

<http://borderlandshistory.org/2015/11/16/organizing-the-oscar-r-castillo-documenting-chicano-life-and-activism-exhibit-at-the-55th-annual-western-history-association-conference-in-portland-or/>

Borderlands History



Organizing the Oscar R. Castillo: Documenting Chicano Life and Activism Exhibit at the 55th Annual Western History Association Conference in Portland, OR

Posted on [November 16, 2015](#) by [Miguel Juárez](#)

When fellow contributor Dr. Michael Bess inquired as to my interest in writing an essay about why the Oscar Castillo exhibit was organized as part of the Western History Association, I wholeheartedly accepted his offer. One of the reasons we organized the exhibit was to show that the study of history is not separate from engaging with communities we are researching and writing about. Secondly, we felt organizing the exhibit would add another dimension to a 55th Annual WHA Conference in Portland, October 21-24, 2015. Having had the experience of attending numerous conferences over the years as an academic librarian and archivist, I feel it is important to engage with the communities where we hold our conferences and what better way than via an exhibit. I want to preface my essay by acknowledging that the exhibit was the product of a 10-month process and a group effort. Also, if not for the intervention of Dr. John W. Heaton, Executive Director of the Western History Association, it probably would not have been included in the conference program at all.

Organizing the Exhibit

On December 20, 2014, my paper titled "The 1972 Raza Unida Party Convention," was accepted for the 55th Annual Western History Association as part of the panel "The Chicano/a Movement as Western History Emerging Scholars." I had the idea to organize a parallel event in the community to accompany the panel. I approached the photographer Oscar R. Castillo, a Los Angeles-based photographer whose archive is housed at the Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) at UCLA where I was employed in 2008, to see if

he would be interested in exhibiting his photography in Portland, as part of the WHA. I had organized events remotely before. In 2008-2009, I was chair of the Southwest Oral History Association (SOHA) conference and working with a group of volunteer oral historians, faculty members and librarians, we organized a regional meeting at the University of Southern California, via e-mail and phone calls. For the Castillo exhibit, I felt all I had to do was locate a venue, perhaps a university or community college gallery in Portland willing to host the exhibit.

I first met Oscar R. Castillo in 2008, a Los Angeles based photographer, whose archive is housed at the Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) at UCLA. In 2012, he loaned us one of his well-known images for the cover of the 40th Year Commemoration of the 1972 Raza Unida Convention that we organized in El Paso, Texas.



Copyright: Digital Archive of Oscar R. Castillo, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Library

**40th Anniversary Commemoration
of La Raza Unida Party 1972
National Convention
El Paso, TX, August 30-September 2, 2012**

Thursday, August 30, 2012
At the Tomás Rivera Conference Center, 5-10 p.m.
University of Texas at El Paso sponsored by UTEP Chicano Studies

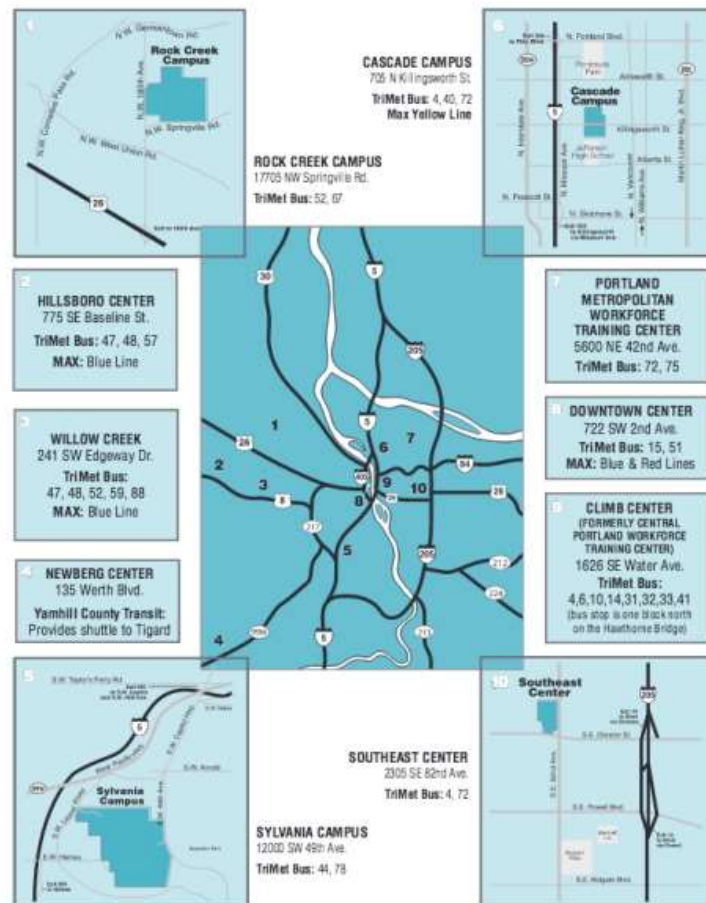
Friday-Sunday, August 31-Sept. 2, 2012
At Mercado Mayapán, 2101 Myrtle Street at Willow St.
With concurrent exhibits in El Museo Mayapán
Information: <http://www.larazaunida2012.com/>

Image: Oscar R. Castillo. *José Angel Gutiérrez, Reies López Tijerina, and Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez at the National Convention of the Raza Unida Party*, photographed in 1972, inkjet print, 14 ½” x 20.” Image archived in the Oscar R. Castillo Photograph Collection, Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) Digital Collections of the UCLA Digital Library Program.

[https://www.academia.edu/6191045/40th Anniversary Commemoration of La Raza Unida Party 1972 National Convention](https://www.academia.edu/6191045/40th_Anniversary_Commemoration_of_La_Raza_Unida_Party_1972_National_Convention)

To locate a venue for the exhibit in Portland, I had discussions with my friend Max Macias, a library technician, at the Sylvania Campus at Portland Community College. I wanted the exhibit to coincide with the conference and have it be part of the program. I initially approached Dr. Roberto De Anda, Interim Program Director/Associate Professor of the Chicano Studies Program at Portland State University, but he was unable to assist in presenting the exhibit.

Max referred me to various people and possible places that could possibly present the exhibit. In January 2015, I approached Mr. Prudence Roberts, Director, of the Helzer Art Gallery to host the exhibit at the Rock Creek campus, but then we realized it was too far from where the WHA would take place, so we looked for other locations. Ms. Roberts suggested we have the exhibit at the Cascade Campus of Portland Community College and she contacted the gallery director and talked to her about the exhibit. Elizabeth Bilyeu, the Director of the Cascade Gallery at the Portland Community College was very receptive to the exhibit. As shown in the Portland Community College map below, the Cascade campus (#6) was closer to the Portland Hilton than the Rock Creek campus (#1). There were other PCC locations such as training centers, but we wanted the exhibit in a PCC campus. Once we secured the exhibit site, we began working with Mr. Castillo via e-mails and phone calls to shape the exhibit.



We communicated with the 2015 Conference Program Committee and they informed us we had an April 1st deadline for having the entire information ready for the program. We identified some issues such as how to get people to the exhibit since it was a 25-minute bus ride away. We were told that I needed to contact the conference co-chairs of 2015 Local Arrangements Committee Co-chairs (Peter Boag and Katy Barber). On March 26, 2015, I e-mailed Dr. Heaton, about the exhibit. I informed him that the venue for the exhibit had changed from the Rock Creek Campus to the Cascade Campus, which was closer to the conference hotel.

On March 30, 2015, via e-mail, Dr. Heaton responded that he felt the Castillo exhibit was an interesting project that WHA members might want to visit, but he was not sure that the exhibit could be listed in the program. He stated that the e-mail on March 26th was the first time he had heard about the event. He explained the process to get into the program would require working with the Program Committee and that information about the exhibit should be coming to the WHA Office through that committee (or through the Local Arrangements Committee, if I had been working with them). He explained that all program digital files came to the office through these two committees, with the exception of paid advertising pages (which are sent by advertisers).

He said that unless my request was coming through one of those channels he could not include the exhibit listing in the official program. He said we needed to work through one of the committees quickly because they were solidifying their plans for the conference. I thanked Dr. Heaton for his response, but told him we had been in communication with the 2015 Program Committee since January 8, 2015 and we were told we needed to solidify the exhibit details by April 1st so it could be included in the program.

Dr. Heaton then questioned both the Program Committee and the Local Arrangements Committee members to figure out what had happened. The Program Committee responded to him on March 31, 2015 and stated they had been in communication with us about the exhibition. Initially they stated that they first encouraged me to work closely with the Local Arrangements Committee and/or Portland State University. They were concerned about the supervision and security of the exhibit items, but then they found out that we had secured a host for the exhibit at Portland Community College. They then told us that the WHA could not provide a shuttle and that we would have to secure transportation from conference hotel to PCC. They also stated that once we confirmed the logistical information that they could help me advertise the exhibition in the official program and/or with flyers at the conference to encourage attendees to visit the exhibition. At that point, they knew that we had devoted considerable time to realize the exhibit.

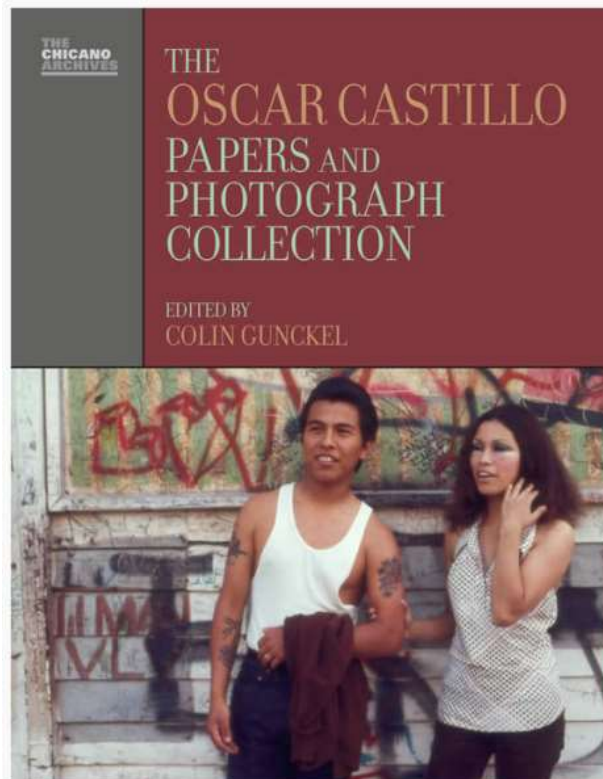
Later, Dr. Heaton e-mailed me and stated that he had been trying to contact everyone to find out what happened, as well as to try and get the exhibit in the conference schedule. He stated that he felt the exhibit was important enough to get it in the program. He said he would speak with the Local Arrangements Committee to ready the exhibit for the program and he asked me to give him a day or two to make sure they would be able to work with us. He said he would be back in touch.

The Program Committee sent us an e-mail that they were proposing to Dr. Heaton that the exhibit be included in the official program. We also sent an e-mail to Katy Barber, one of the co-chairs of the Local

Committee and thanked her for reaching out to us and that we would be sending her a summary of the exhibit and an accompanying photograph. We spoke to her about scheduling an opening reception during the conference. I sent her Elizabeth's contact information. Dr. Heaton then sent us a draft of their tour descriptions so we could see how they were worded so we could adapt the exhibit profile. Later that day, Elizabeth spoke to Katy and they had a productive conversation and ironed out what need to be done for the exhibit. We decided to hold the opening reception for the exhibit from 2 – 4 p.m. on October 22 to coincide with the conference.

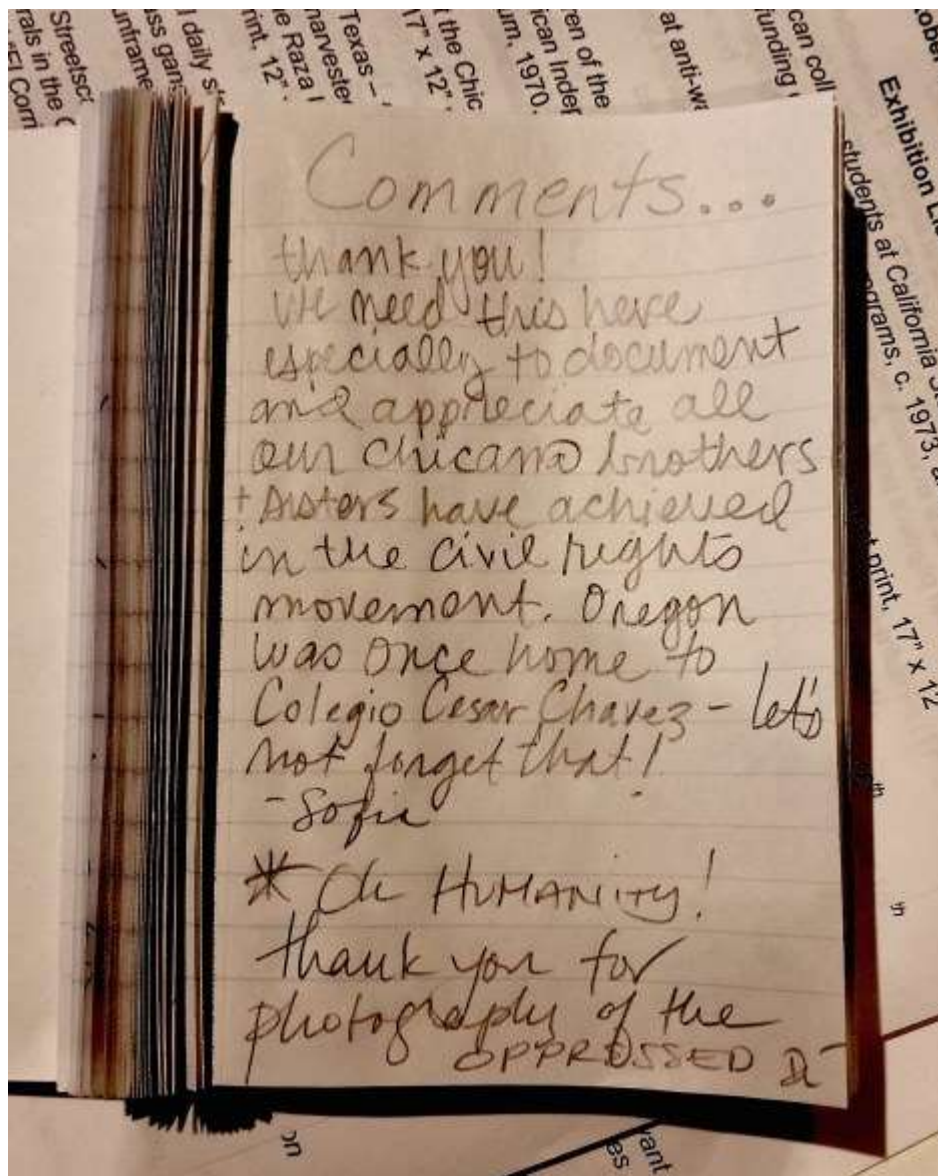
On October 12, we e-mailed Katy and asked her if we could include a copy of the exhibit invitation that the Cascade Gallery had printed out in the conference tote bag. Elizabeth said she did not have 700 invitations and had to order more. On October 13th, Elizabeth e-mailed us that the printer could print more. She then arranged to have them printed and delivered them to Katy in time for them to be put in the tote bags the weekend before the conference.

Students from Shawn Records' photography class at the Cascade Campus selected the photographs for the exhibit. Sandy Sampson installed the work at the gallery. The only conference attendees who attended the exhibit opening from 2-4 p.m. for October 22nd included Lina María Murillo, UTEP Doctoral Candidate, myself, and Dr. Ernesto Chávez, who previously published an essay on Castillo in the book titled *The Oscar Castillo Papers and Photographs Collections*, edited by Colin Gunckel (2011, University of Chicago Press). I had asked Dr. Chavez to attend and say a few comments about Castillo's work as a scholar of Castillo's work and as a representative of the WHA. We also asked Dr. Chon Noriega at UCLA, if the CSRC would send us a complimentary copy of The Castillo publication that we would be featured on a table in the exhibit and afterwards would be donated to the Cascade Campus Library. He sent us one.



On the day of the opening reception, two hours before the opening, I followed the instructions provided by Elizabeth. "From the Hilton Hotel Conference, walk to SW 6th and Taylor and catch the #4-Division/Fessenden Bus (toward St. Johns); after a 25-minute ride, get off at PCC Cascade Campus (N. Albina and Killingsworth)..." I wanted to personally test out the directions and they were exact. On the way there, a young man boarded the bus and told me he had just been released from the hospital and he told me he was looking forward to sleeping in his own bed. An elderly woman also boarded on the bus with a walker, sat across me and she told me about each of the neighborhoods we drove through.

Approximately 30 students attended the opening reception including a student who told me he was born in Texas and that the exhibit made him proud to be Mexican-American. In addition, several Cascade faculty members and a ceramics class of students shuffled in and out after their classes to attend the opening reception. Evidenced from their comments in exhibit gallery book, students really enjoyed the exhibit.



In conclusion, the exhibit was the first Chicano exhibit organized in conjunction with the WHA in its 55-year history. The exhibit was not part of a class or project. It was an attempt to see if the exhibit could be organized. At times, it was a challenging, but we were determined to do it and to bring a piece of Chicano/a history from the Southwest to Portland and have it be a part of the WHA. I hope this effort inspires others to do the same in other conferences.

I would like to thank the following individuals for making the Oscar R. Castillo Exhibit possible:

Dr. Jose Alamillo, California State University, Channel Islands and Program Committee Co-Chair.

Dr. Katy Barber, Portland State University and Local Arrangements Committee Co-Chair.

Ms. Elizabeth Bilyeu, Art History Instructor and Art Gallery Director, Cascade Campus, Portland Community College.

Dr. Peter Boag, Washington State University and Local Arrangements Committee Co-Chair.

Oscar R. Castillo, Photographer, Los Angeles, CA.

Dr. Ernesto Chávez, Associate Professor, UT El Paso and WHA Board Member.

Dr. Lori Ann Lahlum, Minnesota State University, Mankato and Program Committee Co-Chair.

Dr. Karen Leong, Arizona State University and Program Committee, Co-Chair.

Max Macias, MLS, Library Technician, Sylvania Campus, Portland Community College.

Dr. Chon A. Noriega, Professor in the UCLA Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media, and Director of the Chicano Studies Research Center, UCLA.

Ms. Prudence Roberts, Art History Instructor and Director of the Helzer Art Gallery, Rock Creek Campus, Portland Community College.

Shawn Records, Photography Instructor, Cascade Campus of Portland Community College.

Ms. Sandy Sampson, Art Instructor, Cascade Campus, Portland Community College

Dean Dan Wenger, Arts and Professions Division, Cascade Campus, Portland Community College

And

Dr. John W. Heaton, Professor, Arthur T. Fathauer Chair of History, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, Executive Director, Western History Association.

***A special thank you goes out to Lina María Murillo for mentioning the exhibit in her article: "Conference Notes: Western History Association, 2015," November 4, 2015 in the Borderlands History Blog:*

<http://borderlandshistory.org/author/linamariamurillohistory/>



The *Oscar R. Castillo: Documenting Chicano Life and Activism* exhibit at the Cascade Gallery featured 20 of his documentary photographs from 1972 to the present, photographs that revealed significant moments in the recent history of Chicano life, culture, and political movements. The exhibit ran from October 1 to November 8, 2015.

Elizabeth Bilyeu, Gallery Director, stated the following about the exhibit:

“Oscar R. Castillo: Documenting Chicano Life and Activism,” engaged a new viewer in our Gallery that focuses on showing contemporary art mostly by regional artists. Young student activists, historians and professors, and gallery viewers who lived through events like the Chicano Moratorium March on Los Angeles in 1970 and United Farm Workers demonstrations all responded enthusiastically to the documentary photographs, many taken over 40 years ago. For me, one of the most interesting experiences was watching the thoughtful engagement of PCC’s photography students in helping to select 20 photographs to show from a larger group that Mr. Castillo submitted. Rather than choosing photographs documenting rich scenes of everyday life, the students choose expressive photographs showing activism and protest. I feel that this is a reflection of our current situation in education and culture as we work to recognize and to correct racial bias in our institutions and to promote culturally relevant curriculum for our students. Mr. Castillo’s photographs continue those conversations, and for that, we are grateful.

The exhibit webpage is archived at: <http://www.pcc.edu/about/galleries/cascade/exhibitions/2015-10-01/>