

## ***Con Che?*** **The Specter of Communism in the 1968 Chicano Blowouts**

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The influence of communist politics is underemphasized in the historical record of the 1968 Chicano Blowouts. Much like news media at the time, official histories mischaracterize the Blowouts as having been either completely spontaneous or thoroughly entrenched in the politics of representation and reform. Drawing on archival documents, oral histories, and critical research, this study uncovers the communist presence in the movement and demonstrates how activists of the period navigated this presence amid virulent Cold War anticommunism. Using the “specter of communism” as a methodological heuristic, we excavate the margins of the archive: overlooked pamphlets, moments in oral histories, and personal accounts and interviews. We show how Marxist materialist analysis can be brought to bear on archival gaps and silences, and thereby highlight the liberatory potential of activist archival research.

*Keywords: archive, Chicano Blowouts, Cold War, communism, New Left, repression, social movements, specter*

In a letter dated February 25, 1970, a majority of the female members of the Brown Berets tendered their resignations from the organization. Citing grievances of patriarchal exclusion and oppression within the radical Chicano group, the letter’s authors—who would later form the splinter group Las Adelitas de Aztlán—signed off “Con Che,” referring to Argentina-born Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara (Korda, 1960).<sup>2</sup> At first

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Date submitted: 2021-06-02

<sup>1</sup> For their support of this project, very warm thank-yous are owed to Dolores Delgado Bernal, Virginia Espino, Eddie Bonilla, Brenda Lara, Abraham Encinas, and Clare O’Connor.

<sup>2</sup> Guevara’s assassination in 1967 catapulted him to the status of revolutionary martyr and global symbol of Third World liberation. A photo of Guevara, Guerrillero Heroico, was iconized immediately and appeared in protests in Milan 1967, Paris 1968, and Ireland before landing in the hands of Chicanos in the U.S. Southwest. Guevara became symbolic of a New Left ethos that was characterized by a break from previous communist organizational forms, instead favoring emerging models such as the Black Panther Party (BPP).

glance, the phrase “Con Che” appears to signal a sympathetic identification with the communist politics of the Cuban revolution. On this basis, one might reasonably assume that the Brown Berets, or at least Las Adelitas, located themselves within the communist tradition. Yet in an oral history taken by Mario Garcia, Gloria Arellanes, one of the letter’s key architects, espoused a somewhat tepid relationship with Che, explaining that the Berets “weren’t a Marxist group . . . . We didn’t embrace Che as a Marxist but as a revolutionary and, in particular, a Latin American revolutionary” (Garcia, 2015, p. 140). Specifically, Arellanes noted that she stayed away from too much theory, a dimension of communist praxis that she believed led to organizers’ political estrangement. “You may alienate yourself and your thinking from the people in the street and thereby fail to communicate” (Garcia, 2015, p. 140). Opting for “a more practical approach to revolution,” Arellanes’s organizing practice was grounded in community work (Garcia, 2015, p. 140).

Arellanes’s skepticism did not prevent her from collaborating with avowed communists, provided they shared a commitment to practicality (Garcia, 2015, p. 140). Accordingly, she served on the Chicano Moratorium Committee and worked closely with members of the Socialist Workers Party (Garcia, 2015, pp. 139–140). Meanwhile, however, the Berets’s official leadership took a more aggressively anti-Marxist tack. Influenced by Cold War ideals, Brown Beret Prime Minister David Sanchez reputedly held “a deep fear of communism” (Chavez, 2002, p. 50) and stoked anti-Marxist fears among Beret members, even allegedly burning Marxist literature. In 1968, the year after the Berets were founded in Los Angeles, the Brown Berets Minister of Public Relations Carlos Montes conveyed this attitude succinctly when he responded to the city’s revolutionary momentum by telling the *Los Angeles Times*, “Che doesn’t mean a thing to the guy in the street” (Torgerson, 1968).

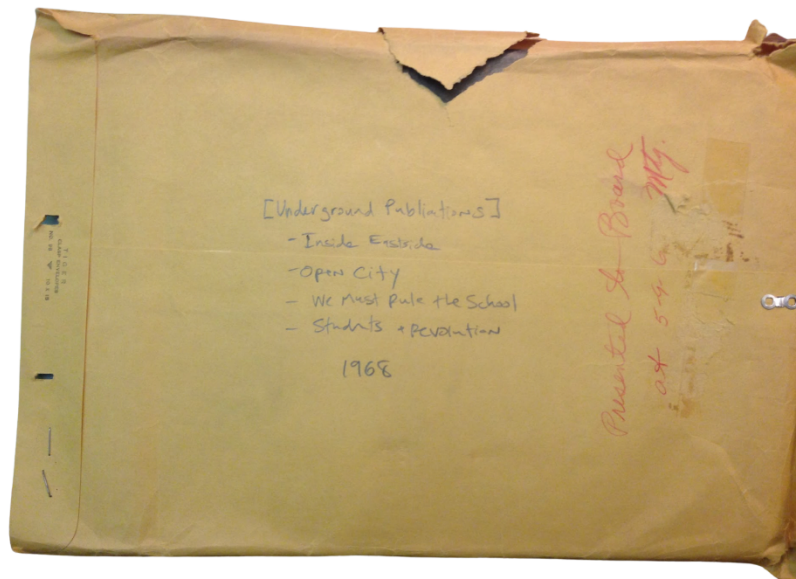
This remark sits awkwardly against the backdrop of 1968, which in Los Angeles saw not only the emergence of the city’s Black Panther Party chapter but also the rapid expansion of a politically diverse Chicano nationalist movement. Among the strongest forces in this nascent movement, for instance, was the Centro de Accion, an organization founded in 1968 by Bert Corona and Chole Alatorre and dedicated to the radical vision of organizing undocumented immigrant workers in the face of union neglect (Pulido, 2006, pp. 117). More famously, 1968 birthed the “Chicano Blowouts,”<sup>3</sup> a climactic wave of student-led protests that erupted in Los Angeles’ Eastside. These protests have been extensively documented both by scholars (Garcia, 2014; Muñoz, 2007) and in other media, including the HBO film *Walkout* (Esparza & Katz, 2006). In this article, we examine the complicated role of communist politics in the Chicano movement of this period by focusing on the months following the Blowouts, when local law enforcement agencies found common cause with the FBI to undertake a repression campaign that eventually tried 13 Chicano leaders in a grand jury. Specifically, we analyze this backlash to show how Cold War hegemony informed the movement’s varied internal political tendencies—liberal, cultural nationalist, and revolutionary nationalist alike—and how anticommunism has distorted the historical record of this crucial period of struggle.

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Like the BPP, the Berets shared Che’s revolutionary aesthetic of donning military fatigues, which has exacerbated historical confusion about their political sympathies.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, we use the terms “Blowouts” and “walkouts” interchangeably. Often, these strikes are referred to as the East Los Angeles walkouts or the Chicano Blowouts. Notably, the students at Lincoln High School and others shouted “Blow Out” through the halls as they exited classrooms in March of 1968.

This project began in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) archive, where, in 2015, we found ourselves sorting through material in anticipation of the 50th anniversary of the Blowouts. When we unearthed a tattered envelope with the words "Underground Publications" handwritten on its front, we were unaware that its contents would lead us to reevaluate much of what we had learned about this historic flash point. Inside were several pamphlets published and distributed by the New Communist group Progressive Labor Party, along with concerned letters submitted in conjunction with a series of 1968 LAUSD public hearings. It seemed that we had exhumed physical evidence of a communist presence that had been obscured, distorted, and in many cases erased from the dominant narrative of the 1968 Chicano Blowouts. But how had this material come to be buried? This question led us quickly to the McCarthyites of the era, whose fear had inspired vicious repression of the newly radicalized Brown menace. Adopting the "specter of communism" as a heuristic, we delved deeper into the general archive of the 1968 Blowouts. This essay presents our findings, starting with an analysis of LAUSD archive materials. Through close readings of the aforementioned pamphlets and multiple letters from concerned community members, we show just how contentious Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education meetings became during the Blowouts. Indeed, as community members, activists, and naysayers presented their grievances, board meetings' records became a repository for speeches, letters, and other forms of evidentiary material about the protests. In addition to the materials that confirm communist participation in the protests, these other materials verify the extent of communist influence, largely through recourse to what we recognize as the capacious "outside agitator" myth, a repressive propaganda tactic still used often for demarcating and containing political radicalism.



**Figure 1. Manila envelope from UCLA Special Collections, LAUSD Board of Education (López, 2014).**

We then turn our attention to an array of interviews and historical monographs, through which we reconsider the histories of the movement and its significant figures. By examining accounts of the Brown Berets's political conflicts and revisiting the roles of prominent figures such as high school teacher Sal Castro,

for example, we theorize that some figures who disavowed or distanced themselves from communism in this period did so as a fugitive practice under hostile organizing conditions. Our last section further meditates on method and the metaphor of the specter, extending contemporary scholarship about how to excavate memories that for reasons of domination have been left out of the historical record. In these reflections, we return to Las Adelitas, who remind us that it is in part because of their systematic exclusion that women have organized themselves according to collective principles that can easily go unrecognized within the conventions of historical recording.

### **A Specter Stands Trial at the Los Angeles Unified School District**

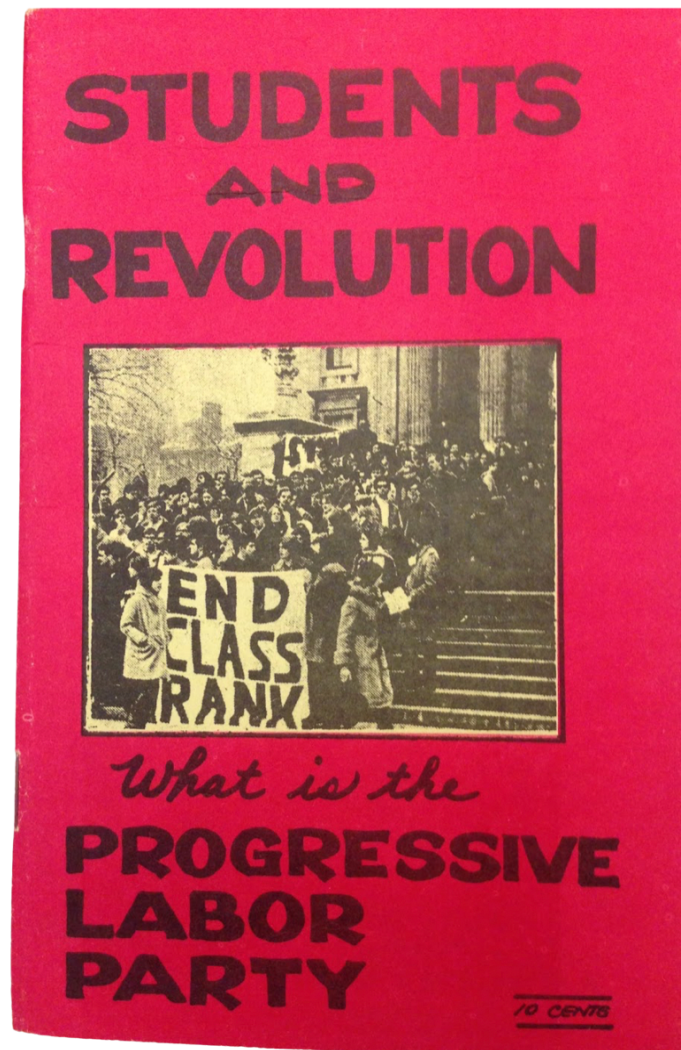
On March 5, 1968, students at Lincoln High School walked out. The walkouts would spread like wildfire throughout Los Angeles's primarily Mexican American and Chicana/o schools. Eventually referred to as the "Chicano Blowouts," the actions appeared to have been provoked by the censorship of a school play at Lincoln High School. However, in the months leading up to the Blowouts, an elaborate network of high school student leaders, teachers, college students, and organizations like the Brown Berets had been laying the groundwork to use nonviolent civil disobedience to confront the second-class conditions of Chicano students. Though seemingly spontaneous, many who participated in the actions had long-standing grievances over unjust conditions like the banning of the Spanish language, rampant corporal punishment, and overcrowding (Davis & Wiener, 2020, pp. 366–367).

The Blowouts initiated a much-needed discussion of Los Angeles' deeply segregated educational system, and the LAUSD School Board meetings became primary arenas for debate. Housed at the University of California (Los Angeles Special Collections), the LAUSD School Board papers offer a glimpse into the public discourse in the months after the Blowouts. These papers (1968) include letters by teachers, lawyers, and concerned members of the public dated between March and May 1968, collated in several archival folders labeled, simply, "student unrest." Though varied in tone and emphasis, the letters as a whole serve as an index of the anticommunist and ethnically charged discourse.

In a letter dated May 9, 1968, a Garfield High School parent identified as Mrs. Enrique Ortega wrote to the LAUSD to condemn the walkouts. "Madame President, Members of the Board, and Superintendent Crowther," Ortega wrote. Specifically citing the common 1960s strategy of containing student antiwar protest through strictly designated "protest areas," she insisted: "I AM one of the majority that opposes the so-called Free Speech Area" (E. Ortega, personal communication, May 9, 1968). As part of her impassioned plea to the school board to listen to what she deemed the "98% majority" over and against the "minority 2% that walked out at Garfield High School," Ortega advocated fences around the campus to prevent "couples" from sneaking in at night and "using the grounds for a motel" while leaving their "traces" along with "beer cans and wine bottles" (E. Ortega, personal communication, May 9, 1968). She defended the school's Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program, which the walkouts sought to abolish, proclaiming that the "discipline [students] receive through ROTC is of much value" and "a quality lacking in many" of the walkout participants (E. Ortega, personal communication, May 9, 1968). Defending the Garfield Parent-Teacher Association and disparaging the Office of Urban Affairs commissioner for his support of the Garfield walkouts, she emphasizes as her target "the flexibility and freedom of distribution of underground newspapers [that are] inflammatory in content, conducive to lawlessness, encouraging of disobedience,

riots, anarchy, and racism" (E. Ortega, personal communication, May 9, 1968). Indeed, her tirade served primarily as an attack on student production and dispersal of alternative media that reflected non-White and anticapitalist perspectives. "Madame President, Members of the Board, and Superintendent Crowther," the letter repeats rhetorically, "I would also like to present this booklet to you titled 'Students and Revolution'" (E. Ortega, personal communication, May 9, 1968).

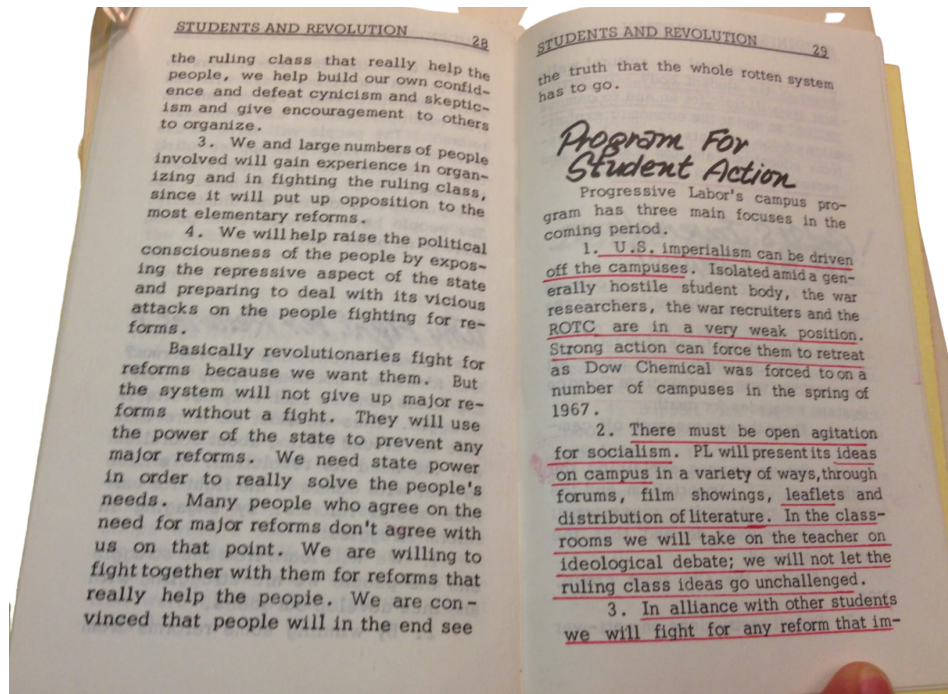
*Students and Revolution* was printed and distributed at the walkouts by the Progressive Labor Party, a Marxist-Leninist party that splintered from the U.S. Communist Party (CPUSA) in 1962. The red pocket-sized pamphlet features photographs of campus activism from across the country. Written in clear, straightforward prose, it outwardly calls for socialist revolution and underscores the importance of party building: "We have to be able to apply international revolutionary experience and Marxist-Leninist revolutionary theory to the concrete conditions of the United States," it reads (Progressive Labor Party, p. 23). Through this 36-page underground publication, the organization disseminated basic political education, such as defining communist parties and analyzing the function of schooling under capitalism. Referring to schools as imperialist "factories" intended to train ruling-class administrators, the pamphlet addressed such topics as "Why Fight for Reforms?" (p. 25) and "What Is the Role of Liberalism?" (p. 24), and included a section about the militarization of schools and function of ROTC programs. With astute clarity, its authors contextualized education under capitalism in opposition to the liberal politics of upward mobility and civility that animated Ortega's condemnatory letter. Mrs. Ortega's own copy of the pamphlet, which she obtained because copies had been distributed at the walkouts by avowed members of New Left organizations, includes underlining in red pen, marginalia, and notes meant to corroborate her assertion that many student demands directly mirrored the pamphlet's communist analysis.



**Figure 3. Front cover of the Progressive Labor Party's pamphlet *Students and Revolution* (López, 2014).**

Based on Ortega's underlining, she was particularly concerned with how the pamphlet echoed student calls for student/worker alliances and an overhaul of student governments, particularly the demand to "abolish" ROTC. An October 1968 article published by Phi Delta Kappa, a professional organization for educators, is one of the few articles of the period to catalog all the known student demands and confirms that "Reallocation of ROTC funds" was indeed among them (Harrington, 1968, p. 76). The article, which sought to provide an objective analysis of the Blowouts for the benefit of public school teachers and administrators nationally, also cited student demands for reduced class sizes, bilingual education, and the inclusion of Mexican American history—each additionally corroborated by official statements brought to the school board by the Educational

Issues Committee and the Garfield Teachers of Mexican American descent.<sup>4</sup> Taken together, the Phi Delta Kappa article and Ortega's letter lent credence to the interpretation that student demands coincided significantly with the politics of the "Students and Revolution" pamphlet. Abolishing the ROTC, after all, is an anti-imperialist aim that disavows liberal visions of an inclusive, diverse military.



**Figure 4. Ortega's underlining and emphasis from Students and Revolution (López, 2014).**

Against the perceived threat of underground publications that were circulating unruly and dangerous ideas, Ortega's letter called for the board to "exercise control over the distribution of publications that not only distort but publish outright lies" (E. Ortega, personal communication, May 9, 1968). She deemed the documents threats to civil society—on the basis that they distort the truth or, worse, inspire riots and anarchism—and made a call for "control" consistent with a broader effort to justify the machinations of repressive state protocols, and hers was one of multiple letters now held in the LAUSD archive that chastised the school board for its failure to control and repress the students. This sentiment aligned closely with the approach adopted by the California superintendent, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), and the district attorney. Max Rafferty, California's superintendent, who would go on to campaign for George Wallace in Alabama, called on the board to uphold a state law that decreed: "Under no circumstances is it ever justified for students to leave classes" (Davis & Wiener, 2020, p. 392). On this basis, Rafferty licensed and encouraged repression of the Blowouts.

<sup>4</sup> Two such statements are preserved in the "Student Unrest" section of the LAUSD archive.

Among the letters that called for such control, many also included ethnic and racial coding. John Childress, vice principal of Lincoln High School, for instance, called on the board to contain the student protests by linking them to the left-wing politics of Latin America. Writing that the “tactics employed by this ‘junta’ are not those of reasonable people,” Childress insisted that students participating in the Blowouts had “taken on the uniform of Fidel Castro and exhibit[ed] open contempt for the flag” (J. Childress, personal communication, 1968). The coded language of “junta,” a Spanish word for military dictatorship, the reference to Fidel Castro, and the condemnation of students’ “contempt for the flag” amount to xenophobic rhetoric. Childress further insisted that what has been called “student unrest” should more rightfully be called “chaos” and “anarchy.” He dismissed the idea that the demonstrations developed “organically,” instead suggesting the careful planning and influence of “far-reaching” organizers. His reference to anarchism, especially to far-reaching organizers, coincided with his scorn of foreignness and crucially bolstered his fearmongering about the threat of “outsiders”—a designation used at the time to delegitimize many radicals, including Martin Luther King Jr.

The “outside agitator” trope was a central rhetorical tool of the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), which between 1956 and 1971 had a mandate to infiltrate, surveil, and discredit so-called “subversive” elements in society, including organizations and individuals involved in civil rights, the New Left, the Communist Party, and antiwar and feminist causes. Under the leadership of J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI developed its rhetorical repertoire primarily by seeking to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize” (Blackstock, 1975, p. 30) the Black-led civil rights movement. King was a key target, often described as an “outside agitator” and vilified on this basis. This rhetorical trope was particularly effective at repressing civil rights activists because it implied that demands for justice were unfounded; racist Southerners propagated the idea that local Black people were content and merely being stirred up by rabble-rousing outsiders (Houlihan, 2020). King’s high-profile case also reveals how accusations of outside agitation were bound up with red-baiting, the practice of discrediting individuals and destroying their reputations by associating them with communism.<sup>5</sup>

The discursive association between “outside agitation” and communism animated one of the other letters in the LAUSD archive, dated March 18, in which Mrs. James O’Connor unreservedly linked the Blowouts to the New Left. Suggesting a slippery slope, O’Connor wrote: “Increasingly, anarchists and activists in the self-styled ‘NEW LEFT’ are being permitted to achieve symbolic victories in their confrontation with lawful authorities” (J. O’Connor, personal communication, March 18, 1968). Like Childress, O’Connor suggested the relevance of students’ race through a peculiar use of Spanish, recalling that she “knew the time was getting close for the Viva La Revolution” when she witnessed students taking over the sports arena. If a revolution is in order, O’Connor concluded, aligning herself with the respectability politics of liberal reformism, it should be “a revolution at the ballot box” (J. O’Connor, personal communication, March 18, 1968).

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<sup>5</sup> Billboards went up throughout the South, for instance, depicting King in attendance at the integrationist Highlander Folk School, which was deemed a “communist training school” (Demby & Meraji, 2020). The state and racist vigilantes used such practices to sow discord and distrust and to dictate reactionary activist protocols among liberals and conservatives alike (vote, call your congressman, organize in a civil fashion, etc.).



Both Childress and O'Connor recycled older tropes linking Latinx subjects to communism. In their letters, we discern echoes of the anticommunist hysteria that influenced policies prohibiting and controlling immigration from Mexico following the Mexican Revolution. This panic continued into 1950s McCarthyism, which targeted Mexican American, Mexican, and Central American leftists for deportation under statutes like the McCarran-Walter Act and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)—leftists such as the Guatemalan activist Luisa Moreno and *Salt of the Earth* actress Rosaura Revueltas. With their allusions to Latin America and use of Spanish revolutionary phrases, Childress and O'Connor specifically shored up Cold War fears about the threat of communism. Their letters remind us that repressive rhetorical tools, like the "outside agitator" trope, can be powerful discursive technologies. Such phrases police the bounds of permissibility by casting out certain bodies, activities, and ideas, dictating proper "democratic" practices and protocols (e.g., voting rather than protesting), and validating only certain modes of media and knowledge production (e.g., mainstream news, not underground publications).

In late 1960s Los Angeles, the notion of outside agitation resonated with law enforcement, especially given the prevailing police attitudes and policies regarding Black civil rights, Black Power, and other dissident groups. Between 1966 and 1970, the LAPD cycled through three different explicitly anticommunist police chiefs, from William H. Parker (from 1950 until his sudden death in 1966) to Tom Reddin (from 1967 to 1969) and then Ed M. Davis (from 1969 to 1978). In Parker's view, "protests in minority communities stemmed not from local grievances but from world communism" (Haney-López, 2003, p. 148). For Reddin, the "Negro movement . . . is just as subversive as the past communist movement." Davis, who took office in 1969, the year following the Chicano Blowouts, insinuated that communist infiltrators were "Negroes, Mexicans, and homosexuals—any dissent group," labeled Chicanos (including the Brown Berets) as "avowedly communist-Marxist," and warned that Mexican youths were being driven toward Bolshevism by so-called "swimming pool communists" (Haney-López, 2003, p. 148). But it was District Attorney Evelle Younger—who years prior testified in the HUAC hearing for the Watts uprisings and had mobilized the California Criminal Syndicalism Act against Black Progressive Labor Party organizer John Harris—who would instrumentalize the grand jury against the perceived Chicano leadership following the walkouts (Davis & Wiener, 2020, pp. 232–392).

### **Grand Jury Exorcism, or Disavowing the "Spook"**

On March 4, 1968, the day after the first walkouts, Hoover's FBI administration issued a memo urging local law enforcement agencies to prioritize the infiltration of Chicano organizations. Subsequently, the law enforcement campaign of repression began against the menace dubbed simply "Brown Power," presumably awakened by the Chicano Blowouts. The memo warned of:

a recent rise in the formation of various Mexican American organizations mostly throughout the Southwestern part of the United States," hypothesizing that "they all originate with the purpose of bettering the educational, economic, and general stature of the Mexican Americans (Muñoz, 2007, pp. 204–205).

By June, a group of individuals identified as movement leaders, quickly dubbed the Eastside 13, found themselves indicted on grand jury charges of conspiracy to "willfully disturb the peace" (Muñoz, 2007, p. 84). Among them were several walkout leaders, including Lincoln High School teacher Sal Castro, United

Mexican American Students President Carlos Muñoz, and Brown Berets David Sanchez and Carlos Montes. Facing the same charges but with lower public profiles were Elizer Risco, Patricio Sanchez, Ralph Ramirez, Richard Vigil, Gilberto C. Olmeda, Joe Razo, and Henry Gomez.

The teacher who helped lead the walkouts, Sal Castro, represented the Mexican American middle-class disillusionment with the Democratic Party. Castro had been involved in the Democratic Party's "Viva Kennedy" campaign but became jaded with its politics, turning to Mexican American civil rights organizations. He envisioned a movement that could use nonviolent tactics, like the walkout, to combat structural racism and remove barriers to class mobility. Castro, who organized with Mexican American professionals like social workers and teachers in middle-class organizations, recruited many of the students who would become the leadership of the Blowouts as part of his goal to recruit "bright, clean-cut high school students" for Camp Hess Kramer, a camp that promoted "citizenship training" and "progress through education" (Muñoz, 2007, p. 58).

Alongside the middle-class professionals represented by Castro were college and university students who shared many of the values and strategic ideas of the Mexican American generation. Many of these students were by then organized under the banner United Mexican American Students (UMAS), an organization that had sharpened its teeth supporting Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers grape boycott and Reies López Tijerina's land grant movement. UMAS members thus naturally gravitated toward the nonviolent civil disobedience of the walkouts that were breaking out in their backyard (Muñoz, 2007, p. 73). While their initial primary stated goal was to support educational advancement, their participation and experience of the walkouts shifted their overall political trajectory. UMAS members radicalized and began to see themselves as the new Chicano student movement's vanguard (Muñoz, 2007, p. 83).

The FBI memo recognized this political evolution as it was occurring and explicitly cautioned of the likelihood—indeed, the probability—of greater radicalization as the Chicano movement inevitably encountered far-left tendencies in the revolutionary, global ecosystem of the late 1960s.

Experience has shown that these organizations do become more militant and aggressive as time goes on. Certain . . . organizations are coming under communist influence and are holding classes in Marxist-Leninist ideology. Others . . . are arming themselves and holding classes on weaponry. Others have tried to align themselves or cooperate in activities of the Black Panther Party . . . . Your investigation of the UMAS should be penetrative and receive aggressive attention (as cited in Muñoz, 2007, pp. 204–205).

In this respect, Cold War repression aligned with the facts on the ground. The FBI accurately observed both a growing disillusionment with the liberal establishment and a swell of social movements pursuing political goals that exceeded liberal calls for racial inclusion. The memo correctly pointed to concrete New Left attempts (particularly within formations such as the Marxist-Leninist Progressive Labor Party, the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, and the Communist Party) to locate the situation of Chicanos within a structural critique of capitalism.

The FBI was mistaken, however, in identifying UMAS as the organization likely to develop into the Chicano version of the Black Panther Party. Instead, it was the Brown Berets that emerged and organized along this trajectory. Originally called Young Chicanos for Community Action, the Brown Berets would formally break with the liberalism of the Mexican American generation years before the Blowouts. The Berets refused to use the label "Mexican American" for themselves, reserving it for "sellouts" and instead favoring the term Chicano (Espino, 2013). At *La Piranya* in East Los Angeles, a cultural center and café that served as the Brown Berets headquarters in the late 1960s, the Berets would host and socialize with Reises Tijerina, Chicano poet Corky Gonzales of the Crusade for Justice, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee members Jamil Al-Amin (formerly known as H. Rap Brown) and Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael), and Maulana Karenga (formerly known as Ron Karenga) of the U.S. Organization (Haney-López, 2003, p. 162). Through *La Piranya*, the Berets played host to various tendencies in the broader radical social movement ecology and drew influence from Black cultural nationalist slogans like "Black Power."

Yet *La Piranya* represented just one of many influences on the Berets's political education. Carlos Montes and fellow Beret Ralph Ramirez protested in Washington, DC, with Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign but, as Gloria Arellanes recalls, Montes and another Beret, Raul Vega, also often took concepts from Marxist thinkers like Ho Chi Minh and Angela Davis (Haney-López, 2003, p. 162). Indeed, oral histories of the Berets suggest that the organization was characterized by acute internal political antagonisms. For instance, Arellanes does not remember anyone "saying that they were Marxists, much less communists . . . I think we had been affected by the anti-Marxism of the Cold War and the fear of communism" (Garcia, 2015, p. 139). Given her vague description of this dynamic, it is possible that Arellanes may have been shielded from some of the political conflicts internal to the Berets. In a 1978 oral history, for instance, Carlos Muñoz states unequivocally that "the Berets purged Maoists, Trotskyites, and the Communist Party because the ideals of those groups were not a 'Chicano thing'" (Bonilla, 2019, p. 60, recalling a January 1968 oral history with Gerald Rosen).

According to Cruz Olmeda Becerra, the Blowouts exacerbated tensions between two tendencies within the Berets: one represented by David Sanchez and Carlos Montes, and the other by Olmeda Becerra himself and several other cofounders of the organization (Bonilla, 2019, pp. 59–63). During the Blowouts, the Berets saw their purpose as policing the police, and they took the brunt of the beatings by LAPD, positioning themselves in middle schools and high schools to tear down fences and barricades and usher youths into the streets (Flores, 2012, p. 93). Although unified in these tactics, members differed in their analyses and motivations. David Sanchez held staunch anticommunist beliefs verging on paranoia about political persecution. As a youth, he had been trained within the liberal and Catholic establishment, first serving as chair of the Mayor's Youth Advisory Council in Los Angeles and later under the mentorship of Father John Luce of the Church of the Epiphany. Olmeda Becerra, meanwhile, carried a copy of Mao Tse-Tung's *Little Red Book*, criticized the group's narrow cultural nationalism, and hoped to steer the Berets into a Maoist-style mass organization armed to serve the people. When differences between these tendencies became irreconcilable, Olmeda Becerra and six others (a total of seven of the nine founders of the Brown Berets) left to form a short-lived Maoist group called La Junta (Bonilla, 2019, p. 60). Olmeda Becerra would go on to found the August 29th Movement, a Marxist-Leninist group whose position paper on the Chicano National Question articulated one of the most sophisticated analyses of the relationship between Chicanos and capitalism to date.

Like the grassroots backlash against the Blowouts within the LAUSD, much of what we know about these internal tensions within the Berets comes from the margins of the archive—particularly from Virginia Espino’s oral history of Olmeda Becerra and Eddie Bonilla’s 2019 dissertation about communists of color in the Cold War context. There are several explanations for the marginality of these historical details—above all, the suppression of communist history in U.S. scholarly and journalistic institutions. When revisiting the Cold War, it is necessary to consider how the lived realities of anticommunist persecution shaped the story. Given the political antagonisms within the Berets, for instance, the Eastside 13’s public refutations of communism become unsettling. We arrive at the messy question of how to interpret these refutations and must assess how these targeted leaders were inducted into the state project of intensifying communist fugitivity, and perhaps compelled toward fugitive practices themselves.

The Eastside 13’s significance as the central figures of the Blowouts and the Chicano movement in 1968 has meant that their accounts loom large in the way historians construct the politics of the walkouts. Their influence overwhelmingly informs our collective memory of the events. “None of the ‘LA Thirteen’ were actually communists or members of ‘subversive organizations’” (Muñoz, 2007, p. 84), writes Carlos Muñoz Jr., president of UMAS during the Blowouts. We do not dispute the claim that none of the 13 were communists. However, we also do not take for granted that these men—who were facing grand jury charges and being vilified in the media and constantly harassed by police—did not feel compelled to disavow communism *despite* the political negotiations and ambiguities animating their nascent movement on this very question.

In *Blowout!* (2011), perhaps the most cited text about the walkouts, Sal Castro recalls speaking at a gathering sponsored by *People’s World*, the West Coast newspaper of the Communist Party. He notes that he “didn’t know who or what they were” and “didn’t know they were reds,” but he later started receiving copies of the newspaper at his home. Castro describes how authorities wielded his subscription to *People’s World* against him in an attempt to strip his teaching credential. Recounting a similar experience in *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement* (2007), Muñoz, a Vietnam War veteran, describes attending California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA), on the GI Bill. A graduate student of political science, Muñoz had been assigned to write a research paper about international communism—ironically, in a seminar run by an anticommunist professor. During a raid of Muñoz’s home, he recalls, “one of the deputies found books by Karl Marx, VI Lenin, and Leon Trotsky on my kitchen table, [and] he shouted, ‘We’ve got the goods on him!’” (Muñoz, 2007, p. 2). Muñoz, however, maintains that he was “far from being a communist” (Muñoz, 2007, p. 2). Such was the intensity of anticommunist scrutiny and manipulation at the time.

At the same time, leaders’ public remarks suggest considerable intramovement confusion about communism and are in some cases objectionable in their alignment with anticommunist power against their immediate comrades on the ground. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* from the period recalls how the Brown Berets—who had gleaned their aesthetics and slogans from the Maoist Black Panther Party and the Third World left—were “accused of inciting high school students to riot, using narcotics, and being communists.” Carlos Montes, then minister of public relations for the Berets, replied, “Communism? That’s a White thing” (Torgerson, 1968, p. 37). Even when interpreted generously as an outcome of shortsightedness, the error of this claim is perplexing. Even more telling is a quote from Sal Castro, in which he invokes the prevailing language of the Cold War boogeyman: “Many students were getting *spooked* by the Che Guevara look of the Berets and felt that too many students were not walking out because of that.

I promised to speak to the Berets about this" (Garcia, 2014, p. 196; emphasis added). Here, the word "spook" carries with it a host of associations, projecting communism as the purview of spies and "outside agitators" and illuminating the degree to which anticommunist paranoia took hold among many of the walkout organizers, who might otherwise have confronted rather than accommodated that paranoia.

### **Conclusion: The Unfinished Business of Friendly Ghosts**

Sociologist Avery Gordon reminds us that ghosts haunt scholars, often "appear[ing] when the trouble they represent . . . is no longer being contained" (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). In summer 2020, the letter by Las Adelitas that we cite at the top of this article was published in a *Los Angeles Times* retrospective of the Chicano Moratorium. Retrieved from the margins of the archive—specifically, from the Gloria Arellanes Papers located at California State University, Los Angeles—it was the first time the letter was presented for the general public. By including it alongside other material from the Arellanes archive, the two journalists responsible for the article clearly sought to bring attention to the erasure of women's contributions to the Chicano movement and try, years after the fact, to rectify this oversight. Male leaders, they emphasized, were more likely to be identified in the archival materials, and usually by first and last name. Hilda Jensen (*née* Reyes), meanwhile, long remained the unnamed subject of a photo in which she can be seen donning the *bandolero* (bullet vest), even as the image became iconic of Chicana feminist militancy. The retrospective aligns with the efforts of numerous Chicana feminist historians who in recent decades have focused on the recovery and excavation of women's erased and forgotten histories. Not only do these scholars interrogate the "mechanics of erasure" that produce such gaps and interstices in the dominant historical narratives (where the unspoken, unseen, unheard, marginalized, and othered subjects of history reside), but they also have developed methods and theoretical tools to listen to these exclusions and distortions that can be brought to bear on archival study more generally.<sup>6</sup>

The PLP pamphlet, oral histories, and other suppressed materials that confirm the communist presence in 1968 haunt us. They reveal that structural critiques of the conditions of racism and capitalism fueled the walkouts—conditions that, as Mike Davis and Jon Wiener remind us, "were responsible for tracking students into vocational classes to make them replacements for their fathers and mothers in low-wage jobs" (Davis & Wiener, 2020, p. 367) in the Eastside of Los Angeles. The marginalization (and surely in some cases the loss) of such materials attests to the effectiveness of Cold War hegemony and a repressive state, implicating institutional forces big and small, from school administrators to the LAPD to the district attorney.

In this article, we have interpreted the silences, gaps, and ambiguities of the archive to rethink 1968 as an important flash point of Chicana/o and Latinx communist politics. Efforts to quell the student unrest of the Blowouts, we contend, left specterlike traces of what might be called a Chicana/o radical tradition. This tradition is unfinished business. For Chicano radicals today, there is much to learn revisiting the political efforts and influences of groups like CASA and multiethnic revolutionary communist organizations like the August 29th

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of oral history and the women in the Chicano Blowouts, see Dolores Delgado Bernal's essay "Using a Chicana Feminist Epistemology in Educational Research" (1998). For a discussion of "retrofitted memory" and the Hijos de Cuauhtémoc, see Maylei Blackwell's (2011) *Chicana Power!* For a discussion of Chicana feminist revisionist history, see Emma Pérez's *The Decolonial Imaginary* (1999).

Movement (which later became the League of Revolutionary Struggle) and to reflect on the attempts by New Left and Old Left groups like the Progressive Labor Party, the Socialist Workers Party, and the Communist Party USA to shape and align with the demands of students during the 1968 Chicano Blowouts.

Much more is yet to be done to uncover the history of this formative period, and the record still urgently lacks testimonies from the many participants who were on the margins—especially women, who were spared from much of the repression but, partly as a result, have not been afforded the same consideration or platforms as the Eastside 13 and other male leaders. Their insights, meanwhile, are indispensable when trying to grasp the political complexity of the movement and learn from earlier failures and successes. Gloria Arellanes's powerful testimony, for instance, reminds us of Elizabeth "Betita" Martinez's insistence that women in the *movimiento* have historically practiced a kind of leadership "that empowers others, not hierarchical leadership," and that in this way is often at odds with dominant masculine organizing models (Martinez, 1998). For Arellanes, this orientation produced a relationship to communist politics that is noticeably different from those advanced by the men cited above—a relationship that foregrounded the principle of serving the people and avoided political posturing.

Chicana historian Dolores Delgado Bernal's work underscores Chicana participation in the walkouts and stresses the leadership of women in the Blowouts, noting how these came to be constructed as illegible. In her oral history of Tanya Luna Mount, Bernal (1997) tells the story of Luna Mount's house, which became a meeting point for discussion and organizing and made headline news when George Putnam, a conservative news commentator, warned of a house in Boyle Heights "notorious for being [filled with] commies, rebel rousers, and antigovernment" (Bernal, 1997, p. 129). Her recollection serves as a kind of algebra for the structure by which institutions such as news media attempt to contain and control leftist organizing efforts, quickly casting them as sources of antigovernment and red danger. However, at least in the sections offered in Bernal's chapter, Mount neither confirms, denies, nor elaborates on the political complexion of the meetings at her house, demonstrating alternative ways to maneuver around the red-baiting. Notably, these meticulous tactics likely arose in part from the concrete need to protect people from deportation. In the revised edition of Carlos Muñoz, Jr.'s book, he tells the story of his colleague Maria Baeza, who, along with him, was nominated to the position of chair of the United Mexican American Students at the California State University, Los Angeles (Muñoz, 2007, p. 6). Baeza turned down the position, explaining that in addition to expecting that the group would not respect her leadership as a woman and a feminist, she had a second important reason: She was not an American citizen, possessing only a green card. Baeza's story highlights the intersection of multiple axes of oppression that make immigrant and Chicana/o women's accounts of the *movimiento* so usefully clarifying. There are many accounts to draw from, including that of Fran Spector, a Belmont High School student arrested in connection with the walkouts who was the daughter of a local communist leader sentenced to San Quentin for organizing a farm strike in the Imperial Valley in the 1930s and whose brother was a leader in Students for a Democratic Society, or of Mita Cuaron, who was arrested during the walkouts along with her father, Ralph Cuaron, a longtime Chicano member of the Communist Party (Buelna, 2019; Davis & Wiener, 2020).

As we have shown, archival interpretation is difficult, even at the level of minutiae. A simple phrase like "Con Che" can open up a world of quandaries. Only when we are prepared to let go of our presumptions about the past can we begin to strengthen our historical memories. In the case of the Blowouts, the margins of the archive not only help us to make sense of what happened but they also remind us that contemporary

struggles are necessarily constellated to the past. Against contemporary anticommunism and amid new deployments of the "outside agitator" myth, it is important to reflect on the missteps of participants in the Blowouts and the forces that shaped the historicization of these events. More than 50 years later, the Blowouts remind us that our responses to repression, vilification, and red-baiting will contribute not only to immediate narratives but also to future narratives. As we hone our sensitivity to the archival silences and minutiae that might unseat dominant but incomplete historiographies, we build our strategic capacity to strengthen the very understanding of politics for future generations.

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