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LA CARAVANA DE LA RECONQUISTA

The Brown Berets Contest Memories of Conquest

OMAR VALERIO-JIMÉNEZ

IN DECEMBER 1971, the Brown Berets arrived in Santa Fe, New Mexico, along their months-long march throughout the U.S. Southwest, called La Caravana de la Reconquista. From local residents, the Berets learned that General Stephen Kearny had raised the U.S. flag in the town's main plaza on August 22, 1846, and declared New Mexico to be part of the United States. Kearny, in charge of one of the military campaigns to take over Mexico's Far North, had led the U.S. army in capturing Las Vegas, New Mexico, months earlier at the beginning of the U.S.-Mexico War. One hundred and twenty-five years later, the Brown Berets purposely traced part of the path of Kearny's troops through New Mexico, held rallies to demand better living conditions and civil rights for Mexican Americans, and raised the Mexican flag at various plazas in the state. After the threats to, harassment of, and arrests of several march participants, one of the leaders of the Brown Berets reflected on the significance of Kearny's nineteenth-century actions. "It was never clearer to me that we were the descendants of the Mexican inhabitants who had lived under the United States occupation," David Sánchez wrote in his memoir, "descendants who continue to live as a subordinate population to a white society which continues to destroy our culture, our health, and our existence."¹

This chapter will examine the multiple ways the Brown Berets contested memories of conquest during their 1971-72 march throughout the U.S.

Southwest. As they traveled from California across various states to Texas, the Berets collected, interpreted, and promoted collective memories. They visited various sites in the U.S. Southwest with ties to the U.S.-Mexico War, and invoked collective memories of the war and its aftermath to contest the nation's official history of the conflict. In addition to raising Mexico's flag at various stops along their march to commemorate Mexico's previous jurisdiction over the region, the Berets erected monuments to nineteenth-century Mexican rebels to remind local communities of their ancestors' resistance to the U.S. invasion. Rather than introducing democracy and civilization to the U.S. West, the war, according to the Berets, directly led to the dispossession of American Indians and Mexican Americans of their lands. This alternative view also addressed the war's legacies by tracing Mexican Americans' second-class citizenship to the broken promises of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The group's journey generated publicity for their cause, but also strategically reminded the nation that the U.S. Southwest was an American Indian and Chicano homeland. The Berets' symbolic "reconquest" of the region relied on reminding residents of the tragic consequences of the U.S. conquest, challenging the "conquered" mentality among some Mexican Americans, and asserting Chicanos' claim to the land and to U.S. citizenship. These Chicana/o civil rights activists strategically "remembered" the nineteenth-century conquest to raise awareness of Mexican Americans' contemporary poverty and disenfranchisement in the twentieth century.

GENESIS OF BROWN BERETS

The Brown Berets began organizing in the Los Angeles area in the late 1960s and achieved prominence through their participation in a series of events, including the East Los Angeles Walkouts, the Chicano Moratorium, a march from southern California to Sacramento, a months-long "caravan" throughout the Southwest, and the occupation of Catalina Island. Scholars have traced the origins of the Brown Berets to the Mexican-American Youth Leadership Conference, a meeting in April 1966 in Malibu, California, for high school student leaders to explore values, identity, and the label "Mexican American." Co-sponsored by the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations and the Wilshire Boulevard Temple's Camp Hess Kramer, the three-day conference included discussions of commonalities among the high school student leaders, with the goal of creating alliances to improve their schools and neighborhoods.

As their conversations extended beyond the conference, a group of six of the attendees, including David Sánchez, created Young Citizens for Community Action (YCCA) the following month.² This group sought to reform the local educational system through political action and electoral participation. The YCCA's first effective effort was to support the successful electoral campaign of Julian Nava to the Los Angeles school board. Several of these founding members eventually served on advisory boards for the Los Angeles mayor's office and the governor of California.³

Over the next few years, the YCCA evolved into the Brown Berets, a militant cultural nationalist organization that remained reformist despite its rhetoric. Various civil and religious organizations assisted the YCCA by providing training and encouragement to participate in neighborhood improvement and community participation projects. One of these groups, the Community Service Organization (CSO), introduced members to Richard Alatorre, who would become a state congressional aide and a state assembly member. Alatorre mentored the youth in community organizing and local politics. He also helped them meet farmworker leader César Chávez. As they gained political knowledge and met more Mexican American political and civic leaders, the members of the youth group began expressing more pride in their ethnicity, which led them to change the name of the organization to Young Chicanos for Community Action. With the support of Father John B. Luce, of the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany, the YCCA opened a coffeehouse, La Piranya, in East Los Angeles. La Piranya became a meeting place for local youth, and also a platform for talks by regional and national civil rights leaders such as Stokely Carmichael and Hubert "Rap" Brown of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, Reies López Tijerina of the Alianza Federal de Mercedes from New Mexico, and César Chávez of the United Farm Workers union. Such speakers increased the youths' politicization about issues beyond East Los Angeles and affecting other minority communities. The coffeehouse also hosted informational sessions on higher education to encourage local youth to attend college. Unfortunately, the meetings at La Piranya also drew the attention of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, whose officers began harassing the coffeehouse customers. In response, the YCCA organized several protests in front of the East Los Angeles sheriff's station. These protests marked a shift in leadership and strategy for the YCCA, as several members discontinued their participation to concentrate on their college studies, and the YCCA became more confrontational under the leadership of David Sánchez. In January 1968,

Sánchez led the YCCA to change its name to the Brown Berets, and to adopt khaki-colored military garb and distinctive brown berets.⁴ The Berets espoused a highly masculinist Chicano cultural nationalism and militant rhetoric against police harassment, and advocated for better schools. Despite their militant rhetoric, the Berets remained a reformist organization that identified both the U.S. Constitution and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo as laws that the United States needed to enforce.⁵

MARCHA DE LA RECONQUISTA

Frustrations with police harassment and the challenges of organizing a movement in the city led Chicano activists to plan a march from southern California to Sacramento, the state's capital. First, however, in response to the disproportionate Chicano casualties in the Vietnam War, Rosalio Muñoz, a recent UCLA graduate, and David Sánchez established the Chicano Moratorium Committee to plan a series of protests against the war. The protests culminated in the National Chicano Moratorium on August 29, 1970, which drew some twenty thousand to thirty thousand participants to Laguna Park in East Los Angeles, but was marred by police aggression, damaged buildings, and the deaths of several participants, including *Los Angeles Times* journalist Ruben Salazar, who had covered several Chicana/o Movement events.⁶ Police harassment of the members of the Chicano Moratorium Committee increased in the aftermath of the August 29 march, while the committee began protesting police brutality in addition to opposing the war.⁷ After the National Chicano Moratorium, the Chicano Moratorium Committee decided to launch La Marcha de la Reconquista (March of the Reconquest) in May 1971, to reach a larger audience and to gather information on broader problems confronting Chicano communities elsewhere in the state. This pilgrimage recalled the strategy used by the National Farm Workers Association in their 1966 march from Delano to Sacramento in support of striking workers.⁸ Like the farmworkers, the Brown Berets sought to publicize their efforts among Chicano communities to build support for their cause, but also to help Chicanos in other towns fight for civil rights reforms. David Sánchez remembers fielding many telephone calls from activists throughout the nation and coordinating contact information prior to the march, but also feeling frustrated at the slow pace of organizing while dealing with the mass of paperwork. Along with other activists, he wanted to learn firsthand

about problems facing Chicanos elsewhere in the state. The activists also wanted to escape the city, “with all its complexities and potential destructiveness.” In particular, they wanted to take a break from the constant police harassment, undercover surveillance, and frequent arrests of activists. The Berets had been forced to close their headquarters because they could not afford the rent; so the march was also a way to make their headquarters “mobile” and escape the police pressure at the same time.⁹

The name given to the march recalled the mid-nineteenth-century conquest begun by the U.S.-Mexico War. The interpretation of the U.S.-Mexico War as a conflict that led to the conquest of Mexican Americans became widespread during the Chicano Movement in the late 1960s. The United States, many Chicana/o activists argued, had not enforced the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo with respect to Mexican Americans’ citizenship rights. A few years before *La Marcha de la Reconquista*, Reies López Tijerina had risen to national prominence with the *Tierra Amarilla* courthouse raid in New Mexico in June 1967. Tijerina had started *La Alianza Federal de Pueblos Libres* (the Federal Alliance of Free Towns), a land-grants organization, in 1963, with the goal of helping the Mexican American descendants of Spanish and Mexican land grantees reclaim their ancestors’ property. In addition to characterizing the U.S.-Mexico War as a war of conquest, Tijerina had argued that the nation had not honored the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.¹⁰ Through their public actions and interviews with the press, Tijerina’s land-grant movement activists had exposed many Chicano Movement activists to the history of the war and the treaty. While details of the U.S.-Mexico War might not have been common knowledge among Mexican Americans, some had acquired a general understanding of the conflict. Through public school education, some activists discovered that the U.S. Southwest had been part of Mexico and sought more information in history books. According to David Sánchez, he first learned that California had been part of Mexico in the fifth grade. This knowledge led him to question Mexican Americans’ role and status in the U.S. Southwest.¹¹ Other activists learned about the U.S.-Mexico War in university courses and from textbooks.¹² Central to these activists’ understanding of the U.S.-Mexico War was the belief that the United States had failed to enforce the citizenship rights for Mexican Americans as stipulated in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. An additional influence was Mexican immigrants, from whom activists learned an alternative version of the war. These immigrants viewed the conflict as it was presented in Mexico’s history textbooks—that is, as an unprovoked and blatant act of aggression to

acquire Mexico's land. For example, among the marchers in *La Marcha de la Reconquista* and *La Caravana de la Reconquista* were several young men who were recent Mexican immigrants.

The use of "reconquest" in the name of the marches also implied a historical agency for a Chicano community long subordinated throughout the U.S. Southwest. The term "reconquest" was consistent with the Brown Berets' belief that Mexican Americans' lands were "temporarily occupied."¹³ But far from believing that Chicanos would retake control of the U.S. Southwest, the Berets used the term to refer to a state of awareness of rights and history.¹⁴ While they considered the U.S.-Mexico War as a military conquest and Mexican Americans as a conquered people, many activists, including some of the Berets, asserted they did not have a conquered mentality or outlook. By declaring "reconquest" as their symbolic goal, these activists were presenting an alternative view of the war, and claiming a right to self-determination consistent with their embrace of cultural nationalism. Not surprisingly, several participants explained that one goal of *La Marcha de la Reconquista* was to "reconquer the rights and dignity of Chicanos," and to "reconquer [Chicanos'] rights to be treated like people, and not like second-class citizens."¹⁵



FIGURE 3.1. *La Marcha de la Reconquista* began in Calexico in March 1971 and traveled eight hundred miles to the state capitol in Sacramento. (Photo courtesy of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Library, *La Raza* Collection.)

During the long march to Sacramento, activists learned about issues confronting Chicano communities along their route, but they also experienced several organizational and logistical problems during their three-month journey. Beginning at the U.S.-Mexico border town of Calexico, the activists were in high spirits, as a large crowd from both sides of the border cheered them on. Twenty-five activists demonstrated their ethnic pride by carrying a Mexican flag and beginning their march on May 5, 1971, a symbolic day commemorating the Mexican army's defeat of French imperial troops at the Battle of Puebla in 1862. Among the marchers were Brown Berets, supporters of the Chicano Moratorium Committee, members of the United Farm Workers union, and individual Chicanos from various parts of the nation.¹⁶ Within a week, the marchers had covered sixty miles and were near the Salton Sea but had already confronted formidable obstacles, including the threats posed by speeding vehicles along the road, hot desert weather, and occasional hostility from local residents.¹⁷ Practical logistical issues, such as securing food, water, and lodging for the marchers, as well as transportation for their supplies, became constant concerns. In the ensuing weeks, they would also face roadblocks set up by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and by local police departments. The core marchers often staged rallies at various towns along the route, and met with residents to learn about the challenges facing local communities. Joining the core group of marchers were residents, students, and farmworkers, who often traveled with the group for a few days. Although these reinforcements helped buoy the spirit and determination of the core group of marchers, some volunteers also created serious problems by encouraging drunkenness, drugs, and infighting among the participants.¹⁸ Along the eight-hundred-mile march, the protesters promoted various issues in speeches at rallies and in interviews with news reporters. They sought to draw attention to the police brutality inflicted on Chicano communities, the farmworkers' struggle, Chicanos' claim to land, their ethnic pride, and their opposition to the policies of Ronald Reagan, the state's governor. When they arrived in Sacramento, the marchers held five days of rallies at various locations, including at Governor Reagan's house and on the capitol steps. By the last day of the march, they had added better education (and specifically more Chicano studies courses at universities), welfare rights, and prison reform to the list of issues they sought to highlight. Despite several formidable obstacles (including exhaustion, violent threats, and internal divisions) along their route, the protesters completed the grueling march to Sacramento to present their demands to the state government, and thus considered their primary goal accomplished.¹⁹



FIGURE 3.2. As the march passed through various communities along the route to Sacramento, local residents joined the Brown Berets and often shared with the marchers their community's concerns about civil rights issues. (Photo courtesy of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Library, La Raza Collection.)

LA CARAVANA DE LA RECONQUISTA

The success of La Marcha de la Reconquista led the activists to plan another march to other states, which they called La Caravana de la Reconquista (Caravan of the Reconquest). This caravan began in southern California in fall 1971 and proceeded over the next year to Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Texas, with a side trip to the Midwest. Like the California march, the months-long Caravana de la Reconquista attracted various students, activists, organizations, and local Brown Beret chapters, who helped increase the number of participants on weekends and in large cities. The core group of some twenty-five to thirty Brown Beret marchers would swell to one hundred or more when the participants in La Caravana entered large cities like Albuquerque and El Paso to participate in demonstrations.²⁰ Among the Brown Berets, there was a belief that the movement was dwindling and that the Chicano Moratorium Committee was in decline after the first march. These activists believed that continuing a march throughout the U.S. Southwest would help prolong the movement that pressed for issues important to the Chicano community.²¹ The Brown Berets

wanted to see the U.S. Southwest for themselves, map the region, and get to know activists in the region, where they planned to launch future organizing drives. The *Marcha de la Reconquista* had convinced the Brown Berets of the usefulness of mobile headquarters to avoid police harassment and surveillance; so despite the challenges, the group decided to extend the march across the Southwest. While various police departments and the FBI continued to harass the marchers during *La Caravana*, the police had their difficulties too because the Brown Berets were always on the move. Nevertheless, an FBI infiltrator briefly joined the marchers but left after the activists confronted him.²² As they ventured outside of California, the Berets faced greater logistical challenges to coordinate a long-distance march. In response, they reached out to Brown Beret chapters in the states they visited to ask for food and water, as well as additional marchers.²³ As the group visited border states historically tied to Mexico, they capitalized on various opportunities to directly challenge public history about the U.S. Southwest, to learn about local issues, and to promote their message of cultural nationalism.²⁴

CONTESTING THE HISTORY OF U.S. WESTWARD EXPANSION

As they traveled across the U.S. Southwest, the Berets often sought out local residents to learn about contemporary civil rights struggles and community issues. While visiting Tucson, Arizona, in November 1971, one of their local guides (Anna) explained community efforts to convert part of the city-run El Río Golf Course into a public park in Barrio El Río, a Chicano neighborhood.²⁵ After nine months of repeated demonstrations the city agreed to build a park, but it remained unnamed. The Chicano community wanted to name the park after Joaquín Murrieta, the nineteenth-century “social bandit” from California, so the Brown Berets decided to stage an unofficial christening ceremony for the park. They organized an “invasion,” set up tents, took over a miniature children’s “castle” in the middle of the park, and raised two flags (one for Mexico and one for the Berets) over the castle. The group then staged a march through various Tucson neighborhoods in order to announce a rally for the next day to name the park. As they had done similarly elsewhere along their *Caravana de la Reconquista*, the Brown Berets created a small monument to commemorate the park’s name as “Parque Joaquín Murrieta.” Prior to unveiling this monument, several

speakers addressed the crowd, including one who spoke about the significance of Murrieta, California's gold rush, and the U.S. westward expansion. After characterizing the park's namesake as a great hero who "stole from the rich to give to the poor," the speaker claimed that Murrieta understood the severity of the destruction initiated by the European American westward movement. The speaker closed by summarizing European Americans' persecution of Mexicans during the gold rush and the environmental damage unleashed, and by affirming Murrieta's struggle for "our cultural survival."²⁶

The visit to Tucson illustrated some of the ways the Brown Berets used collective memories to contest the official history of the American West and of Chicanos. Brown Beret leader David Sánchez recalled that the toy castle in the middle of the park intrigued the group and led them to organize the rally and unofficial christening. The castle was ten feet tall, built of sturdy concrete, and had authentic-looking gun sights. Sánchez remembered the group's fascination with the children's castle. "The park struck us as having been designed for battle and the fact that it needed a name intrigued us."²⁷ The military aspects of the children's castle in this unnamed park led the Brown Berets to recall collective memories of the nineteenth-century U.S. westward expansion as a military conquest. As they had done elsewhere along the march, the group raised the Mexican flag as a reminder that the park's land (and the territory of the state of Arizona) had formerly belonged to Mexico. While the Mexican flag served to trigger the collective memory of a pre-annexation period among some of the Mexican American residents of Tucson, it also angered the local police as well as residents who had no social or cultural connections to Mexico. Raising the Mexican flag also reminded residents that the Brown Berets' Caravana de la Reconquista was meant to highlight the Chicano community's grievances, many of which had begun with the U.S. conquest in the mid-nineteenth century. While the Berets surely knew that they could not physically reconquer the U.S. Southwest, the caravan did spread their message of symbolically reconquering the region by advancing efforts for Chicanos' self-determination and community control.

The Berets' symbolic "reconquest" of the region relied on challenging the official narrative of U.S. westward expansion, and reminding the region's residents of the tragic consequences of the U.S. conquest. One of the rally speakers, for example, inverted the American claims of "pacifying the wild west," calling that a justification for expansion onto lands claimed by Mexico and American Indian nations. "Today, this serves as a reminder," the speaker argued, "that

the west was not wild until the expansion of the United States boundaries.” By accusing the United States of making the west “wild,” this speaker publicly contested the common narrative that the nation’s westward expansion introduced progress to the region. This speaker also connected Murrieta to Mexican American resistance to the U.S. conquest. In this retelling of Murrieta’s role in challenging American expansion, the social bandit’s efforts were equated with the larger Mexican community’s goals of protecting their land and culture. For Chicano activists, it seemed fitting that this park be named after a nineteenth-century Mexican American hero who had fought against American expansion. After all, the park was located in a Mexican American neighborhood and created through local community efforts in an area of the American West that had belonged to Mexico. Although the Berets’ naming ceremony was unofficial and the monument was only temporary, the ceremony was consequential by fulfilling the community’s wishes and pressuring city officials, who acquiesced to name the park after Joaquín Murrieta.²⁸ The unofficial naming ceremony, raising of the Mexican flag, and speeches denouncing U.S. westward expansion allowed the Brown Berets to effectively contest official public history of the American West and propagate an alternative memory of the war’s tragic consequences for Mexican Americans. Moreover, their unofficial naming ceremony undoubtedly motivated some attendees and onlookers to read more about the nineteenth-century conquest of the U.S. Southwest.

As the Caravana de la Reconquista passed through Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, the Brown Berets repeatedly experienced the transmission, contestation, and strategic use of collective memories of conquest. While visiting Silver City, New Mexico, the Brown Berets were forced to sleep in campsites after a local priest rescinded his initial offer to house them at the Catholic Youth Organization Center on discovering they were not students. The group split into three smaller units (two male and one female) in order to camp and train in different parts of Silver City. The Berets named the first unit the Nepomucenos squad after Juan Nepomuceno Cortina, the South Texas native who led a rebellion in 1859. The second squad was named Los Tigres after one of Pancho Villa’s units during the Mexican Revolution in 1910. The third group, composed of Brown Beret women on the expedition, was named Las Juanitas squad after a Mexican woman whom California vigilantes hanged during the gold rush.²⁹ The symbolism of these monikers illustrates how the group used its understanding of the history of Texas, Mexico, and California to draw parallels between earlier struggles and their contemporary goals. The names also served to remind



FIGURE 3.3. La Marcha de la Reconquista attracted considerable media attention throughout the eight-hundred-mile route to Sacramento. (Photo courtesy of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Library, La Raza Collection.)

group members and the public of an alternative history that was not taught in public schools. Finally, the monikers symbolized the Berets' understanding of the transnational history of resistance.

The appellations chosen for the three squads demonstrate how the Brown Berets harnessed collective memories of conquest and struggle for civil rights goals. The first two groups recall popular male rebels, one in Brownsville and the other in Mexico's northern states, who fought against injustice and for land reform, respectively. David Sánchez identified Cortina as a "famous Mexican general . . . who captured Brownsville, Texas[,] in 1859 to free twelve Chicano prisoners."³⁰ Although he does not acknowledge it in this description, Sánchez implicitly linked Cortina's efforts to fight criminalization by freeing Mexican American prisoners in 1859 with the Brown Berets' struggle to highlight the increasing incarceration of Chicano youth in the 1970s. The reference to a unit of Pancho Villa's soldiers highlights the importance of the Mexican Revolution and Mexican history to the Chicano movement, and it also demonstrates the transnational circulation of collective memories of struggle. The Berets' choice to name a squad after Pancho Villa's unit might have been an effort to link the contemporary land reform struggles in New Mexico with those of the Mexican

Revolution of the 1920s. The Berets undoubtedly also knew of Villa's 1916 capture of Columbus, New Mexico, which was about eighty-five miles south of Silver City. Villa's daring capture of Columbus and ability to avoid General John J. Pershing's troops increased his popularity among Mexicans and Mexican Americans, who admired Villa's ingenuity and direct challenge to U.S. forces. Finally, by choosing the name Las Juanitas for the all-female squad, the Berets recalled a Mexican American woman who was hanged after she killed a white miner in self-defense during an assault in the aftermath of the U.S. conquest.³¹ The squads' names demonstrate the Berets' desire to commemorate Mexican and Mexican American heroes, and to offer a counter-history to the official narrative of U.S. westward expansion. The names also helped remind the Berets and their supporters in New Mexico of previous struggles against injustice, and to promote the collective memories of these heroes among Mexican Americans, who probably did not learn such history in their schools.

After a brief stop in Las Cruces, the Berets visited Mesilla, New Mexico, on December 6, 1971, to highlight the failure of the United States to honor the Gadsden Treaty of 1853. The treaty was signed in Mesilla, and completed the U.S. purchase for the transfer from Mexico to the United States of some 29,600 square miles of land in present-day southern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico. The Berets located the old town square, or Placita, where they believed the Gadsden Treaty had been signed.³² During their visit to the Placita, the Berets met an elderly resident, Cruz Alvarez, who provided an alternative history of the Gadsden Purchase. According to Alvarez, Mexico initially refused to sell the land designated as the Gadsden Purchase, but later acquiesced after the United States threatened to use military force to obtain the land.³³ The exchange with Alvarez served to disseminate a local resident's alternative collective conquest memory to the Berets. In turn, Sánchez wrote about this meeting and propagated a collective memory of the Gadsden Treaty that countered the official U.S. narrative. Sánchez further explained that the United States had failed to guarantee the civil rights of the Mexicans who remained in the territory covered by the Gadsden Purchase. Like the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Gadsden Treaty had guaranteed that Mexicans who remained in the ceded territories would receive full U.S. citizenship rights. The United States, the Berets argued, had violated both treaties by failing to guarantee the civil rights of Mexican Americans. By using Mexican Americans' collective memories of the U.S. conquest to illustrate the nation's failure to enforce nineteenth-century treaties, the group also linked these legacies of conquest to the contemporary denial of

civil rights for Mexican Americans. Highlighting the “right to assemble” as one of the civil rights guaranteed to U.S. citizens, Sánchez offered several recent examples of the nation’s violation of this right, including the police killings of *Los Angeles Times* reporter Ruben Salazar and two others during the Chicano Moratorium (August 29, 1970) and the police shootings of demonstrators in January 1971.³⁴ To underscore their right to assemble and their goal of reminding local residents of Mexico’s prior claim to the land, the Berets camped out in the Placita and raised the Mexican flag on the town square’s sixty-foot flagpole. Sánchez reflected on the Berets’ choice by writing, “we felt proud that the Mexican flag was once again spreading its influence over these historical grounds.” Their actions did not trigger an official response from the police, but some angry residents fired shots at the Berets. While no one was hurt, the violence directed at the Berets demonstrated that some local residents did not appreciate being reminded that the U.S. conquest had displaced a nation to which many local residents still held cultural and social ties.³⁵

The Berets’ efforts to symbolically reconquer the U.S. Southwest included challenging the narrative of a benign and uncontested U.S. conquest of New Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century. After visiting Las Cruces and Mesilla, La Caravana traveled north to Albuquerque, and then on to Santa Fe. As they entered Santa Fe in mid-December 1971, they learned from local residents that General Stephen Kearny had raised the U.S. flag over the city’s main plaza in 1846 and declared the territory under U.S. control. This was another example of the transmission of collective war memories from local residents to the Berets. These residents warned the group of the hostility of local police. Undeterred, the group staged a march to the state capitol to demand “better living conditions” for Mexican Americans. The march led the police to arrest twenty-six Berets for supposedly violating a local ordinance prohibiting marches on the streets.³⁶ After gaining their release, the Berets continued along part of the route taken by Kearny as he led the forces of occupation into Mexico’s Far North. Whenever they camped along the way, the Berets repeatedly raised the Mexican flag, which angered some local residents. Such a hostile reception to their peaceful protest undoubtedly influenced Sánchez’s interpretation of the links between Kearney’s invasion and the post-annexation consequences. From Santa Fe, the group continued to Las Vegas, New Mexico, where Kearny was believed to have begun his invasion of the U.S. Southwest. In his memoir of La Caravana, Sánchez provides some background on Kearny’s nineteenth-century invasion of New Mexico, and the refusal of New Mexico’s governor, Manuel Armijo, to

resist the U.S. aggression. Sánchez includes a few details about the unofficial resistance from Mexicans and Pueblo Indians (and their subsequent massacre). His decision to include these details (which he gleaned from Rodolfo Acuña's *Occupied America*) demonstrates the emerging influence of Chicana/o history in shaping Mexican Americans' historical perspectives. It also illustrates how the collective memories of New Mexico residents combined with the counter-history offered by Acuña to shape an alternative history and memory of the U.S. conquest. General Kearny's forces had taken the U.S. Southwest by force, argued Sánchez, which began Mexican Americans' second-class citizenship. His conclusion about Kearny's significance clearly attributes Mexicans' initial subordination to the effects of the U.S. conquest and blames their continued subservience on the nation's failure to provide full civil rights.

The march continued to other southwestern states, with the Berets stopping at various locations to learn about community issues and to contest official public history. As the Berets traveled along the Rio Grande in South Texas, they learned new details about the U.S. provocation that initiated the U.S.-Mexico War in the vicinity of Brownsville. The Berets "learned that the southwest takeover started with the first Americans who began to lose their lives in violent clashes with Mexicans who resisted their invasion."³⁷ From local residents' collective memories, the Berets learned that the region's Mexicans had indeed resisted the nineteenth-century U.S. invasion. Such conquest memories underscore the view that the U.S. troop movement beyond the Nueces River was an invasion of Mexico's territory, and contradicted President Polk's infamous excuse for starting the war. Sánchez wrote: "The Americans were claiming the loss of American blood on American soil, but Mexico was claiming the loss of American blood on Mexican territory since the southwest was part of the Republic of Mexico." Sánchez concluded by identifying the Americans as "exploiters" and accusing the United States of forcibly taking the land from Mexico. While the Berets had a general understanding of the U.S.-Mexico War before embarking on their Caravana, their interactions with various Mexican American communities along their march led them to absorb local conquest memories. While such collective memories had been passed from one generation to another by family and neighbors, the Berets' visit to the region allowed local residents to inform these activists and spread such memories beyond their immediate community. Individual Berets surely shared this information on the war and the U.S. conquest with their family and friends back home, while others passed along this historical information to a wider audience through the





La Caravana De La Reconquista Is Coming

La Caravana de la Reconquista is traveling, and is a tour and caravan of the Southwest, to unify an understanding that "ALL CHICANO throughout the Southwest are being discriminated against" and because of this, we are traveling to spread the word "CHICANOS UNITE"

During our last expedition, "La Marcha de la Reconquista" we marched from Calexico to Sacramento, Calif., of which we were the first to set foot on almost all of California. "Now Chicano Power will travel".

Ahora, we are coming to your Barrio, we have traveled many miles to prove our sacrifice for CHICANO SIGNIFICANCE "POR LOS NIÑOS SE VALE". We have come to your Barrio to create history for the children of LA RAZA.

With us we are bringing films, speakers and "Respect for your Barrio".

La Caravana de la Reconquista is a caravan to reconquer our rights to be treated like people, and not like second-class citizens.

La Caravana de la Reconquista just began its first tour and deployment October 6, 1971, from Palm Springs, California, and is traveling in a convoy movement to Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Texas, California. We are also recruiting RAZA from your Barrio for Leadership training.



BROWN BERETS SURVIVE THE WINTER COLD, WHILE TRAVELING THROUGH BARRIOS OF NORTHERN NEW MEXICO AND THE MIDWEST.

La Caravana de la Reconquista esta aquí en el pueblo, y es una gira y caravana por los barrios de todo el país, para unificar un entendimiento que "Todos los Chicanos por el país están siendo discriminados" y a causa de esto, hemos venido aquí a deserramar la palabra "Chicanos Unidos."

Durante nuestra última expedición, "La Marcha De La Reconquista" marchamos de Calexico a Sacramento, Calif., de cual nosotros fuimos los primeros en poner pie en casi todo California, "Ahora Poder Chicano viajará."

Ahora, nosotros estamos aquí en su barrio, hemos viajado muchas millas para probar nuestro sacrificio por significancia Chicana "Por los niños se vale."

Hemos venido a su barrio a crear historia para los niños de la Raza.

Con nosotros traemos películas, oradores y "Respeto para su barrio."

La Caravana De La Reconquista es una caravana para reconquistar nuestros derechos para ser tratados como gente, y no como ciudadanos de segunda clase.

La Caravana De La Reconquista apenas empezó su primer gira y deserrame el 6 de Octubre, 1971, de Casa Blanca, California, y está viajando en un movimiento convoy para Arizona, Nuevo Mexico, Texas y California y los barrios del Medio-Oeste.

Estamos también reclutando Raza de su barrio para entrenamiento en dotes de liderato.

CARAVANA EXPEDIMENTOS

To join La Caravana De La Reconquista, call anyone of the following numbers and leave your name, your address and phone number.

Southern California- 213/264-6865
Northern California- 415/ 471-4182
Chicago- 312/ 733-9200

FIGURE 3.4. The Brown Berets' newspaper, *La Causa*, reported on the progress of La Caravana de la Reconquista, alerting readers throughout the U.S. Southwest of the route and dates when the marchers would arrive in their communities. (Photo courtesy of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Library, David Sánchez Papers.)

Berets' newspaper, *La Causa*. Sánchez reached even more people by relaying this information in his book, published seven years after *La Caravana*. The Berets strategically used these newly acquired collective war memories to highlight the purpose of their trip—the symbolic “reconquest” of the U.S. Southwest by reshaping collective conquest memories for contemporary political purposes.

In addition to the Brown Berets learning about the U.S.-Mexico War, their visit to Brownsville gave them an opportunity to discover more about Juan Cortina from local residents, as well as to honor his legacy. Many Brownsville residents, the group was surprised to learn, had not heard of Cortina, a nineteenth-century resident who led a rebellion. This lack of knowledge of a famous Mexican American rebel illustrates the uneven dissemination of collective memories within a community.³⁸ It also confirms that the educational system failed to provide information about an important episode of resistance to American westward expansion. The Berets were pleased to meet an older woman, Teresa Canales, who shared her family's collective memories of Cortina. Canales claimed to be the sister of J. T. Canales (a local lawyer and politician), and a descendant of Cortina's family. She explained how Mexicans who became U.S. citizens after the war lost land because they lacked knowledge of U.S. laws, failed to pay property taxes, and relied on European American lawyers and real estate agents who defrauded them of property. Canales also described Cortina's 1859 shooting of a European American marshal to stop an incident of police brutality against a Mexican worker, and his raid on Brownsville. While explaining Cortina's role in the region, Canales described the U.S. government's failure to enforce the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to protect the property rights of Mexican Americans.³⁹ Given the Berets' criticism of the increasing incarceration of Chicano youth, their fascination with Cortina, who freed ethnic Mexican prisoners from Brownsville's jail, was expected. Before leaving the city, the Berets held a rally to dedicate a monument to Cortina for his role in fighting “for justice for the Mexicans living in the U.S.”⁴⁰ As they had done elsewhere on their march throughout the Southwest, the Berets sought not only to correct the historical narrative about Mexican Americans, but also to create an alternative public history with their monuments to Mexican American heroes. Although temporary, the monuments served to commemorate Mexican American historical figures left out of the nation's official history.

By linking the long-term consequences of the U.S.-Mexico War to the continued subordination of Mexican Americans, the Berets strategically used conquest memories to advance their political agenda. They traced the origins

of Chicanos' subordination to the aftermath of the U.S.-Mexico War, detailed problems facing the Chicano community, and challenged official public memories of the nation's westward expansion. To contest official memories of conquest, the Brown Berets created alternative monuments to Mexican Americans who had fought on Mexico's behalf during the U.S.-Mexico War or who defended Mexicans from European American attacks in the war's aftermath. They also attempted to raise the Mexican flag at war landmarks as a reminder of Mexico's former claim to the land. Ultimately, these and other Chicano activists combined collective memories of conquest with myths to construct a view of the U.S. Southwest as a Chicano homeland and to promote entitlement among Mexican Americans who had been politically and socially marginalized. As memory scholars remind us, the act of remembering is accompanied by the act of forgetting. While the official U.S. history remembered a "bloodless" conquest of the U.S. Southwest, it selectively forgot Mexican Americans' resistance during and after the war. The construction and dedication of monuments to Mexican American rebels like Joaquín Murrieta and Juan Cortina demonstrate the Brown Berets' attempt to create a counternarrative to the nation's public history and to propagate collective memories of these rebels as champions of civil rights. This activism illustrates the Berets' strategic use of conquest memories and the links between social and political uses of memory.⁴¹ Each time activists recalled the war in their pamphlets, speeches, and/or media interviews, they reminded the nation of the long-term social consequences of the U.S.-Mexico War, the unfulfilled promises of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and the justifications for civil rights activism. Moreover, by recalling the war and the treaty's promises in their campaigns, activists reinforced and modified their communities' collective memories, thus transmitting conquest memories across several generations.

NOTES

1. David Sánchez, *Expedition Through Aztlán* (La Puente, Calif.: Perspective, 1978), 99.
2. Ernesto Chávez, "¡Mi Raza Primero!" (*My People First!*): *Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966–1978* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 43.
3. Chávez, "¡Mi Raza Primero!," 43–44.
4. David Sánchez, interview by Virginia Espino, oral history interview conducted by the UCLA Oral History Program, session 1, November 26, 2012.
5. Chávez, "¡Mi Raza Primero!," 56–60.

6. Lorena Oropeza, *Raza Si! Guerra No! Chicano Protest and Patriotism During the Viet Nam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 145–47, 160–67; Chávez, “*¡Mi Raza Primero!*,” 65, 68–70; F. Arturo Rosales, *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Houston: Arte Público, 1996), 200–207.
7. Chávez, “*¡Mi Raza Primero!*,” 72–77.
8. Miriam Pawel, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 124–26.
9. Oropeza, *Raza Si! Guerra No!*, 186; Sánchez, interview, session 4, December 20, 2012; Sánchez, *Expedition Through Aztlán*, 15–17.
10. Oropeza, *Raza Si! Guerra No!*, 69–72.
11. Sánchez, interview, session 1, November 26, 2012.
12. Manuel Gómez, interview by author, September 7, 2017.
13. Chávez, “*¡Mi Raza Primero!*,” 56.
14. Oropeza, *Raza Si! Guerra No!*, 186.
15. Jack Jones, “Chicanos March to ‘Reconquer,’” *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1971; Jack Jones, “Chicanos 3-Month March to Capitol Reaches Salton Sea,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1971; “Chicano March Ends in Near Skirmish,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 8, 1971; Chávez, “*¡Mi Raza Primero!*,” 56.
16. Jones, “Chicanos March to ‘Reconquer.’”
17. Jones, “Chicanos 3-Month March.”
18. Sánchez, *Expedition Through Aztlán*, 18–51; on problems with alcohol and drugs during march, see pages 34, 41, 45, 49; Sánchez, interview, session 3, December 14, 2012.
19. “Chicano March Ends in Near-Skirmish”; “Protesters Call Reagan a ‘European Wetback,’” *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1971; Sánchez, *Expedition Through Aztlán*, 51–54; Sánchez, interview, session 4, December 20, 2012. For an account of La Marcha de la Reconquista and some of the tension, see Rosalio Muñoz’s testimonio in Mario T. García, *The Chicano Generation: Testimonios of the Movement* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 211–319.
20. It is difficult to estimate the number of participants in a months-long march through several states because participants came and went for various reasons. Throughout La Caravana, local chapters of the Brown Berets would join the marchers before and after their city of residence. The Federal Bureau of Investigation provided some estimates on the core group of marchers, as the FBI had informants join the march at various times and also received reports from various local law-enforcement agencies. For example, the FBI estimated twenty-five to thirty Brown Berets marching into El Paso on July 7, 1972. See José Angel Gutiérrez Collection, MS 24, box 21, in the University of Texas at San Antonio’s Special Collections Library, which contains redacted copies of the FBI reports about La Caravana. Folder 25 has reports on La Caravana as it passed through El Paso, San Antonio, and the Lower Rio Grande Valley.
21. Sánchez, interview, session 4, December 20, 2012; session 5, January 7, 2013.

22. Sánchez, interview, session 5, January 7, 2013.
23. Sánchez, interview, session 5, January 7, 2013.
24. Chávez, “*¡Mi Raza Primero!*,” 56.
25. Gómez and Chilcott identify the golf course as El Río Golf Course, while Rosales identifies it as Del Rio Golf Course. Gómez and Chilcott also identify the neighborhood as Barrio El Río, and the adjacent neighborhoods (just south and south-east) as Barrio Manzo and Barrio Hollywood, respectively. See Angel Ignacio Gómez and John Henry Chilcott, *Outline of Mexican American Education* (Tucson, Ariz.: Impresora Sahuaro, 1973), 60–62; Rosales, *Chicano!*, 211.
26. Sánchez, *Expedition Through Aztlán*, 73–76. Sánchez misspells the name of the park as “Joaquín Murietta.”
27. Sánchez, *Expedition Through Aztlán*, 74–75.
28. Armando Navarro, *La Raza Unida Party: A Chicano Challenge to the U.S. Two-Party Dictatorship* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 208. This park came about through the grassroots efforts of the Chicano Leadership Coalition and the El Rio Coalition to create a neighborhood park out of the city-owned El Rio Golf Course, located in a barrio on the west side of Tucson. The intransigence of city officials and their disrespect for community activists helped fuel the creation of La Raza Unida Party in Tucson, according to activist Salomón Baldenegro.
29. Sánchez, *Expedition Through Aztlán*, 83–86.
30. Sánchez, *Expedition Through Aztlán*, 86. Cortina became a Mexican brigadier general in the 1870s, but was living in Texas and working on his family’s extensive properties in 1859.
31. According to literary scholar Maythee Rojas, the woman referred to as “Juanita” was in reality Josefa (Juvera) Loaiza. Rojas, “Re-Membering Josefa: Reading the Mexican Female Body in California Gold Rush Chronicles,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2007): 127, 144.
32. The Gadsden Treaty was signed in Mexico City. For more information on La Placita as a site of the Mexican American community celebrations, and the Mexican American women-led struggle against its redevelopment, see Lydia Otero, “La Placita Committee: Claiming Place and History,” in *Memories and Migrations: Mapping Boricua and Chicana Histories*, ed. Vicki Ruiz and John R. Chávez (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 44–70.
33. Sánchez, *Expedition Through Aztlán*, 90. Sánchez identifies Alvarez as a colonel and as a former U.S. ambassador to Spain. According to an oral history interview, Alvarez was attached to the American embassy in Madrid, Spain, during World War I. Marie Carter and Cruz Richards Alvarez, *Cruz Richards Alvarez*, New Mexico, manuscript/mixed material, <https://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh001139/>, and <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/mss/wpalh1/18/1813/18130506/18130506.pdf>.
34. Sánchez, *Expedition Through Aztlán*, 90–91.
35. Sánchez, *Expedition Through Aztlán*, 91–93.
36. “Berets March in Santa Fe,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, December 22, 1971. According to the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, police arrested twenty-three Brown Berets: “Brown

- Berets Arrested Here,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, December 23, 1971; “Angeleños from Outer Space?,” *El Grito del Norte* (Española, N.M.), February 18, 1972; *Valley Morning Star* (Harlingen, Tex.), December 22, 1971.
37. Sánchez, *Expedition Through Aztlán*, 155.
 38. Alon Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,” *American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (December 1997): 1398–1400.
 39. Sánchez, *Expedition Through Aztlán*, 156–57.
 40. Sánchez, *Expedition Through Aztlán*, 158–59. Their monument might also have been a response to several historical markers about the U.S.-Mexico War that the group had seen on their visit to South Texas. After dedicating their monument to Cortina, the group visited the town of Santa Maria, where they read a historical marker with the following inscription: “This is the location where in April of 1848 [*sic*], the Mexican Cavalry killed 62 dragoons, perpetuating the Mexican-American War.” Sánchez, *Expedition Through Aztlán*, 160. The historical marker focuses on the so-called Thornton Skirmish, which precipitated the war. It reads, “The spot where ‘American blood was shed on American soil’ April 25, 1846; here Captain Seth B. Thornton and 62 dragoons were attacked by Mexican troops.” Contrary to the information on the marker, this spot was not on U.S. soil, but rather on El Rancho de Carricitos, owned by a Mexican rancher, and under Mexican jurisdiction. Omar S. Valerio-Jiménez, *River of Hope: Forging Identity and Nation in the Rio Grande Borderlands* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013), 134–35.
 41. Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History,” 1394.