

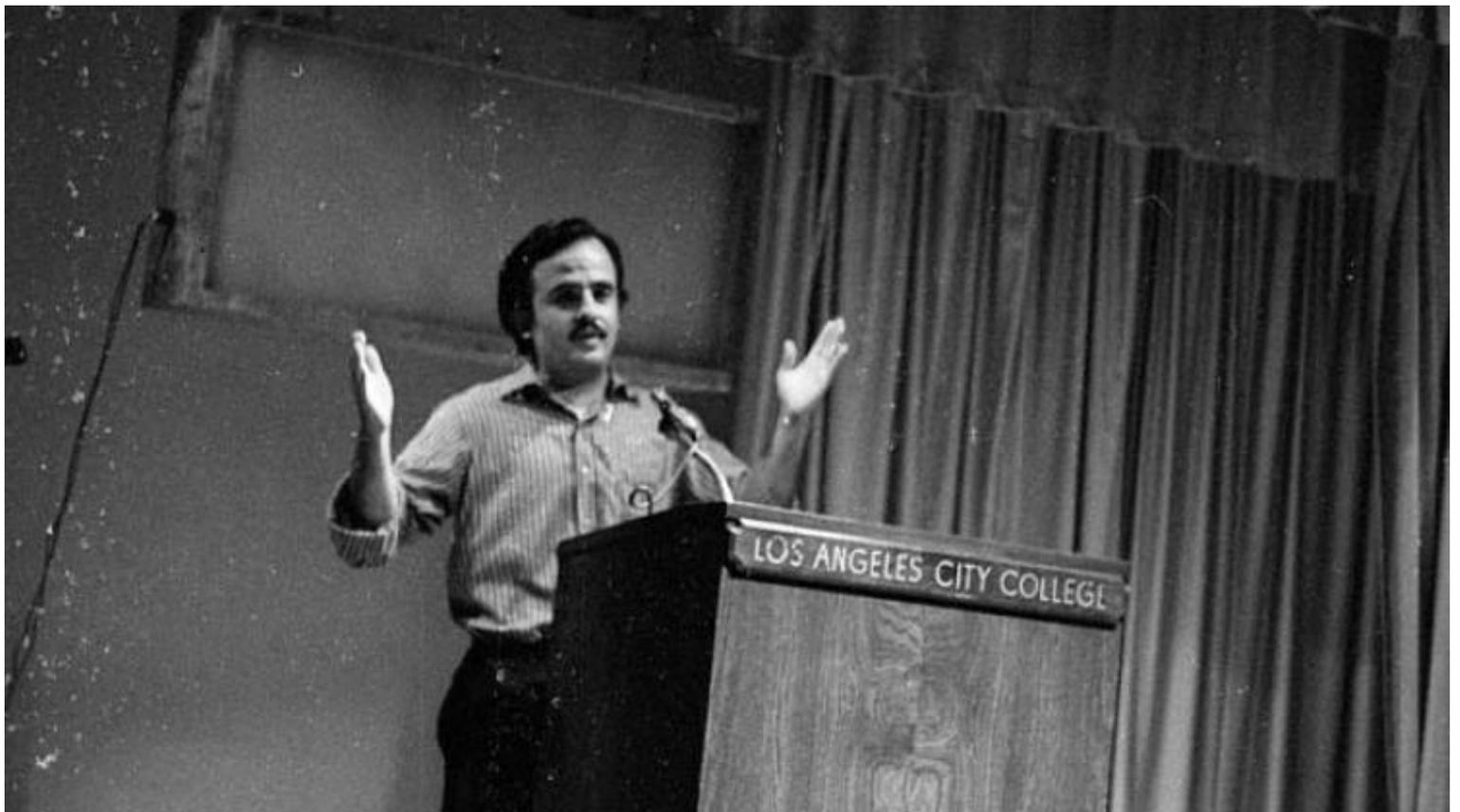
I Am A Mexicano: The Legacy of Chicano Journalist and Activist Raul Ruiz

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When Raul Ruiz took the witness stand to testify on the killing of Mexican American journalist Ruben Salazar, he showed Mexican Americans something they'd never seen before. In the courtroom and on their television sets, they saw an educated, politicized Chicano speaking truth to power.

"You are questioning my integrity. I know this because I am a Mexicano," Ruiz pointedly tells the courtroom deputy who repeatedly deviated the inquiry from the death of Ruben Salazar to cast doubt onto his testimony. Collective gasps and stirrings in the room break into cheers. These moments continue to reverberate today as the Chicano community remembers the life of Raul Ruiz and his contributions to a political and cultural movement that changed the course of history.



Raul Ruiz at an L.A. City College event | La Raza photograph collection. Courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

Dr. Raul Ruiz died Wednesday, June 13 in his home at the age of 78. Ruiz played many important roles during his lifetime as a photographer, journalist, activist, as well as a Harvard educated scholar and CSU Northridge professor. He even ran for office as a candidate of the first and only Mexican American political party, La Raza Unida Party. He was also a photographer and editor of La Raza Magazine, an influential Chicano publication that documented much of the Chicano Movement in the late 1960s through the 1970s.

During his lifetime Raul Ruiz not only shifted narratives and the image of Chicanos as they were represented publically, but also how they saw themselves, modeling with intelligence and bravado what a Chicano could be.

“Raul produced some of the most iconic images in the presence of tragedy,” says Chon Noriega, Director of the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA where the digitized archive of La Raza is currently housed. “The image of the killing of Ruben Salazar in particular was seen around the world. It became iconic.”

[Hear Raul Ruiz talk about his experience covering the East L.A. walkouts and perils he witnessed and faced.](#)

Ruiz’s most recognized photograph documents the moment in which police officers shot tear gas canisters into the Silver Dollar Saloon, killing Mexican American journalist Ruben Salazar during the Chicano Moratorium on August 28, 1970. Ruiz and La Raza staff took to the streets to document the thousands of women, men and children that peacefully protested the disproportionate recruitment and drafting of Chicanos to the Vietnam War. However, the highly policed event broke out into violence and widespread panic as protestors ran for cover from LAPD police batons, tear gas canisters and live fire.

For photographer Harry Gamboa Jr. and thousands of other Chicanos at the time, the televised footage of Raul Ruiz speaking in the courtroom was an eye-opening and empowering experience.



Raul Ruiz speaks during La Raza Unida Party event | La Raza photograph collection. Courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

"It was incredible," says Gamboa. "It was the first time a Chicano exhibited such depth of thought, analysis and conceptual awareness in such a setting. He was playing a much better game than they were," remembers Gamboa, recalling how Ruiz was able to challenge and expose the courtroom deputy's line of inquiry, aimed at discrediting Ruiz and other protestors rather than investigating the killing of Ruben Salazar.

For Chon Noriega, Ruiz's display of sharp intelligence and bold counter-argumentation modeled what he and other Chicanos could aspire to. "Raul was so eloquent. We saw what it was like to have the wherewithal to hold your ground when everyone is against you and say no, I'm going to tell you the truth."

Noriega notes that what the La Raza staff and the film crew of UCLA students documented in their images of the events of the Moratorium would serve as crucial evidence to counter the narratives that the LAPD and L.A. County Sheriff's Department controlled. "The L.A. Sheriff's had their own film crew and photographers. They generated images for mass media," says Noriega.

Learn more about La Raza on ["Artbound."](#) Watch this documentary now.

And while Ruiz was certainly just one person in a civil rights movement made possible by a mass collective, he stood out for his exemplary courage and intelligence when wisdom and action were required of him. "We each have moments in which we have [the] opportunity to

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do what's needed. That opportunity to speak or turn away," Noriega reflects. Ruiz seized those moments for all to see.

Never a mere observer of history as it unfolded, his politics were inextricable from his personal life and his profession. In the events he attended and covered, he was both a presence and a participant. Raul Ruiz and the La Raza photographers took cameras to the streets to document poverty, institutional discrimination and violence experienced by Mexican Americans, as well as to celebrate life in the barrio. Gamboa recalls that at in the early days of the *movimiento*, when very few people were taking photos in Mexican American neighborhoods. He notes that photography was once not only an expensive, generally inaccessible practice, but was also perceived as a threatening activity. "That was a particularly painful period. At the time, it was like living in apartheid in Southern California. Doing anything out of the ordinary on the street was met with violence from the police.



Raul Ruiz with Gustav Montag, a bystander who was struck by ricochet ammunition during a protest on January 31 1971. | Courtesy of Luis C. Garza.

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Even after the fateful events of the Moratorium, violent protests against police brutality and the Vietnam War continued. At a protest in East L.A. on January 31, 1971, violence erupted again, this time claiming the life of a bystander.

Photographer and fellow La Raza staffer, Luis Garza describes the death of a bystander named Gustav Montag, a young Jewish American man from Boyle Heights who was struck by ricochet ammunition. Garza remembers that Montag bled to death on the street amid the chaos of the disrupted protest. He remembers how Ruiz kneeled over the fallen young man to honor him, laying a Mexican flag over the blanket that covered his lifeless body. "Raul gave persistence, dedication, stubbornness, and a sense of human-ness. All of it was part of his personality," says Garza.



Raul Ruiz speaks at a La Raza Unida meeting | La Raza photograph collection. Courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

For Ruiz and Garza, the act of photo-taking was a way to honor the living and the dead. However, photographs, as sacred things that honor their subjects long past their moment, can be ephemeral and vulnerable to the tests of time. Easily lost, stolen or damaged, they require diligent guard. As the last editor of La Raza, which closed finally in 1977, Ruiz became the guardian of tens of thousands of photographs and negatives which documented the span of the Chicano movement, as well as rare glimpses of Chicano life in L.A. at the time. His protectiveness of a vulnerable archive was one that endured over the decades, until 2010, when Ruiz was publically called out for hoarding photographs and keeping them even from their original producers, other La Raza photographers. His grip on the collection

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loosened when the archive began its transition to the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA, which now houses over 25,000 images that had gone unseen for decades. In 2017, many of these images and other materials were exhibited finally at the Autry Museum of the American West's "La Raza" in time for the 50th anniversary of the Blowouts or Walkouts.

"His passing is the passing of a baton to new generations," says Garza. "When you see his work, you see the original intent of La Raza to organize, to educate, to celebrate, to push back against the status quo. It ain't over."

The footage and photos of the Chicano Moratorium and the series of violent protests that followed never get easier to see. Even now, images of women being hit with batons in the back by police officers, young men beaten bloody to the ground and families, including children, chased terrified in their own neighborhoods are chilling as they continue to echo in today's police brutality against brown and black bodies. In the [video footage](#) of Requiem 29, Ruiz issues advice that we should heed still today. "In reality, the rights that people think that they have are no longer really there. Hopefully ... they will understand that they have very few and they must begin to look for the strength and for the justice among themselves because nobody else is going to help them."