Introduction: The Art and History of the Chicano Movement

What significance does the Chicano movement have today? This question is at the heart of the book you hold in your hands, but it is not an easy one to ask, let alone to answer. Many people have never heard of the Chicano movement, a nationwide campaign during the 1960s and after for the civil rights of Mexican Americans. Some individuals faintly recall the movement from brief mention of it in the pages of their high school or college textbooks, while others know of the movement, but don’t believe it holds any relevance in their lives. Progressives often celebrate the Chicano movement as an important part of the American Left, though they are sometimes critical of the direction it took. Conservatives, on the other hand, are generally ignorant of this history. Those few who do know a little about the movement are scornful. When Jorge Bustamante ran for governor in California’s 1999 recall election, right-wing activists accused the one-time movement leader of being party to an elaborate Reconquista (Reconquest) plot to take over the American Southwest and return it to Mexico. Theirs was a fringe view, but its coverage in the press prompted one of the more sustained public discussions of the Chicano movement in recent years.

Like other movements and memorabilia associated with the 1960s, the Chicano movement is often presented as a morning’s half-remembered dream that fades as the day goes on. This book offers the reader a different picture. It shows the image of a social movement that transformed American society and culture. The process was imperfect and
the motivations of the people involved were complex, but progressive Chicano/a activism of the postwar period improved the lives of Mexican Americans and bettered the nation as a whole. And the movement is not over. Old struggles still reverberate, and new struggles have emerged. The rights of immigrant women and men were earlier treated as an auxiliary issue in the Chicano movement; now they are the movement’s most pressing concern. During the 1960s and 1970s, gays and lesbians often felt compelled to compartmentalize their activism. As Gloria Anzaldúa recalls in *This Bridge Called My Back:* “Years ago, a roommate of mine fighting for gay rights told MAYO, a Chicano organization, that she and the president were gay. They were ostracized. When they left, MAYO fell apart.” Homophobia forced activists to draw lines between the work they did toward racial equality and the work they did for sexual freedom. In the twenty-first century, queer issues are a visible and vital part of Chicano/a politics.

Art—a term this book defines in the traditional sense to mean the entire range of human creative forms—affords a unique perspective on the contemporary meanings of the Chicano movement. This is partly a matter of institutional history. Unlike the African American civil rights movement, the Chicano movement won no direct legislative victories in the postwar decades. However, Chicano/a cultural expression of the period has been well received in many corners of the U.S. culture industry, including museums and galleries, corporate and independent publishing houses, colleges and universities, and theater venues. These institutions have kept the images, narratives, performances, and ideas of midcentury Chicano/a activism in circulation, and they have also sponsored new forms of politically engaged art. Historiography, or the writing of history, gives us yet another reason to look to art as a way of understanding the Chicano movement. From the perspective of traditional history, the past always is receding from the here and now, and as it withdraws, its lessons get dimmer. This is especially true of those events deemed “minor” or “failed” by history’s chroniclers, who often see such events as marginal in the narrative of how a society arrives at its present. Art possesses a different chronology. It is governed not by linear time but rather by the imagination, and therefore it is often more attuned to the subtle ways in which the past shapes the present. Also, because art revolves around the senses, it allows individuals and collectives to feel their relationship to the past more intimately.

Chicano/a art takes on yet another political dimension when one considers that Mexican Americans and other Latinos/as in the United States
are frequently represented by the mass media as numbers. This dynamic deserves close attention, because it helps frame the contemporary relevance of the Chicano movement. It also underlines the value of art in thinking differently about progressive Chicano/a politics.

The Limits of Demographic Thinking

In what has become something of a national ritual, the Census Bureau every ten years releases new data about Hispanics in the United States. Magazines and newspapers then use this data as the foundation of frequently melodramatic stories about a changing America. Data in the 1980 census showed approximately 14.6 million people “of Spanish/Hispanic origin” in the United States, an apparent jump of 61 percent since 1970. Questions about terminology led to a debate among experts about the accuracy of these figures, but many business and government leaders were nevertheless willing to make pronouncements. Several major American corporations seized the 1980 census as an opportunity to refine their niche marketing strategies, sometimes with the help of newly formed Hispanic ad agencies that positioned themselves as native informants. The Coors Brewing Company, for example, declared the 1980s the “Decade of the Hispanic.” Not coincidentally, it did so only a few years after Chicano/a activists had ended their boycott against the company for its discriminatory hiring practices.

Politicians responded with similar zeal. Told by the consultant class that Latinos/as are a tradition-minded people, the GOP tried to portray itself as the party of family, faith, and country. In 1984, Ronald Reagan’s reelection campaign launched the Hispanic Victory Initiative, a nationwide get-out-the-vote effort. Meanwhile, Ted Kennedy and other Democratic leaders renewed their attention to civil rights issues and appealed to the memory of John F. Kennedy, whose “Viva Kennedy” clubs had been a political boot camp for many Mexican American voters. A Washington Post headline from August 1983 captures the breathless rhetoric that often surrounds discussion of Latino/a demographics: “Hispanics, Seen as Pivotal 1984 Voters, Courted by Both Parties.”

Census 1990 showed a further expansion of Latino/a populations in the United States, and it was met with similar excitement by the press. The Hispanic population had grown by 50 percent since 1980, compared to only 6 percent for non-Hispanics. Nearly 40 percent of Hispanics had marked “Other” as their racial designation, compared to less than 1 percent of the non-Hispanic population. These numbers formed part
of the backstory to *Time* magazine’s well-known 1993 “New Face of America” issue, which used computer-simulation software to produce an olive-skinned woman described as an image of “How Immigrants Are Shaping the World’s First Multicultural Society.”7 The editors of *Time* offered a naïve gloss on racial politics at the end of the twentieth century. However, Census 1990 did prompt the federal government to change its approach to managing racial difference. In November 1993, Congress held subcommittee hearings to discuss the most recent census data. It was not the first time that Latino/a populations had posed a problem for demographers. The category “Mexican” had been added in 1930, only to be removed in 1940.8 But the pace and scale of Latino/a population growth in 1990 seemed to call for a rethinking of the nation’s historically black-and-white racial imagination. After entertaining the addition of “Hispanic” as a distinct racial category from “white,” “black or negro,” “American Indian,” and “Asian or Pacific Islander,” administrators decided to keep it as a separate ethnic marker for the millenial census. As Clara E. Rodríguez observes, the 2000 survey marked the first time in the two-hundred-year history of the national census that respondents were allowed to select more than one racial group.9 Officials hoped to prevent the frequent undercounting of minority populations, and also to bring Hispanics in line with conventional racial categories.

Mass media responded with predictable sensationalism to Census 2000. According to the data, there had been a 50 percent increase in the “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino” population during the 1990s, from 22.4 million in the previous census, to 35.3 million in 2000. By comparison, the non-Hispanic population grew at a rate of 13.2 percent. Latinos/as were reportedly younger as well: 35 percent of Hispanics were under eighteen, compared to 25.7 percent of the population as a whole.10 Following the release of this data, USA *Today* reported that “a booming economy” in the 1990s led to “a surge in the Hispanic population far beyond anyone’s expectations.” It also noted a “surprising Hispanic population growth” in places like Georgia, Nevada, Arkansas, and Iowa.11 The truth is that these regions have long been home to sizable communities of Mexican Americans and other Latinos/as, but the presence of these populations has been obscured by stubborn mythologies of a white heartland in the middle of the United States. Collective faith in these mythologies has only served to intensify the melodrama surrounding the national growth of Latino/a populations.

After the 2010 census, the *Christian Science Monitor* reported that “white Americans are still the majority in the United States, but they’re
This rhetoric of competition had appeared seven years prior, when the Census Bureau announced in January 2003 that Hispanics had replaced African Americans as the largest minority group in the United States. In a front-page article headlined “Hispanics Now Largest Minority, Census Shows,” Lynette Clemetson of the New York Times reported that “Hispanics have edged past blacks” as a result of “the explosive growth in the Hispanic population.” The St. Petersburg Times called it “a multicultural milestone,” and London’s Guardian newspaper said it was “a symbolic shift in the country’s racial landscape.”

Media coverage tends to sentimentalize, rather than illuminate, the complex relationship between African American and Latinos/as. During the past two decades, the growing numbers of Latinos/as living in historically black urban areas has led to grassroots coalition-building, including Latino/a involvement with the environmental-justice organization Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles, and African American support for the 2003 Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride. Sadly, it has also sometimes created mutual suspicion and occasional conflict, with African Americans accusing Latinos/as of taking scarce job opportunities, and Latinos/as accusing blacks of laziness and criminality. The latter is particularly troublesome, because it builds on a decades-long pattern in U.S. immigration history. As Toni Morrison said of immigration in her contribution to the 1993 Time special issue on race, “the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens.”

Morrison’s commentary reveals one of the central problems in coverage of the quantitative changes taking place in the United States: appeals to the growing power of Latinos/as as consumers and as voters are too often tainted by an implicit and denigrating comparison to blacks.

Magazine and newspaper reporting on Latino/a demographics has been accompanied by widespread television commentary, including special programs such as Soledad O’Brien’s Latino in America, which aired on CNN in October 2009. Without question, much good has come out of this media coverage. Together with changes on the ground, it has compelled educational, political, legal, religious, and commercial institutions to expand their outreach and, in some cases, to reflect on their mission. Large corporations and small businesses continue to see Latinos/as as an emerging market. In a consumer capitalist economy, this perception inevitably translates into meaningful social power, as evidenced by the fact that the widespread availability of bilingual signage, packaging,
advertising, and customer service has made Spanish into a second lingua franca—no small change, considering the persistent efforts to stamp out the language across much of U.S. history.\textsuperscript{18}

Demographic changes, and media coverage of those changes, have likewise prompted government agencies and educational institutions to increase their Latino/a outreach. In 1976, Governor Robert Ray of Iowa established the Spanish-Speaking People’s Commission and charged it with coordinating services for the state’s expanding Latino/a population. Reorganized in 2011 as the Office of Latino Affairs, the agency connects residents with citizenship classes, English-language learning, scholarships and youth activities, and health services.\textsuperscript{19} Similar efforts have been reproduced in cities, counties, and states across the United States. In August 2009, Sonia Sotomayor became the first Latina confirmed as a justice of the Supreme Court. President Barack Obama’s decision to nominate Sotomayor reflected her impressive qualifications as a jurist, but it also reflected the importance of the Latino/a electorate, especially in swing states such as North Carolina, Colorado, and Florida.

These efforts by government officials run parallel to the efforts of educators. Colleges and universities are creating interdisciplinary programs in Chicano/a and Latino/a studies. There are now more than seventy Latino/a studies programs across the United States, many of them formed after 1990.\textsuperscript{20} Traditional disciplines such as English, history, sociology, Spanish, and political science are revising their curricula to include Latino/a content. Primary and secondary schools are changing as well. Author and journalist Héctor Tobar tells an inspiring anecdote of how one school in Dalton, Georgia, responded to the growing number of Mexicans moving there to work in the city’s carpet industry. Instead of isolating their Latino/a students, leaders at Roan Street Elementary School used the population shift as a learning opportunity and sent veteran teachers to Mexico for summer language and culture training.\textsuperscript{21}

The demographic shifts of the past several decades have undoubtedly changed how institutions in the United States relate to Latino/a communities, and mass media coverage, for all of its sensationalism, has likely accelerated this process. To the extent that it helps alleviate human suffering, activists are wise to ground their demands for social justice on census data. Numbers, though, are never enough. They must be accompanied by narrative, and too often the numbers are used to tell mistaken and even misleading narratives about Latinos/as. The most obvious example of this dynamic is the way that census figures are put in service of a narrative that says that Latino/a population growth is undermining
American culture. Otto Santa Ana argues that in the early 1990s, journalists began to replace old metaphors of Latinos/as as a “sleeping giant” with a mixture of military- and health-related metaphors of invasion and disease. These media metaphors became an essential ingredient in a racialized anti-immigrant movement that has positioned Latinos/as as a new and corrosive element, rather than as a long-established and valuable part of America.

The United States has been home to anti-immigration campaigns in the past. They typically follow a boom-and-bust pattern: when the economy is doing well, natives mostly ignore the underpaid immigrants who keep prices down; when the economy shrinks, many natives scapegoat immigrants, accusing them of stealing jobs and freeloading. The anti-immigrant movement of the 1990s was unique, though, in that it led to the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border on an unprecedented scale. After the Cold War ended in 1989, the interest groups that together make up what Republican President Eisenhower called the “military-industrial complex” needed a new enemy to justify the Pentagon’s massive budget. They found it at the Rio Grande. Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (1996) argued that with the war between capitalism and communism over, the future would be dominated by conflict between several “civilizational identities.” Mexican migrants played an important role in Huntington’s narrative because they marked for him the incursion of the “Latin American” civilization into the “Western” civilization of the United States. Huntington claimed that Latin America was an “offspring of European civilization” that had become “a corporatist, authoritarian culture,” and he warned that if the number of Latino/s in the United States continued to rise, then “revanchist sentiments” among Mexican migrants and their children could endanger “the results of American military expansion in the nineteenth century.” Huntington’s argument was soundly discredited by intellectuals with a more accurate understanding of the patterns of exchange and migration in world history, but it continues to animate the bellicose border policy of the United States. Even though the recession that began in 2008 brought migration from Latin America to a virtual halt, politicians and pundits continue to conjure up fears of “illegal aliens” exploiting the nation’s “broken borders.”

Recent media coverage of Latino/a demographics has reinforced a misconception that sometime in the not-too-distant past, Latinos/as either weren’t in the United States, or they were invisible. This narrative is as politically damaging as it is historically inaccurate. In 1565, Spanish
explorers founded Florida’s St. Augustine, the first permanent European settlement in what would become the United States. In 1570, thirty years before the English settlement of Jamestown, eight Jesuit priests and an acculturated Algonquian known as Luis de Velasco explored the James River and the Chesapeake Bay in the hope of finding a waterway to the Pacific. In 1598, Juan de Oñate established a major colony in present-day New Mexico. His legacy, like that of other Spanish colonizers, is complex: he brutalized the indigenous communities of the region, but he also established relations that would allow for the preservation of native traditions.

During the early 1800s, Moses Austin, Sam Houston, Abel Stearns, and other undocumented Anglo-America immigrants had to depend on these mestizo (mixed) Indian and Spanish populations for information on how to survive in the arid regions of what was then northern Mexico. California, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Texas, and parts of Colorado and Oklahoma did not join the United States until the 1848 signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended la invasión norteamericana (or the North American invasion, as it is known in Mexico), and turned tens of thousands of Mexicans into American citizens almost overnight. Puerto Rico was made an American territory in 1903 after the Spanish-American War, and Puerto Ricans have been citizens of the United States since the passage of the Jones Act in 1917.

The line connecting these colonial histories to contemporary Latino/a demographics is admittedly a crooked one. Many Latinos/as arrived in the United States after the liberalization of U.S. immigration law in 1965. Also, some members of the heritage Latino/a populations in the United States identified as European and white, even when they had been born in the Americas and had darker skin than the typical northern European. These individuals, many of whom were elites, went to great lengths to distance themselves from the stigma of being brown, including the development of an elaborate casta (caste) system in which skin tone was explicitly linked to social status. Some of their descendants still try to secure the privileges of whiteness by distancing themselves from recent migrants and from darker-skinned Latinos/as. Nevertheless, the long history of Spanish-speaking peoples within the boundaries of the contemporary United States undoes the media’s census-driven narrative, which suggests that the nation has only recently had substantive contact with Latin America, its histories, its languages, and its peoples. The truth is that the relationship of the United States to the rest of the Americas has been as central to its history as its relationship with Europe.
One of the many lessons worth learning from movement activism of the 1960s and 1970s is how to make public demands for social justice without appealing exclusively to the neoliberal framework of population, voting power, and market force. Quantitative frameworks can be strategically useful, but their historical and political imagination is restrictive in that it tends to be both presentist and profit-motivated. The combination of the Bracero guest worker program, the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, economic turmoil in Mexico, and higher fertility rates led to an increase in the size of the Mexican American population during the 1960s and 1970s. Chicano/a activists never grounded their appeals on changing demographics, though. They knew the numbers, and they were aware of their significance. In 1970, Mexican American activists convinced the Census Bureau to ask a subgroup of respondents if they were “of Spanish origin.” This led eventually to the multiple-race option of Census 2000. Data, though, was not front and center in the minds of postwar activists. What anchored the political imagination of movement activists was a twin commitment to preserving the rich traditions of the past and winning social equality in the future. This commitment—also the ideological and practical center of movement art—was not animated by the relative size of the population. It was animated instead by a radical belief in human dignity as the basis of public policy.

A comparison of recent rhetoric with the rhetoric of the 1960s illustrates the shifting frame of progressive Chicano/a politics. In 2006, immigrant-rights activists organized a series of highly successful nationwide protests against House Resolution 4437, the Republican-led effort to extend border fencing, increase employer penalties, criminalize aid to migrants, and make undocumented border crossing a criminal (rather than civil) offense. Speaking about the scheduled May Day boycotts of that year, Oscar Sanchez of the March 25th Coalition told the New York Times: “We don’t want to hurt the United States economically. . . . We want to show them the buying power of the immigrant consumer. . . . We are flexing our economic power to gain political power.” His language of dollars and cents is a common trope in the fight for a humane immigration policy. Sergio Arau’s film A Day Without a Mexican (2004) comically imagines what would happen if Mexican labor in California suddenly and mysteriously disappeared. It represents Latinos/as as a kind of “invisible hand” powering the U.S. economy. The Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, a political mentoring program founded in 1978, says that “with the dramatic growth in the Latino population and future workforce needs, it is imperative that
we significantly increase the number of Latinos ready to assume leadership positions in the public, private, and non-profit sectors. Similar language is used by the Southwest Voter Registration Project, a nonpartisan organization created by movement activist and Medal of Freedom winner William C. Velasquez. The organization says its mobilization efforts are needed because of the “growing clout of Latino voters.”

These metaphors of economy and demography are conspicuously absent from the major documents of the Chicano movement. Instead one usually finds rhetorical appeals to history and to moral principle. The “Plan of Delano,” the stirring manifesto of the United Farm Workers (UFW) and an essential document of the Chicano movement, is representative in this respect. Written in 1966, the document was read aloud by Luis Valdez during the union’s pilgrimage from Delano to Sacramento. It begins with a preamble that combines American political rhetoric and Catholic ritual:

We, the undersigned, gathered in Pilgrimage to the capital of the State in Sacramento in penance for all the failings of Farm Workers as free and sovereign men, do solemnly declare before the civilized world which judges our actions, and before the nation to which we belong, the propositions we have formulated to end the injustice that oppresses us.

Contemporary political discourse about Latinos/as generally measures their value in terms of the profits to be made from their purchases, or the power to be gained from their votes. The “Plan of Delano” grounds itself in the intrinsic worth of the “free and sovereign” individual, and also in the collective conscience of “the civilized world which judges our actions.” Political philosophers have criticized language of this sort as the residue of a naïve, and even imperialistic, European liberalism. The Delano manifesto’s use of the sexist pronoun “men” confirms the practical limits of liberalism, but the courage this document gave its farmworker audiences, and the central role it played in union victories, also shows the radical power that still resides in concepts of individual autonomy and civic responsibility—especially when those concepts are taken up by persons who have historically been denied their potential.

The “Plan of Delano” also possesses a different sense of time and temporality than contemporary rhetoric, which generally revolves around the place of Latinos/as in the future of the United States. Nativist paranoia says that the growing Latino/a demography will make America unrecognizable; Latinos/as and their allies claim these demographic changes
as the basis of a new and better United States. The “Plan of Delano” sees justice for past grievances as the path to a better future:

Our sweat and our blood have fallen on this land to make other men rich. . . . They saw the obvious effects of an unjust system, starvation wages, contractors, day hauls, forced migration, sickness, and sub-human living conditions, and acted as if they were irremediable causes. The farm worker has been abandoned to his own fate—without representation, without power—subject to the mercy and caprice of the rancher.34

This rhetoric represents an important contrast to the neoliberal rhetoric that dominates the public sphere. Since the 1970s, wealth in the United States and across much of the globe has been moving from the public trust to private interests, and from the lower- and middle-classes to the upper classes. Several overlapping factors are driving this shift: declining union membership; the exporting of manufacturing; low tax rates for high-income earners and for capital gains; the offshoring of corporate profits; and the deregulation of the financial industry. Individuals and communities increasingly rely on the private sector for schools, roads, and other goods and services once supplied by government, and because they do, they are compelled to speak the language of the free market. The vacuous language of marketers and corporate executives overruns the public sphere: university administrators speak of “efficiencies” and “entrepreneurialism”; primary and secondary schools sell advertising space in their classrooms to pay for extracurricular activities; churches develop “branding” strategies; in their leisure time, people read books on how to be “highly effective.”

The irony is that people are increasingly looking to the market to solve the very crises that the market is creating. When pressed for explanations, public figures frequently represent social inequality as a fact of life, or they blame the victims. After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, conservative pundits such as Glenn Beck and Charles Murray suggested that the loss of life was due to the irresponsibility of the mostly black underclass. Their commentary studiously avoided discussion of the scarce transportation options available to victims, just as it deflected attention away from years of public underfunding for levee repair. Reflecting on public opinion polls about the hurricane, political scientist Michael C. Dawson contends that “whites viewing the aftermath to Katrina see a relatively uncomplicated landscape dominated by inept government and blacks behaving badly. . . . Blacks viewing the
aftermath to Katrina, much like the 1968 Kerner Committee Report, see two countries, black and white, separate and unequal.” A similar pattern emerged after the collapse of the real estate market in 2008. Many commentators on television and in print suggested that irresponsible borrowing by minority homeowners was to blame for the bursting of the housing bubble. These assessments were built on bad data. They conveniently ignored the enormous wealth these loans had produced for upper-income whites, and they turned a blind eye to the fact that housing represented for minorities one of the few sources of college and retirement funds in a period of declining wages.

Like other texts of the Chicano movement, the “Plan of Delano” looks not to the market for solutions, but to direct action. It describes in detail the crimes committed against farmworkers, including “starvation wages” and “forced migration.” It places blame at the feet of “the rancher” who has “abandoned [the farmworker] to his own fate—without representation, without power.” The manifesto then seeks remedy, not through managerial reform, but through nonviolent confrontation:

Our revolution will not be armed, but we want the existing social order to dissolve; we want a new social order. We are poor, we are humble, and our only choice is to strike in those ranches where we are not treated with the respect we deserve as working men [sic], where our rights as free and sovereign men are not recognized. . . . We shall overcome!

People sometimes dismiss the utopianism of the 1960s as naïveté. By the time Luis Valdez wrote the “Plan of Delano” in 1966, César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, Gilbert Padilla, and other UFW leaders had been organizing California’s Central Valley for more than three years. The future-oriented promise of “a new social order” was already visible among farmworkers who—many for the first time in their lives—recognized their personal and collective dignity. This recognition was a victory in its own right, because a first aim of the exploiter is to convince the exploited that they deserve no better.

The original “Plan of Delano” was typewritten, mimeographed, and disseminated informally, but in the fall of 1966 it was published in book form alongside the realist images of photographer George Ballis. Its powerful defense of labor rights in an outsourcing economy makes ¡Basta! La historia de nuestra lucha/Enough! The Tale of Our Struggle as relevant today as it was when it was first published. However, the lessons
of this important cultural text are hard to access because the Chicano movement occupies an indistinct place in U.S. history. Most people have a working knowledge of the political dynamics that shaped the mostly white counterculture of the 1960s, even if this knowledge is sometimes overlaid by caricatured images of long hair, acid, and free love. The African American civil rights movement is also widely known, though it, too, is sometimes rendered one-dimensionally in mass media. The enslavement and segregation of black people has played a foundational role in American society and government since the earliest days of British colonialism. The success that African American activists and their allies had in attacking this foundation made postwar civil rights activism one of the most consequential and most admired chapters in American history. Mexican Americans participated in the struggle for black civil rights. Elizabeth Martínez, for example, registered voters in Mississippi during the 1964 Freedom Summer project, and she later served as New York coordinator of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).37

Black activism and Chicano/a activism together formed part of a postwar democratic insurgency, but the Chicano movement is rarely remembered as such in popular history. The curricula of primary and secondary schools in the United States bear this out. A generation ago, social studies textbooks ignored the Chicano movement altogether. Contemporary textbooks are more inclusive and more sophisticated in their analysis. Paul Boyer and Sterling Stuckey’s high-school volume American Nation provides the best available treatment. In addition to giving background on U.S.–Latin American relations and on histories of discrimination against Latinos/as, the textbook gives a six-page overview of the movement, including impressive multimedia resources, an explanation of the word “Chicano” and of Aztlán, and an overview of regional differences. Gary Nash’s American Odyssey is also noteworthy. Not only does the book discuss the UFW, it also discusses feminist initiatives within the movement, the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, the Zoot Suit Riots, and debates in the 1990s about affirmative action and redistricting. The attention that these textbooks pay to the Chicano movement and to the larger multicultural history of the United States is a testament to the success of antiracist activism during the past several decades. However, many volumes still provide insufficient commentary on the full scope of postwar civil rights activism. Under the heading “Other Groups Seek Rights,” Joyce Appleby’s American Journey includes only a few short paragraphs on the farmworker movement, never mentioning the words “Chicano”
or “Chicana,” and never making connections with other progressive social movements.

The American historical imagination needs a fuller narrative of how progressive Chicano/a activism shaped and was shaped by the 1960s, just as it needs a more grounded sense of how this activism relates to contemporary political struggles. Art can be a useful tool for developing this richer historical imagination. The “Plan of Delano,” for example, owes both its populist content and its exhortatory form to previous manifestos from north and south of the U.S.-Mexico border: the 1915 “Plan de San Diego,” which called for persons of “the Latin, the Negro, or the Japanese race” to take up arms and reclaim territory ceded by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; Emiliano Zapata’s 1911 “Plan de Ayala,” which decried corruption in the Mexican Revolution and demanded the nationalization of wealth; and the 1821 “Plan de Iguala,” which formalized Mexican independence from Spain. Stylistically and thematically, the “Plan of Delano” belongs to this long tradition of radicalism in the Americas. It also belongs to the canon of manifestos that emerged from the social movements of the 1960s, including the Port Huron Statement, the Redstockings Manifesto, the Black Panthers’ “Ten Point Program,” and the Yippie Manifesto. Like the Delano document, these varied texts used unqualified declaratives and a strict analytical structure to challenge the artifice of postwar consensus, and to grab audience attention at a time of increasing media-made distraction. The formal parallels between them offer a window on the Chicano movement’s complex embeddedness both in 1960s politics in the United States, and in transnational left cultures, particularly in Latin America.

Music provides another cultural avenue for understanding the points of contact between the Chicano movement and the broader social and political currents of the postwar era. It was rhythm and blues that provided the sound track to the Chicano movement. Mexican Americans listened to other genres, including jazz, rock, mariachi, boleros, and corridos, but they were especially drawn to the black sounds of doo-wop and R&B. In Los Angeles, this affection started early. During the 1950s, while white youth were listening mainly to pop vocalists such as Patti Page, or to Elvis Presley and other early rock-and-rollers, Chicanos/as were listening to Little Richard, Johnny Otis, Richard Berry, Big Jay McNeely, and Fats Domino. The appeal of this music stemmed both from the physical proximity of African Americans and Mexican Americans to each other in the barrios and ghettos of southern California, and from the desire for cultural distance from the white mainstream.
Adults weren’t always happy about the popularity of black music among Chicano/a youth. Some parents forbade their children from purchasing offensive records, and city elites tried to steer Mexican American adolescents away from rhythm and blues by sponsoring classical music programs at the Hollywood Bowl. These efforts rarely succeeded, though. Young people continued buying 45s at East L.A.’s Record Rack, dancing at the El Monte Legion Stadium or the Hollywood Palladium, and listening to disc jockey Huggy Boy’s R&B and rock-and-roll program on radio station KRKD.

The 1964 Beatles “invasion” inspired garage bands across East Los Angeles and helped popularize groups such as the Ambertones, the Romancers, Cannibal and the Headhunters, Thee Midniters, the Sisters (an all-woman band), and the Rhythm Playboys. A few of these bands garnered modest national and even international attention, but most remained popular only among Los Angeles audiences. Still, they created a distinctive style, one that gave sonic expression to the political energies of the moment. The Romancers’ “My Heart Cries” was a 1963 cover of an R&B duet by Etta James and Harvey Fuqua. The band’s crooning ballad, which is praised by David Reyes and Tom Waldman as “one of the better-kept secrets of Chicano rock ’n’ roll,” keeps the languor of the original, but it adds the harmonic line and crisp instrumental notes of mariachi. Lead singer Max Uballez said the cover was inspired by the Mexican song “La noche y tú,” which he sometimes heard played in Los Angeles. The top-forty hit “Land of 1000 Dances” (1965) by Cannibal and the Headhunters was a cover of a song first recorded by New Orleans musician Chris Kenner in 1962. Producers of the East L.A. band brought fans into the studio to reproduce the feeling of a barrio concert. Unable to remember the lyrics during rehearsal, lead vocalist Frankie Garcia improvised a “na na na na” intro. His mistake turned into one of the most famous hooks in American pop music, especially after it was covered by R&B singer Wilson Pickett in 1966.

“My Heart Cries” and “Land of 1000 Dances” are just two examples of an extended musical dialogue between African Americans and Chicanos/as after World War II. This artistic dialogue has a political resonance. Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin note in their classic *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying* that Motown channeled the labor unrest surrounding the urban rebellion of 1967 and the formation of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. The Mexican American musical style that emerged in the 1960s was a powerful cross-pollination. It joined Mexican Americans to black labor struggles in Detroit and elsewhere, in much the same way
as the “pachucos” and “pachucas” of 1930s- and 1940s-era jazz subculture. It made connections with a mostly white counterculture that also expressed its alienation through music. And it gave voice to the transnational dimensions of progressive Chicano/a politics.

Listening carefully to the music of the Chicano movement can help broaden public understanding of the links between the various social movements of the 1960s at a time when this broadening is badly needed. Traditional historical narratives draw neat boundaries around the diverse social movements of the postwar era, treating their origins, participants, and goals as distinct from each other. There were indeed differences and tensions between, for example, black nationalism and the Chicano movement. These realities must be dealt with honestly, but they should not be allowed to obscure the ideological, institutional, and personal connections between and among the various progressive struggles that lent shape and significance to the 1960s.

Neither should these differences and tensions be allowed to detract from the simple but profound truth that the left movements of the period bettered and continue to better the world we live in. This transformation is not always easy to perceive, since the 1960s are stereotyped and sentimentalized in U.S. popular and political culture. Todd Gitlin argues that with the passage of time “‘the Sixties’ receded into haze and myth: lingering images of nobility and violence, occasional news clips of Martin Luther King, Jr., and John F. Kennedy, Beatles and Bob Dylan retrospectives, the jumble of images this culture shares instead of a sense of continuous, lived history.”

His commentary points to what may be art’s greatest usefulness for thinking about the 1960s in general, and the Chicano movement in particular. The arts are capable of taking what has become old or cliché and recasting it. This capacity—often realized in Chicano/a art and literature—can help to undo 1960s sentimentality and to replace it with the deeper “sense of continuous, lived history” for which Gitlin rightly calls.

Rethinking 1960s Sentimentality

The 1960s occupy a particularly prominent place in U.S. political history. The “baby boomers” were coming of age during the decade. Theirs was a generational cohort of unequaled size, before or since. America’s domestic economy was expanding at an unprecedented rate. Disposable income levels were high. Film, radio, and television—still relatively new communication technologies—saturated everyday life, consolidating the
power of the culture industry, and transforming everything from childhood play to presidential elections. The governing coalition between southern Democrats and northern Republicans that had been produced by the Great Depression and by World War II was coming apart, largely because of widespread opposition among whites to civil rights for African Americans. Meanwhile, the U.S. presence in Vietnam was escalating from a low-profile military action to a full-scale war. By the end of the decade, the lies used to justify the conflict were wearing thin, and public support was collapsing.

Partisan debate about the decade and its legacies has produced a peculiar kind of sentimentality around the 1960s. As historian Bernard von Bothmer argues, liberals and conservatives tell competing stories about what happened in this era. The liberal narrative emphasizes “the positive associations of the ‘good sixties,’” meaning the Kennedy years between 1960 and 1963. For liberals, Kennedy’s “thousand days” in office represented an opportunity at last to realize the promise of American freedom. The conservative narrative emphasizes “the bad sixties,” which stretch from the beginning of Johnson’s Great Society program in 1964, to Nixon’s resignation in 1974. For conservatives, these years marked the beginning of American decline, a period of “urban riots, antiwar protests, difficulties in fighting the Vietnam War, increased incivility, crime, drug abuse, and social arrest.”

The competing liberal and conservative narratives create two very different affects toward the 1960s. Conservatives are fueled by anger at what they see as the enormously destructive influence the decade had on U.S. society. This anger began structuring contemporary conservatism early on. According to von Bothmer, “Reagan invented ‘the sixties’ during the 1960s and was against ‘the sixties’ even before the decade ended.” It gives the former governor of California too much credit to say he invented the idea, but von Bothmer is right in saying that Reagan consolidated Republican opposition. During the past three decades, the conservative movement has used a version of the 1960s to stir voter anger and to erode some of the political victories won by progressives. During the 1970s and 1980s, opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment blocked ratification by representing its supporters as man-hating radicals determined to destroy the family. Never one to go for subtlety, the influential archconservative Phyllis Schlafly wrote: “Women’s lib is a total assault on the role of the American woman as wife and mother, and on the family as a basic unit of society. . . . Women’s libbers are promoting free sex instead of the ‘slavery’ of marriage. They are promoting Federal ‘day-care centers’
for babies instead of homes. They are promoting abortions instead of families.” Schlafly’s use of the charged expression “free sex” was a clever manipulation of powerful cultural stereotypes of the 1960s as a time of reckless hedonism.

In 1993, Myron Magnet argued in The Dream and the Nightmare: The Sixties’ Legacy to the Underclass that the “cultural revolution” of the liberal elites (or “Haves”) has “weakened families and communities” through its me-first attitude and trained the poor (or “Have-Nots”) to blame the system for their plight, rather than work their way out of poverty. Though the book is premised on a patronizing attitude toward African Americans and a naïve image of the United States before the 1960s, it has been influential. President George W. Bush—who said The Dream and the Nightmare was second only to the Bible in its influence on his thinking—used Magnet’s commentary as his ideological justification for cuts to already underfunded federal antipoverty programs. When Bush was elected in 2000, domestic discretionary spending, which includes education, welfare, and housing, comprised 18.4 percent of the budget, compared to 21.7 percent for defense. By the time he left office in 2008, discretionary spending had been reduced to 14.7 percent, while military spending had increased to 29.2 percent. These cuts were fueled by conservative anger about the perceived excess of liberal “tax-and-spend” policies.

The Chicano movement has been a target in this conservative attack on the 1960s. In 1991, Republican activist Linda Chavez claimed that leaders of the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) and other movement organizations had “enhanced their own power” by “demanding entitlements based on ethnicity and disadvantaged status.” Chavez argued that these “entitlements” such as affirmative action undermine the assimilation pattern that allowed Jewish, Irish, and Italian immigrants to enter the American middle class in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A career opponent of the labor movement, she ignored the post–World War II economic restructuring that gutted trade unions, the historic engine of class mobility for white ethnics.

In 2002, Chavez escalated her attack on the Chicano movement with the publication of the provocatively titled An Unlikely Conservative: The Transformation of an Ex-Liberal, or, How I Became the Most Hated Hispanic in America. Like David Horowitz, Peter Collier, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and a number of other prominent conservatives, Chavez positioned herself rhetorically as a 1960s liberal who had seen the light. The evidence suggests she was never a liberal to begin with, though. She voted for
Democrats in 1972 and 1976, supported feminist “equal pay for equal work” policies, and hung around the fringes of the African American and the Chicano civil rights movements. Throughout her life she has benfitted directly from liberal policies, including the affirmative action programs she spent her career undermining. However, she admits that in 1980, the year she first voted Republican, she was “on most issues . . . still the Catholic schoolgirl, respectful of authority, more comfortable with a fixed moral code, and with a reverence for tradition and decorum.”

Chicano/a activists were also respectful of authority, morality, and tradition, so long as they were used as tools of justice rather than as weapons of inequality. But Chavez dismisses her progressive contemporaries as “cronies” and “professional ethnic[s].” Her anger at the Chicano movement paints with a broad and slanderous brush what was a coalition of diverse people working toward sometimes very different goals, and often with very different means.

Conservatives like Chavez are not the only ones whose sentiment toward the 1960s inflects their political thinking. Liberals and leftists have cultivated their own powerful forms of affect about the period. For many of them, the 1960s are enveloped in regret over the direction that history took, and in sadness over all the dreams that weren’t realized. Tom Hayden says of himself and his peers: “We ourselves became infected with many of the diseases of the society we wished to erase. Thinking we could build a new world, we self-destructed in a decade. . . . That burden of self-imposed failures weighs heavily.” The narrative that structures this mournful sentiment sees the election of John F. Kennedy as a symbol of the optimism that began the decade, an optimism that is said to have faded after Kennedy’s assassination and after the escalation of the war in Vietnam. Tom Brokaw’s recent retrospective of the decade gives an example:

It was November 22, 1963, and it was, in effect, the beginning of what we now call the Sixties. Kennedy’s death was stunning not just because he was president. He was such a young president, and his election just three years before had kindled the dreams and aspirations of the young generation he embodied and inspired. His death seemed to rob us of all that was youthful and elegant, cool and smart, hopeful and idealistic. Who now would stir our generation by suggesting we “ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country?”

The narrative Brokaw tells has considerable irony. It was Kennedy who in 1961 committed American troops to the mission of propping up the
corrupt administration of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. Kennedy’s record on civil rights was mixed, and his anti-Keynesian approach to ending the recession of the early 1960s involved a regressive tax cut and tepid public spending. As historian William O’Neill put it, “President Kennedy’s politics were hardly less conventional, and not much more liberal, than Nixon’s.” If not for the persistent mythology of an enchanted Camelot, public perception of Kennedy and of his policies would likely be less fervid. Progressive sentiment about the 1960s would certainly be less tragic in its tone.

Anger among conservatives about the social movements of the 1960s has dominated the political culture of the last forty years. It won seven presidential elections since 1968, pulled the federal judiciary to the right, and hardened the partisan divide in Congress. However, the more liberal sentiment of sadness has dominated popular culture. Even before President Kennedy’s death, Peter, Paul and Mary’s “Where Have All the Flowers Gone” captured what seemed to many a generational mood. The song, which was written by Pete Seeger and covered by the trio on their 1962 debut album, conveyed an ethereal sadness through its plaintive harmonies and its Whitmanesque refrain. Popular songs from later in the decade echoed this melancholy, among them Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” (1963), Procol Harum’s “Whiter Shade of Pale” (1967), and the Rolling Stones’s “Ruby Tuesday” (1967). The sorrowful notes that structure these melodies gave a framework for later visual interpretations of the 1960s, including television shows such as The Wonder Years (1988–93), and such films as The Big Chill (1983) and Forrest Gump (1994).

Most workers in the culture industry have liberal political views. This is one reason why popular media persistently grieves the 1960s. A second and larger reason is institutional: the 1960s marked the first time a generational cohort came of age in a truly mass media environment. If successful, a TV show, album, or film could define a cultural moment. Now that cable television, satellite radio, and the Internet have divided audiences into niche markets, elite producers no longer enjoy the reach they once did. The culture industry is only beginning to adjust to this shift.

Like the decade it is most closely associated with, the Chicano movement is often narrated using what Max Cavitch (in a different context) calls an “elegiac temper” that mourns the premature death of the struggle. As with the 1960s in general, this temperament is legible in several memoirs, histories, and documentaries. Mario Barrera’s and Marilyn Mulford’s film Chicano Park (1988) tells the story of an early-1970s effort in San Diego’s Barrio Logan to block a proposed highway
patrol headquarters and to build instead a recreation area with green space, murals, and performance venues. Chicano Park is thriving well into the twenty-first century, and many of the activists and artists who were involved then are still active in community service. However, the narrator of the film laments that by the mid-1970s, “the politics of the Chicano Movement had changed. Less confrontation. More meetings, meetings, and more meetings.” Carlos Muñoz Jr.—one of the “East Los Angeles 13” arrested on conspiracy charges after the school walkouts of 1968—writes in his authoritative history that “the Chicano student movement and the larger Chicano Movement of which it was a major part exemplified the politics of a decade unique in the history of the United States. . . . But times changed. The movements of the sixties that had been sources of inspiration for Mexican American youth disappeared into the pages of history by the mid-1970s.” José Angel Gutiérrez, a founder of the Chicano/a third-party La Raza Unida and among the visible leaders of the Chicano movement, says in his autobiography: “My generation of Chicano activists made events happen. We were determined, motivated, political actors in the Chicano movement. As proud militants and ready activists, we had resolve.”

After an activist reunion in 1988, Gutiérrez noted that his peers had become “middle-aged” and “middle-class,” with “wrinkles and gray hair.” “Clearly,” Gutiérrez says, “we were the past generation.”

Even those who felt alienated from the Chicano movement or who were born after it sometimes mourn its supposed passing. As a light-skinned Chicana and a closeted lesbian, Cherrie Moraga felt alienated during the 1970s by dominant Chicano nationalism’s valuation of brown skin as a metaphor of authenticity, and also by its idealization of heterosexual families as the symbol of cultural purity. Grassroots activism and scholarship by Gloria Anzaldúa, Richard T. Rodríguez, Norma Alarcón, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Anna NietoGomez, Alma Lopez, Maylei Blackwell, and Moraga herself has made progressive Chicano/a politics more inclusive of gays and lesbians, and also more nuanced in its handling of racial difference within Chicano/a communities. Yet even with these advances, Moraga still eulogizes the past. She writes: “I mourn the dissolution of an active Chicano Movement possibly more strongly than my generational counterparts because during its ‘classic period,’ I was unable to act publicly.” Her poignant commentary shows the diverse sources from which mourning for the movement springs.

These elegies for the social movements and cultural developments of the 1960s could be dismissed as harmless nostalgia for youth, or as
historical poetry, were it not for their considerable impact on contemporary U.S. politics. They do a service to progressive politics in that they preserve a memory of the past in a culture often obsessed with the present and the future. Ironically, though, these eulogies preserve the past ahistorically. They homogenize an entire generational cohort, giving the wrong impression that all young people in the 1960s were entirely consumed with sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Many youth sat on the sidelines, either indifferent to, or unsure of, the social, cultural, and political changes happening around them. Others were involved in activism, but as Republicans. The popular perception of the 1960s suggests that young people identified as liberals or even as radicals, while their “Greatest Generation” parents clung to the traditional institutions of patriotism, religion, and the family. In fact, even among teenagers and twenty-somethings, conservatism and liberalism warred with each other. The 1960s witnessed the formation of the Students for a Democratic Society, the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), and SNCC, but it also gave rise to the Young Americans for Freedom, a conservative organization that helped launch the resentment-fueled careers of pundit Pat Buchanan and direct-mail operative Richard Viguerie. Elegies for the 1960s obscure this battle, and in doing so give cover to Republican framing of the decade as a period of reckless liberalism. Conservatism wreaked far more havoc in the United States and around the globe than did any flower child, New Leftist, or cultural nationalist. As proof, one need look no farther than the paranoid anticommunism that stalled civil rights at home, destabilized democratically elected governments in Latin America and Africa, and perpetuated the war in Vietnam.

Elegies for the 1960s create a troublesome exceptionalism that sequesters the period from the political currents that came before and after. The counterculture, for example, is represented in cultural texts ranging from *The Graduate* (1967) to *Mad Men* (2007–present) and from *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me* (1966) to *Vineland* (1990) as a quasi-Oedipal struggle within the white middle class between stern parents and their rebellious children. This narrative of generational rebellion colors our thinking about the postwar moment, propping up the idea that the 1960s was a singularly turbulent, transformative decade. The idea is more romance than reality, though. Ideologically, the push-and-pull during the 1960s between deep faith in the American dream and anxiety about its demise has a long history in the United States. As Sacvan Bercovitch argues, seventeenth-century Puritanism established a rhetorical pattern in which present failings were transformed through
condemnation into reminders of the nation’s providential mission.\textsuperscript{70} This “American jeremiad” (as Bercovitch famously calls it) was a staple of 1960s political discourse. Even the experimentation that defines the decade in popular imagination—the quest for “higher consciousness,” the sexual libertinism and group living, and the search for alternative economies—had precedent in the socialist communes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, among them the Oneida Community (1848–1881) in New York or the Spirit Fruit Society (1914–1939) in Ohio.\textsuperscript{71}

The relationship between and among different age cohorts during the 1960s was also more complex than 1960s exceptionalism allows. More than a few activists were “red-diaper babies” whose left-leaning parents not only approved of their children’s political involvement, but also nurtured it. Those young people who didn’t have progressive parents may have been rebelling, but their rebellion was more complex than the popular caricature admits. Dominick Cavallo argues that white youth in both the counterculture and in the New Left had internalized the “autonomy and intellectual independence” their middle-class, mostly professional parents had taught them.\textsuperscript{72} They used this training to criticize the world handed to them by the previous generation, but their critique was not as clear a departure as they sometimes imagined. The situation was different for working-class kids, and especially for minorities. Their parents sometimes disapproved of their activism. Delia Alvarez became involved in Chicano/a antiwar activism after her brother Everett’s plane was shot down over Vietnam in 1964. Her public protests angered her father, but she viewed them as the only way to get her brother home and to prevent other parents from suffering the way hers did.\textsuperscript{73} Regardless of their family’s opinion of the Chicano movement, Chicano/a activists usually saw themselves as fighting not against their parents, but rather for their parents. Most Chicano/a baby boomers were immigrants or the children of immigrants, and so their activism was often fueled by anger at the discrimination their parents endured.

This sociological difference reflected the contradictory relationship Mexican Americans had with the wider Left of the 1960s, and especially with the counterculture. Raised in devout Catholic homes by working-class parents, many Chicanos/as were suspicious of what they saw as the moral libertinism and the class decadence of white hippies. Yet these same individuals often shared the counterculture’s desire for a utopian alternative to the status quo. They had even more reason to feel alienated from what C. Wright Mills called “the power elite” and its values than their white peers.\textsuperscript{74} This ambivalence led many young Chicanos/
as to identify with the counterculture, but to remain on its periphery. Many smoked pot or used psychedelic drugs; some men grew their hair out, and some women went unshaven; activists often wore secondhand clothing from army/navy surplus stores to show sympathy for soldiers and to challenge American consumerism’s fetishizing of the new; and most loved the music of the Rolling Stones, James Brown, Jefferson Airplane, and Jimi Hendrix. Always, though, they sought to create their own spaces of community and culture. Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973) thematizes this dynamic. Buffalo, the larger-than-life protagonist of Acosta’s fictionalized autobiography, is drawn to hippie attitudes about sex, work, and spirituality. His sister Teresa has married a white Marine and moved to a San Fernando suburb, but Buffalo is a man “running around the world, talking of writing and revolution and women and death.” The considerable emotional drama of the novel comes from the first-person narrator’s attempts at reconciling his private desires with his public commitments. He wants to “turn on, tune in, and drop out”—to use Timothy Leary’s famous line—but he feels a sense of responsibility to his family and to his community. In this respect he resembles the author Oscar Zeta Acosta, a tragic figure who disappeared in Mexico in 1974. The fictional Buffalo—like Acosta himself—never managed to reconcile the tension between the individual and the collective. Most movement activists, though, found a way to channel their rebellious energy into social change. *Revolt of the Cockroach People* illustrates how and why the generational thinking traditionally applied to the 1960s fails to fully explain Mexican American politics. Yet a version of 1960s exceptionalism does make its way into the pages of Chicano/a history. Activists of that era often represented the Chicano movement as an awakening, a moment when Mexican Americans at last decided they had had enough abuse. The influential “El plan espiritual de Aztlán” gives an example of this framework. Written by the poet Alurista and first delivered at the seminal Chicano Youth Liberation conference of 1969, the manifesto’s preamble augured a revolution: “In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage, but also of the brutal ‘Gringo’ invasion of our territories: We, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán . . . declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny.” José Angel Gutiérrez echoed this sentiment in comments he made to *NBC News* on September 4, 1972, at the La Raza Unida convention: “These are Chicano people here. You’ve never met us. We’re not in the dictionary. It’s a
brand-new ball game. You’re going to have to relearn all your stereotypes and all your myths because we’re about to begin creating new ones.”

A popular sign at movement rallies used the Latin American anticolonial expression “¡Ya Basta!” (Enough Already!) to suggest a rupture with the past, and one of the movement’s vanguard feminist publications was titled Regeneración (Regeneration). Metaphors of rebirth and renewal were in fact pervasive in the rhetoric of the Chicano movement, as in other movements of the 1960s.

The language of innovation often formed part of a contrast between the activism of the Chicano/a generation and the quiescence of previous generations. The contrast is misleading, as Mexicans in America have a long history of political involvement. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo extended specific legal protections to persons who chose to remain in the conquered territories, among them “the free enjoyment of their liberty and property.” The protections were honored more in the breach than in the observance, and so these new Mexican Americans were compelled to organize and fight on their own behalf during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Sometimes the struggle was violent and uncoordinated, as in the case of the mythologized “bandits” Tiburcio Vásquez and Joaquín Murrieta. More often the fight was peaceful and coordinated, as with the many mutual-aid societies that sprung up across the Southwest and Midwest.

María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s Who Would Have Thought It? (1872) and The Squatter and the Don (1885)—the first novels published in English by a Latina—used the conventions of sentimental fiction to protest the American government’s trampling of the cultural and legal rights of Mexicans in the United States. The outrage she captures on the page in her complex and sometimes contradictory novels grounded political mobilizing well into the twentieth century, including collective action against the “repatriation” campaigns of the 1930s. After the October 1929 stock market crash triggered a new wave of race resentment among whites, several states and the federal government raided Chicano/a communities and deported without due process almost 1 million Mexicans, some of them U.S. citizens. Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans responded to this injustice by forming relief groups such as La Cruz Azul Mexicana (the Mexican Blue Cross), lobbying the Mexican government for resettlement aid, and organizing protests in Los Angeles, Detroit, San Antonio, and elsewhere.

The anticommunist paranoia that engulfed American society after World War II eroded the institutions and the memory of the Chicano/a
Left, just as it undermined the labor movement and the Left more broadly. Movement activists sometimes knew the general outlines of Mexican American history, but they often didn’t have a sense of how this history impacted their lives, or what they might learn from it. At a time of historical amnesia and widespread political intimidation, the 1960s rhetoric of rebirth and renewal gave activists the courage they needed to confront postwar America’s militarism and entrenched inequality. This development came at a cost, though. Movement exceptionalism tended to magnify the effects of the presentism that Mexican Americans (like their peers) were exposed to via mass media and dominant society. It deepened their isolation from a rich tradition of cultural and political activism, leaving them more vulnerable to infighting and to sabotage. The September 1972 convention of La Raza Unida in El Paso, Texas, began with tremendous excitement as participants pursued a national platform for progressive Chicano/a politics. However, things soon devolved into bickering over leadership and parliamentary procedure. What many attendees interpreted as an unprecedented personality dispute over which man—Reies López Tijerina, Corky Gonzales, or José Angel Gutiérrez—should represent the Chicano “nation” was in fact a new wrinkle in an old debate over the prospects for change within the system. A deeper sense of historical perspective would have helped activists to recognize the controversy for what it was, and to navigate it more cautiously.  

In an ironic turn, exceptionalist rhetoric also alienated the movement activism of the 1960s from the events that came after. Documents such as “El plan espiritual de Aztlán” invoked a new political order advancing toward the future. Chronologically, the present moment belongs to that future, but many commentators speak of a rupture that happened along the way. The dates of this rupture vary. Some say the movement began to unravel in August 1970, after police provocation at the antiwar “Chicano Moratorium” led to three deaths and extensive property damage in East Los Angeles. Others say the beginning of the end was the embattled La Raza Unida convention in 1972. Armando Navarro claims that the movement ended in 1974 in the midst of “a sectarian ideological war.” Still others say it concluded with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. The fact that different dates are used for the chronology of the Chicano movement shows just how difficult it can be to narrate the history of social movements. More significant, though, is the sense of decline attached to this chronology, a feeling not just that the Chicano movement died, but that in its place came something foreign and contemptible.
This sentiment represents the ugly side of the 1960s elegy. Many of the same people who have eulogized the Chicano movement in print or on film have also publicly condemned the cohort that succeeded the “Chicano generation.” José Angel Gutiérrez says that “those of us from the Chicano generation were intent on bringing about an entire package of change for all.” He fears, though, that “the subsequent generation, our children, the Hispanic Generation, are not activists and doers. They do work for change for themselves. They seldom work for change for others. . . . They have paid no price for their benefits; hence, they don’t know why they should struggle and fight.”

Respected activist and scholar Armando Navarro is just as harsh. He says of the “Viva Yo Hispanic Generation” (Long Live Myself) generation that came of age in the 1980s and 1990s:

From a political cultural perspective, its “ethos” embraced the ideological beliefs, values, and symbols of liberal capitalism. The emphasis was on the “I” rather than the “we,” and it embraced the Horatio Alger “bootstrap” argument that anyone can make it or be successful providing they are competitive, hardworking, and willing to sacrifice. Moreover, it adhered to a rather middle-class to higher-class bias toward free enterprise, consumerism, materialism, individualism, and pursuit of unbridled wealth. “What’s in it for me” was a pervasive attitude.

Navarro gives little evidence to support these generalizations, apart from a handful of trifling statistics and anecdotes about the use of the label “Hispanic” versus “Mexicano” or “Chicano.” It’s a disappointing passage in an otherwise illuminating book.

The “declension narrative” told by Gutiérrez, Garcia, and Navarro finds frequent echo in commentary on other social movements of the 1960s. One story suggests that as the idealistic 1960s turned into the cynical 1970s, members of the largely white counterculture came back into the fold of dominant society. By the 1980s, their principled protests against government wrongdoing had purportedly turned into greedy antitax initiatives, their pursuit of the good life into a hedonistic obsession with material things. The decision of “Yippie” leader Jerry Rubin to work in Wall Street has been held up as an example of this decline, though as Todd Gitlin suggests, for every one Rubin, there were many more New Left “graduates” who continued to work away from the media glare as union leaders and disarmament activists. A second version of the 1960s declension narrative suggests that the 1960s marked a
disastrous pivot from the unified class politics of the 1930s to the divisive “identity politics” of the post-1960s era. Walter Benn Michaels tells a version of this story, though with little genuine understanding of the multicultural Left and its sophisticated understanding of how class divisions operate through race in a postindustrial economy. A third version says the hard-won victories of the 1950s and 1960s were squandered by the ungratefulness of the generation that came after. Sara Evans documents this narrative among feminists, but it is especially potent in the world of black politics, where commentators such as Bill Cosby complain that the “hip-hop” generation has wasted the opportunities given it by the civil rights generation.

Declension narratives may be appealing as nostalgia, but they are flawed in that they offer shallow generalizations about morality, when what is needed is critical thinking about historical change. The post-1960s decades have undoubtedly seen their share of apathy and greed among all segments of society. Those same things could be found in the 1960s, though. The real difference between the 1960s and what came after lies not in the level of individual commitment to political goals, or in generational traits. It lies instead in the social and political climate in which progressive politics takes place. The liberal-Left coalition forged out of the financial crisis of the 1930s had produced by the 1960s a broad commitment to the collective good. This commitment led in turn to a relatively prosperous economy and to “rising expectations” for marginalized populations that were previously seen only as disposable labor pools. Mobilizing among workers and the democratizing pressures of Cold War foreign policy prompted wage increases and civil rights reforms. A reorganized GOP and their corporate backers responded to the progressive victories of the mid-twentieth century by pouring unprecedented levels of money into the political process and by creating a right-wing propaganda machine that included the *National Review*, the Heritage Institute, and eventually Fox News. Their first success was the election of Richard Nixon in 1968, but their most important victory was the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan. Reagan tore apart the fragile social-safety net that had been formed out of the New Deal, redistributed wealth from the bottom to the top, and gutted the federal government’s civil rights protections. Chicano/a and Latino/a activist networks were put on the defensive by the conservative countermovement, but they were not destroyed.

Dramatic changes in the media landscape have also impacted the Chicano movement. The 1960s represent the apex of a truly mass media: growing rates of disposable income fueled a Hollywood boom; radio was
embedded in everyday life; and television was a household fixture. Public assembly at sites of symbolic national importance has been an essential “repertoire of protest” since the formation of the modern nation-state and the rise of the daily newspaper in the eighteenth century. Assemblies were especially effective in postwar politics, though, because the consolidation of the FM signal and a limited number of TV networks allowed maximum exposure. Progressive activists spent considerable time and energy pursuing airtime, and with mixed results. The 1963 March on Washington gave incontrovertible proof of the power of television as a political tool. However, the protests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention showed that the pursuit of media exposure could lead to physical repression and public backlash. Mexican Americans learned this lesson firsthand at the Chicano Moratorium on August 29, 1970.

The media calculus changed in the later 1970s. The rapid expansion of cable television carved audiences up into narrow target demographics. This market segmentation—which intensified with the advent of satellite broadcasting and the Internet—made it harder for protesters to deliver their message to a broad public. Paradoxically, even as the television industry became consolidated within a relatively small number of global corporations, it became a more diffuse presence in everyday life, making audiences skeptical of televisual politics. This skepticism is good insofar as it reflects an awareness of how elites manipulate media for antidemocratic interests, as when George W. Bush’s campaign operatives staged mock protests during the 2000 Florida recount. It is destructive, though, in that it has generated widespread cynicism toward the public sphere as an arena of politics. This cynicism breeds apathy.

The macrolevel changes in economy and media surrounding progressive politics are joined by changes that are specific to Chicano/a politics. Latino/a communities across the United States have become more diverse, and this demographic shift has shaped the nature of Chicano/a activism. During the 1950s and 1960s, Mexican Americans lived in largely homogeneous ethnic enclaves, most often in the barrios located in and around major cities of the Southwest. An ideology based on common socioeconomic realities and on a shared ethnic identification was useful under such conditions, and thus various forms of cultural nationalism became dominant. The demographics have shifted a great deal since the 1960s. Historically Mexican barrios have become home to mixed populations of Latinos/as from Central America and the Caribbean, or they have been gentrified by young professionals, most of them
white. At the same time, a small but growing number of Latinos/as have moved to the suburbs, where they send their kids to integrated schools, participate in integrated civic and religious organizations, and work in integrated postindustrial jobs. Many of these Latino/a suburbanites are middle-class professionals, but not all of them are. Some are working-class, first-generation immigrants from Latin America who pool their resources and craft their own version of the American dream.87

Cultural nationalism was a powerful organizing tool during the 1960s and 1970s. It helped build bridges across regions and across classes, and it emboldened activists through a narrative of collective triumph over oppressors. Demographic change and internal debate prompted an evolution, though. The prevailing emphasis on traditional gender roles was replaced by a more feminist- and queer-friendly politics. Mexican American communities were always diverse, but this diversity deepened in the last decades of the twentieth century. As it did, the ideology of chicanoismo gave way to a pan-Latino/a politics, or latinidad. This latinidad has sometimes been used as a marketing gimmick and evacuated of political content. But it has also been at times a vital tool in progressive politics.

The changes that have taken place within and around Chicano/a communities since the 1960s have undoubtedly brought obstacles to progressive organizing. For example, some 36 percent of native-born Latino/as oppose giving amnesty to unauthorized immigrants; the evidence is inconclusive, but this number likely correlates to rising class status for a subset of the population. Also, the massive neoliberal realignment of the economy of the last forty years has left most Chicanos/as (and everyone else) working harder for the same or less compensation, which makes it more difficult for individuals and communities to find time and energy for activism. Contrary to what movement elegies suggest, people are neither more nor less virtuous today than they were in the 1960s; they are, however, more beleaguered.

This is the bad news. But even amid skyrocketing income inequality and signs of collective alienation, the decades since the 1960s have also brought about meaningful opportunities and more than a handful of victories for progressives. The large-scale public rallies that dominate our collective memory of the 1960s have declined in number and effectiveness because of media segmentation and a heightened cynicism—much of it justified—toward staged political events, but in their place has emerged a stronger emphasis on the local. As I detail in the chapters that follow, progressive Chicano/a activists have gained ground since the 1970s on a number of pivotal issues by focusing their attention on the
grassroots, and often by working within institutions. Greater contact between Mexican Americans and Latinos/as from other Latin American and Caribbean backgrounds has blunted the rhetorical force of cultural nationalism, but it has also created effective political alliances on human rights and other issues, and it has made multilingualism a more central concern in Chicano/a politics. (Few problems are more urgent, yet more neglected, than the need for more and better language learning in the United States, including among Mexican Americans.) Even the slowly expanding Chicano/a middle class, attacked by hard-liners as a flock of vendidos (sell-outs), represents a tangible victory and a powerful political force. There are advantaged Latinos/as who try to strengthen their position as cultural citizens of the United States by differentiating themselves from the poor and brown “masses” so vilified in contemporary America. But there are others who ally themselves with the more vulnerable segments of the Latino/a population, both on principle and because of meaningful cultural bonds.

My aim in highlighting some of these post-1960s political developments is not to produce a triumphalist counternarrative to the movement elegy in which we are marching ever onward to glory. As historian Van Gosse rightly argues, this kind of naïve “neo-Whig history” has its own pitfalls. What I am trying to do is shake up our perception of the Chicano movement and emphasize its contemporary significance by telling a different story about history. We often imagine ourselves in a linear relationship to the past, always receding from or advancing toward a moment of perfection. In a world as complex and sadly unjust as the one we live in, the appeal of this narrative arc is considerable. But whatever its virtues, the dominant model of history as a straight line does not fully represent its back and forth, its unpredictability, and its many returns. Nor does this model capture well the irregular but definitive impact of social movements, which are, when it is all said and done, the engine of political change.

A Sense of the Past: Chicano Movement Art and Literature

During the last decade, activists and scholars have been reexamining the social, cultural, and political significance of the 1960s. There are many reasons why: the need to record oral histories as members of the baby boomer generation age and pass away; a desire to see the 1960s with the new eyes that only the passage of time can provide; and, above all, the desire to push back against the conservative extremism of the Bush
administration, an extremism driven to no small degree by a hatred of the progressive achievements of the 1960s. The result of this reexamination has been renewed attention to the period’s complexity, as well as a greater appreciation of the positive impact it had on the present. Young “third-wave” feminists are studying the 1960s and 1970s and collaborating with older leaders to protect reproductive rights and to extend educational and professional opportunities. Union leaders mindful of the damage that racism and infighting did to the labor movement during the postwar decades are organizing workers in the service sector and creating cross-ethnic and cross-industry coalitions. These activists often find inspiration for their efforts in the multiethnic civil rights movements of the 1960s.

The Chicano movement has been part of this recent reappraisal. During the 1980s and 1990s, most commentary on the Chicano movement focused on the ways in which the leading Chicano nationalist doctrines of the 1960s and 1970s had marginalized women and compelled queers to remain in the closet. Norma Alarcón, Sandra Cisneros, Cherríe Moraga, Chela Sandoval, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Angie Chabram-Dernersesian, Frederick Luis Aldama, Ana Castillo, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Sonia Saldívar-Hull, among others, called for a progressive politics more fully committed to gender and sexual equality and more attuned to differences within Chicano/a communities. Their work challenged the chauvinist forms of machismo that circulated in some versions of Chicano nationalism, and in doing so allowed the Chicano movement to evolve and to confront the Reagan-era assault on women’s rights and on gay and lesbian freedom. In the twenty-first century, scholars and activists continue to build on this feminist-led initiative, even as they revisit the mid-twentieth-century activism in search of lessons that might help confront a new wave of conservative attacks on civil rights and economic justice for all people. Recent commentary by scholars such as Jorge Mariscal, Richard T. Rodríguez, Dionne Espinoza, Ernesto Chávez, and Maylei Blackwell offers a complex and innovative view of the virtues and the flaws, the defeats, and the victories of Chicano/a activism during the 1960s and 1970s.81

The book you are reading is part of this effort to reconsider the nature and impact of the Chicano civil rights movement in the twenty-first century. Like the commentators named in the paragraph above, I aim to show how el movimiento Chicano continues to shape progressive politics long after its rumored demise in the 1970s. My particular focus, though, is on cultural politics, the arena of creative expression where personal
and collective values get articulated, and where emotion and ideas come together. I contend that by looking carefully at the art that emerged from the movement, we can see that it didn’t die at all. Changes in technology, politics, economy, and demography forced the Chicano movement to evolve, but the spirit of progressive populism and cultural commitment that guided the activism during the 1960s and 1970s survives still. The most important manifestation of this spirit resides in the people whose lives were changed by the movement. Sometimes the impact is direct and dramatic, as in the lifelong union organizing of Eliseo Medina, in the ongoing intellectual work of the feminist group Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (Women Active in Letters and Social Change, or MALCS), and in the outreach efforts of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project. More often the impact is indirect but no less real, as is the case with the innumerable students of all backgrounds who benefit from a richer and more accurate education in U.S. history and culture than their grandparents received, or with the undocumented migrants who find a broader base of support among native-born Latinos/as than before the Chicano movement.

These changes are sometimes hard to perceive. Contemporary U.S. society is maddeningly presentist in its orientation. In order to meet quarterly earnings expectations, the corporate-driven economy of the nation uses advertising to stimulate consumer demand for goods and services. The effect is a permanent obsession with the new: new products, new experiences, new technologies, new markets, and new trends. Because wages have been stagnant in recent decades, workers must work longer hours to satisfy their current needs, let alone fulfill their future desires. In this economy of artificial scarcity, consideration of the past becomes a luxury that too few can afford, except as sentimental escape or as commercialized nostalgia.

What is true of history is also true of art, which finds itself in a “best of times, worst of times” moment. Arguably, never before have humans been as immersed in forms of cultural production as they are now. Radio, television, film, the Internet, and magazine and book publishing are woven into the fabric of everyday life. Yet there are too few educational spaces, formal or informal, where people can learn how to think critically about the culture they consume, or how to produce and circulate their own content. Testing mandates have forced primary and secondary schools to focus on math and reading at the expense of media literacy, art, music, and social studies. The corporatizing of higher education has necessitated early specialization among undergraduates, which has fed
a severe and growing divide between the humanities and social sciences on one side, and business, mathematics, engineering, and the physical sciences on the other. One of many consequences of this latter phenomenon is that too few humanists know how to program computer languages or interpret scientific data, and too few engineers and scientists have the historical and philosophical wherewithal to evaluate the social, political, and moral costs of the technologies they create. Cultural spaces such as museums, art galleries, libraries, and theaters are in a position to bridge this gap, but they face their own set of challenges. Cuts in government funding have forced these institutions either to scale back services or to rely on the private sector. This leaves the public—and especially the working-class public—increasingly alienated from the official avenues of culture-making.

The 1960s and 1970s mark the period when social and economic realignment took hold, and movement activists were acutely aware of its significance. “Internal colonialism” was the Marxist phrase that many of them began to use to describe a political system that reinforced traditional military and police force with media innovations like television to reproduce European-style imperialism inside the borders of the United States. Following the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, they argued that cultural domination was being used as an alternative to direct violence. As an influential 1972 treatise phrased it, “dominant society has . . . waged a constant attack on Chicano values and other cultural traits through the schools, the media, and other institutions.” Activists were eager to reconnect with traditions and histories that had been denied them, and they were outraged at the culture industry’s refusal to recognize Mexican Americans as legitimate producers and consumers of art. When members of the avant-garde performance collective Asco approached the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in 1972 with an idea for an exhibit, the museum director dismissed them, saying that Chicanos/as made graffiti, not art. That night, Willie F. Herrón III, Gronk, and Harry Gamboa Jr. spray-painted their names on an exterior wall. The next morning, member Patssi Valdez completed the piece by posing for a furtive Gamboa photograph of what Chon Noriega describes as “the world’s largest work of Chicano art.” Since their art wasn’t welcome in the museum, Asco had decided to turn the entire museum into their art.

The guerrilla ethos behind *Spray Paint LACMA* (also known humorously as *Project Pie in De/Face*) animated Chicano/a cultural production
throughout the 1960s and 1970s and long after. Independent art institutions such as Self-Help Graphics in Los Angeles, the Galería de la Raza in San Francisco, the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, and the Mexican Fine Arts Museum (now the National Museum of Mexican Art) in Chicago began holding public workshops to give amateurs experience in silkscreen and other visual arts. Coffeehouses such as La Piranya in Los Angeles and cultural centers such as El Centro Chicano at the University of Southern California hosted poetry and fiction readings. At a time when elites in Los Angeles and New York were amassing unprecedented levels of control over mass media and popular culture, these venues provided opportunities for individuals of every background to experience the power and the pleasures of creative expression. They also helped cultivate new circuits of reception and influence. Chicano/a communities in the United States had fertile folk traditions that included altar making, décimas (a 10-line stanza poetry), local cuisine, carpa (tent) theater, and dance. But they had little access to education in the history and theory of art. In December 1969, Carmen Lomas Garza served as curator of an art exhibit at MAYO’s conference in Mission, Texas. While meetings took place upstairs, she stayed in the basement of the former monastery, guarding the artwork and discussing it with visitors. Informal lessons such as these, and more formal training in high school and college Chicano/a art classes, gave people new tools for appreciating their heritage and for putting art in the service of the common good.

The majority of those who participated in the Mexican American cultural activism of the 1960s and 1970s remained amateurs. They learned how to paint, dance, act, write, and sing, and they learned the history and interpretation of Chicano/a art. The movement inspired in them an enduring love of art, just as it instilled in many a lifelong commitment to public service. That was victory enough. Some movement artists, though, were able to make a career out of their creativity, including: Jesus Treviño, Moctezuma Esparza, and Sylvia Morales in film and television; Gronk, Malaquías Montoya, Yolanda Lopez, and Judy Baca in the visual arts; Rudolfo Anaya, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Norma Alarcón, Rolando Hinojosa, Ana Castillo, and Juan Felipe Herrera in literature; Luis Valdez in theater; and Mark Guerrero in music. The list goes on. Indeed, an argument could be made that the cultural sphere is where the Chicano movement has enjoyed its most obvious success. In 2010, LACMA hosted a retrospective exhibit on Asco, celebrating the spray-paint piece they
scrubbed off their building in 1972. The museum’s change of heart suggests just how far Chicano/a art has come.

Elegies for the Chicano movement only make sense inasmuch as they either ignore or downplay the Chicano/a cultural politics of the last thirty years. In his 1996 survey of Chicano/a studies at the twilight of the twentieth century, historian Ignacio M. García complained that the field had become “an academically anemic stepchild of higher education.” García placed much of the blame for this impasse on an unholy trinity of “lesbian-feminism, neo-Marxism, and a militant form of Latinoism” that, in his view, undid the militant “spirit” of the “Plan de Santa Barbara,” the 1969 manifesto that issued the first call for Chicano-studies programs. He was particularly pointed in his discussion of a “small but influential” group of “gender nationalists” who cause division among activists by “find[ing] the lurking ‘macho’ in every Chicano scholarly work.” Together with the middle-class scholars, male and female, who work absent any connection to the barrio, these radical feminists are, according to García, selling out the movement’s principled commitment to community service and ethnic empowerment.

Feminists do not spend their time hunting for gender bias in everything they read, but when they see it, they call it what it is. For a long time now, queer politics and feminism have been the main engines moving progressive Chicano/a politics forward. Scholar-activists such as Alicia Gaspar de Alba have used their writings and their classrooms to change how society thinks about Chicano/a history and U.S. history. Their work has influenced what kinds of policies get set in government and in civil society. Queers and feminists have also built effective community-based organizations such as San Antonio’s Fuerza Unida (United Force) and San Francisco’s Proyecto ContraSIDA por Vida (Project Anti-AIDS for Life, now called El/La para TransLatinas). Progressive activism of this sort helps women and men, gays and straights, but a philosophy impaired by sexism and homophobia prompts García to interpret it as a betrayal of the Chicano movement, rather than as its evolution.

Lorena Oropeza argues in a published rebuttal that García’s commentary does not reflect mainstream opinion within Chicano/a studies. This is fortunately true. There are many stories in circulation of activists who were once uncomfortable with homosexuality embracing gay and lesbian rights. The artist Barbara Carrasco, for example, was forced to confront the homophobia she inherited from her conservative Catholic education after César Chávez asked her to represent the UFW at a Pride parade in Hollywood in the 1970s. However, there is a second
dimension to García’s essay that deserves closer attention, as it speaks directly to more common anxieties about the role of the university—and with it, culture—in political change. García argues that the generation of scholars who followed the “Chicano” generation of the 1960s and 1970s has become complicit in a system of higher education that rewards intellectual conformity and careerism over community and engaged scholarship. “Since the end of the major Chicano activism of the 1960s and 1970s,” he writes, “scholarly ties to the community have declined as scholars concentrate on gaining tenure and promotion, or on building networks with politicians and educational lobby groups who are politically correct and who offer opportunities for professional enhancement.” García is right to critique the managerialism of the American academy. Administrators at colleges and universities across the country obsess over their rankings, all the while using PR buzzwords like “efficiency” and “flexibility” to cut salaries and scale back programs that fail to turn a profit, even successful ones.

He is wrong, though, in his estimation of contemporary Chicano/a scholarship. Amid ongoing resistance by bureaucrats and conservative politicians, intellectuals in Chicano/a studies (and the field of Latino/a studies more broadly) are carrying forward the principle found in the “Plan de Santa Barbara” that says “higher education must contribute to the formation of a complete man [sic] who truly values life and freedom.” In addition to producing innovative research across the humanities and the social sciences, scholars are organizing locally, nationally, and internationally on behalf of democratic values. MALCS has played an important role in drawing attention to the brutal patterns of violence against women in Ciudad Juárez. The journal Latino Studies regularly publishes a “Vivencias” section that engages grassroots struggles and publishes interviews with community leaders. The National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS) continues to mobilize against H.B. 2281, a bill signed in May 2010 that bans ethnic studies in Arizona on the false pretense of preventing hate speech. Most importantly, undergraduate students on campuses throughout the United States are involved in progressive politics, lately leading the fight for passage of a federal “Dream Act” that would grant legal residency to undocumented citizens who entered the country as children. As in the 1960s and 1970s, these young activists form a vanguard, rather than a majority. They have been effective, though. In 2011, students at the University of Maryland were pivotal in persuading the General Assembly to pass a state-level Dream Act.
García misinterprets the development of Chicano/a studies—and with it, Chicano/a politics—because of misplaced anxieties about the university. He argues that Chicano/a studies has lost its “relevance” to Mexican American communities, and he castigates certain unnamed “Chicano scholars” who have “been involved in an intellectual voyeurism that sounds progressive but has little relationship to . . . everyday problems.” Garcia’s impressive publication record makes clear his commitment to higher education, but as happens sometimes among activists, García seems more comfortable with revolution than with governance. A measure of unease about institutionalization is understandable, even healthy. As Stuart Hall once argued against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis, scholars should feel a “necessary modesty” about their scholarship. He insisted, though, on the “deadly seriousness” of intellectual work as a whole, including specialized terrains such as cultural studies and critical theory, because it can illuminate “certain things about the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death.” The university cannot be replaced as the location for this kind of cultural labor. Because higher education does not—or should not—revolve around the profit motive, students and researchers have more freedom than those in the private sector to take the long view on complex social and political issues. Also, because of the vitally important tenure system, members of the academy have more independence than politicians to ask hard questions and defend controversial arguments. Paradoxically, the university derives its highest value to society precisely through its studied detachment from other social spheres, including grassroots activism. While never absolute, this detachment is essential.

Indeed, the fact that the Chicano movement has experienced many of its most lasting successes in education and in the arena of cultural politics is not at all a disappointment. To be sure, culture should never become the exclusive focus of progressive activism. Social problems related to economics, transportation, migration, health, sexuality, criminal justice, and war are multidimensional and must be approached from a variety of angles. Yet to ignore the cultural aspects of these issues is to ignore their origins and, quite often, their real remedy. For example, opposition to undocumented immigration rests more on misconceptions about Latin American “backwardness” than it does on reasoned policy positions. The immigrant rights struggle—the most urgent area of contemporary Chicano/a politics—therefore requires both legislative and cultural strategies, which is to say there must be a reforming of the imagination before
there can be meaningful political reform, to say nothing of revolution. People must come to think of migrants differently, to think of America differently, to think of the world differently. Art is sometimes trivialized as flowery adornment to the real work of politics. But as Edward J. McCaughan puts it: “Artists . . . are attuned to important sensory and emotional data about the human experience that are often overlooked by activist policymakers and political strategists who place greater stock in readily observable, quantifiable phenomena. Deeply engaged in the symbolic, artists are often better able to fully appreciate the cultural processes by which people attribute meaning to social reality through representation.”

There can be no politics, no movement without art.

The following chapters turn to art and literature as a way of telling a different story about the Chicano movement and its place in contemporary politics. Each chapter focuses on a different cultural medium. Chapter 1 (“Antennas and Mimeograph Machines: Postwar Mass Media and the Chicano/a Street Press”) offers an unprecedented study of television’s reductive news coverage of the Chicano movement. Through careful use of archival evidence, I argue that network journalists at NBC and elsewhere interpreted Chicano/a activism as yet another racialized threat to an imaginary postwar consensus. Mindful of the culture industry’s growing power, activists responded with the creation of an independent Chicano/a media that used mimeograph machines, offset printing, and other available media technologies to circulate alternative images and narratives of Mexican America. This Chicano/a media took many different expressions, including film, television, radio, and other forms of communication. But the printed word was its most vital instrument because print was accessible, and because print allowed creator and audience to imagine themselves as part of a Chicano/a nation. The Chicano/a press became a foundation for the cultural politics of the Chicano movement, and an important inspiration and guide for contemporary Chicano/a politics.

Chapter 2 (“Green Aztlán: Environmentalism and the Chicano/a Visual Arts”) looks at the visual arts and their imagining of a distinctive Chicano/a environmentalism founded on the union of social justice and ecological protection. The historical period that some commentators identify (shortsightedly, in my view) as the peak of the Chicano movement was the same period in which environmentalism entered the political mainstream. The first Earth Day took place on April 22, 1970. Around this same moment, the UFW was organizing its boycott of non-union lettuce; activists were taking concrete steps toward the creation of
a Chicano/a third party; and Mexican American women were engaged in laying the foundation for independent feminist organizations. Like many of their generational peers, Chicanos/as worried about the damage that runaway consumerism was doing to ecosystems across the globe. They were wary, though, of the leading environmentalist organizations. Not only did groups such as the Sierra Club draw too sharp a distinction between the needs of human and nonhuman nature; they also frequently endorsed the popular “zero population growth” movement and its anti-immigrant agenda. Mexican Americans therefore began developing a distinctive Chicano/a environmentalism that united social and ecological justice. The visual arts became an important part of this initiative. As the portfolio of distinguished Chicana artist Santa Barraza makes apparent, painting and other visual media have been effective tools for pushing back against racism within the environmentalist movement, and also for inviting audiences to imagine economies that are healthier for all living things.

Chapter 3 (“Immigrant Actos: Citizenship and Performance in El Teatro Campesino”) studies the celebrated theater collective El Teatro Campesino and its staging of a “performative citizenship” that challenged the inhumanity of U.S. immigration law. The backdrop to this challenge was what historian Mae Ngai calls the “regime of immigration restriction” that began in the 1920s and continues into the twenty-first century.¹⁰⁵ For decades after the 1848 signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, movement between Mexico and the United States was largely unimpeded. Racial fears stoked by immigration from Asia and by World War I led to the establishment of the Border Patrol in 1924 and to the passage that same year of the Johnson-Reed Act, which created an unprecedented system of preferences that “drew a new ethnic and racial map based on new categories and hierarchies of difference.”¹⁰⁶ The liberal Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 put an end to the race-based quota system, but it did little to challenge the legal and cultural figuration of the nonwhite immigrant as a security threat. The improvised actos, or skits, of El Teatro Campesino enacted both for audiences and for performers an alternative form of belonging based not on papers—or papeles, as they are known among Spanish-speaking migrants—but on the power of creative labor. Though El Teatro Campesino has changed dramatically since its days as the creative arm of the farmworker movement, its vision of a more inclusive and more just citizenship still matters, particularly in view of the anti-immigrant politics that followed 9/11.
Chapter 4 ("After Words: Sandra Cisneros’s Caramelo and the Evolution of Chicano/a Cultural Politics") offers a close reading of Sandra Cisneros’s 2002 novel as evidence of the progress made in Chicano/a politics after the 1960s. Often the narrative of movement decline suggests that feminism was somehow to blame for the collapse of el movimiento Chicano. Feminists have occasionally reinforced this narrative by suggesting that Chicana feminism was a response to the failures of Chicano nationalism. *Caramelo* tells a different story. Through Celaya Reyes, the protagonist of the novel, Cisneros suggests that the progressive politics at the heart of the Chicano movement was and is threatened by sexism and homophobia, not by feminism. Her novel champions a different nationalism than the chauvinist version that too often dominated Chicano/a politics during the 1960s and 1970s. This feminist nationalism celebrates the pleasures of cultural heritage, but it refuses to make women the servants of tradition, or demand that gays and lesbians sacrifice their desires for the sake of the heterosexual family. And while Cisneros’s nationalist narrative is rooted in the histories of Mexicans north and south of the border, it branches out and becomes a transnational story that honors the many connections between Chicanos/as and other peoples, including the Arab communities that have been bombarded by racism and military violence in the wake of September 11. Celaya’s multilayered coming-of-age story figures the contemporary Chicano movement as a feminist struggle for a grassroots globalization built on the recognition of cultural, legal, and economic rights for all people.

There are many people who believe that the civil rights moment in American history is over. They think that racism was fixed once and for all with the legal reforms of the 1960s. Some even naively believe that the pendulum has swung the other way, leaving white people more vulnerable to discrimination than minorities. The reality is that many of the political and economic issues confronted by civil rights activists persist, and some, such as income inequality, have worsened. But progressive mobilizing has persisted as well. Taken together, the following chapters tell the story of a Chicano movement that has evolved since the 1960s to become a diverse and abiding presence in progressive politics. Like any story, it has protagonists and antagonists, tragedy and comedy, irony, plot twists, narrative tension, climaxes, and dénouements. Commentators from across the political spectrum have declared the Chicano movement and other social movements of the 1960s dead. Though they rage against the damage done, conservatives celebrate this death and hope it signals a return to an earlier world they misguidedl
see as safer and more decent. For their part, liberals and leftists alike mourn the passing of the 1960s as a utopian experiment cut short in its prime. Latinos/as—like African Americans—have experienced an overall decline in their collective welfare since the 1970s, and are measurably worse off than non-Hispanic whites, most of whom have also faced stagnant wages and rising costs. The 2009 American Community Survey indicated that the poverty rate for nonwhite Hispanics was 23.3 percent, compared to 25.5 percent for non-Hispanic blacks and 9.9 percent for non-Hispanic whites. Native-born Latino/a households earn an average of $44,000 per year, and the foreign-born earn $37,000. Non-Hispanic white households earn an average of $55,000. (Non-Hispanic blacks average an unconscionable $33,500 per year.) Approximately 31 percent of Hispanics are without health insurance, compared to 19.1 percent of non-Hispanic blacks and 10.9 percent of non-Hispanic whites. Homeownership rates for Hispanic households are also inequitable, at 48.1 percent compared to 44.7 percent for non-Hispanic blacks and 72.9 percent for non-Hispanic whites. Things have improved over the last several decades for the members of a relatively small Latino/a middle and upper class, many of whom identify as white: the percentage of Latino/a households earning more than $75,000 annually (in 2005 dollars adjusted for inflation) went from 10.2 percent in 1980 to 19.4 percent in 2005. However, for many Latinos/as—especially those who are first-generation, Spanish-speaking, and brown- or black-skinned—things are getting worse, not better.

This is the bad news. The good news is that the progressive social movements that set the political agenda during 1960s have continued their fight in the decades since. Their accomplishments are impressive, particularly in the realm of social values. Gays and lesbians have won wider political and legal recognition for their communities. Their struggle against a powerful culture of shame around sexuality benefits heterosexuals as well. Feminists have expanded the professional and personal choices available to women through their support for affirmative action and through education. They have also protected the right to abortion established in *Roe v. Wade*, despite well-funded conservative opposition to women’s autonomy. The civil rights struggle—which includes the Chicano movement—put an end to formal segregation and led to increasing diversity throughout public and private institutions. Environmentalism prompted reform of the government’s management of ecological resources, and it also inspired a growing initiative in the public sphere toward more sustainable models of consumption.
Conservatives have mobilized effectively during the past several decades. They are fond of portraying their movement as a reaction to the imagined excesses of 1960s liberalism, but it is in fact merely an extension of the hidebound politics of Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon. When Republicans have won at the state or national level—and they have won plenty—it has often been by framing the progressive campaigns of the mid-twentieth century as destructive, ineffective, or, perhaps worse, irrelevant. The frame is as ruinous as it is wrong. The 1960s didn’t make everything better. The skepticism toward government created by Water-gate and by the lies surrounding Vietnam has increased voter apathy and led to disinvestment in public programs. Infighting among progressive organizations crippled many of them before they could develop and sustain a critique of the neoliberal economic policies that have enriched a few and harmed so many. In the absence of any credible alternative to corporate capitalism, income inequality has soared. But through all of this, Chicano/a activists have joined with progressive allies to imagine better futures. Art has been an indispensable tool, in the 1960s and in the decades since.