tlatelolco where it is estimated that some 300 students were gunned down by the Army during a political rally in Mexico City. However, repression was by no means limited to one event but was generational, lasting perhaps until the 1990s.



many of the urban Chicano Movement activists that followed the birth of the UFW. Such an example was UFW organizer, Ramses Noriega, who went on to co-found the National Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War in Los Angeles. He viewed that action as a means to organize and birth a national movement in the cities.<sup>12</sup>

The UFW saw itself as part of the labor movement, with historic ties to field labor organizing efforts going back to the 1930s, etc. (Kushner). Ironically, the Chicano Movement always saw the UFW and specifically Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, as icons of the Chicano Movement. Its newspaper, *El Malcriado*, was as popular in Chicano Movement circles as was *La Raza Magazine*.

On the cultural/political front, Mexican scholar Luis Leal (1927-1908), came to the United States in 1927, looking for the ancestral Aztec home of Aztlan in what is today the United States. One of his students, Alberto Urrea or Alurista, became the author most associated with the 1969 El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan, penned in Denver, Colorado—perhaps the manifesto most associated with the Chicano Movement and the document, along with the *Yo Soy Joaquín* poem by Corky Gonzales, perhaps most reproduced in Chicano publications in the 1960s and 1970s.

One myth to dispel involved the role of women in Chicano Movement publications; many did not remand women to secondary roles. Many of the most important publications were published and edited by women. For example, *Carta Editorial* and *Regeneracion*, were edited and published in Los Angeles by Francisca Flores and *El Grito del Norte* in New Mexico were edited by Betita Martinez and Enriqueta Vasquez.

To understand the Chicano Movement was to understand its publications and to understand Chicano publications, was to understand the Chicano Movement. To be sure, all the Chicano Movement-era publications were not ideologically on the same page. They may have generally started that way, but once the movement was in full swing in the early 1970s, many of the publications began to ideologically harden to the left, where there was less unity. Despite that, they fulfilled a need, one that had apparently not been filled by English-language newspapers, and generally, not by Spanish-language newspapers that often found themselves at odds with the young radicals that often wrote for these movement newspapers.

The Chicano Movement newspapers, like the Chicano Movement, never actually ended. Newspapers such as *La Gente* continue to publish. What perhaps did end is the cultural explosion associated with that era. And yet, today, virtually all the best-known Chicana/Chicano poets and artists of today had their beginnings in such publications. In that sense, the cultural explosion continues to reverberate through their art and writings.

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<sup>12</sup> Personal conversations with Ramses Noriega, 2007-2011.



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