

The Necessary Theater of the Royal Chicano Air Force

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In 1979, a photograph of the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF) ran in the *Los Angeles Times* alongside an article by staff writer Charles Hillinger. Captioned "Generals," the photo shows RCAF members decked out in captain's hats, flight goggles, bomber jackets, and aviator sunglasses (fig. 1). Two members, Esteban Villa and Juanita Ontiveros, hold opposite ends of a plaque emblazoned with the RCAF's acronym and a pair of pilot's wings. In the article, Hillinger quotes RCAF co-founder José Montoya on the origins of the group's name:

We started out as a group of artists and poets teaching at California State University, Sacramento, calling ourselves the Rebel Chicano Art Front. . . . But right from the start, everyone began confusing our abbreviation, RCAF, with the Royal Canadian Air Force. So we capitalized on the confusion and renamed the group the Royal Chicano Air Force. (Hillinger 1979, 3)



'GENERALS'—From left, Esteban Villa, Elias Alias, Lala Polendo (holding child), Ricardo Favela, José Montoya, Malaquias Montoya, and Juanita Ontiveros. Times photo by Fitzgerald Whitney.

Figure 1. "Generals." From left: Esteban Villa, Elias Alias, Lala Polendo (holding child), Ricardo Favela, José Montoya, Malaquias Montoya, and Juanita Ontiveros. Published in the *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 1979. Clipping in the author's collection. Photograph by Fitzgerald Whitney. Copyright © 1979 Los Angeles Times. Reprinted with permission.

Founded as a Chicana/o arts collective in Sacramento, California, in 1969, the RCAF was known as an "air force" in the Chicano movement for ten years prior to the publication of this article and photograph. The air force identity suited the group, since many members had served in the US armed forces during the Korean conflict or the Vietnam War.¹ The air force identity also helped

members respond with a sense of duty to the urgent needs of Sacramento's Chicana/o community.

In 1972, for example, José Montoya and the RCAF initiated the Barrio Art Program, which brought university students into Sacramento's inner city to engage local youth and the elderly in art and cultural practices. RCAF artists also painted fifteen murals in Sacramento by 1979 (Hillinger 1979, 20). Many of these works referenced the group's air force identity. Armando Cid created *Por la Raza United Flight* (1973) on the window of La Raza Bookstore in Sacramento's Chicana/o neighborhood. Under the word "libros," Cid painted a pilot connected to a pre-Columbian warrior and to a young Chicano wearing a United Farm Workers emblem on his shirt. Cid's representation of the pilot's connection to these figures was both aeronautical and gestational. Conceivably he intended the duality, since the pilot's attachment to the young Chicano and the pre-Columbian warrior suggests that his "flight" took place through political awareness and cultural education.

In addition to murals of pilots and photographs of members dressed as generals, RCAF artists visualized the air force identity through their production of silkscreen posters. In 1976, Ricardo Favela created *Huelga/Strike* in homage to the United Farm Workers (UFW) and the 1965 Delano strike, as well as the 1973 boycott of Safeway supermarkets.² The poster depicts RCAF members "dressed as pilots, riding a jeep as if they have just landed on a runway in front of Safeway" (Arroyo 1997, 14).³ Favela revised the image in 1989 for his MFA show, and *Huelga/Strike* became *In Search of Mr. Con Safos*.⁴ The poster reappeared in 2007 as the announcement for the *R.C.A.F. Goes to College* show, an exhibition of early and contemporary RCAF art at California State University, Sacramento (fig. 2). The continuous use of the air force identity by RCAF artists suggests that it was not an individuated personality, but a shared persona that the RCAF visualized, performed, and articulated for artistic, political, and historical reasons.

Despite the RCAF's frequent play with the air force theme, Chicana/o art history treats it as backstory, or as an easy introduction to the group's catalog of silkscreen posters and murals.⁵ But the air force persona was integral to the RCAF's visual art. It created a context

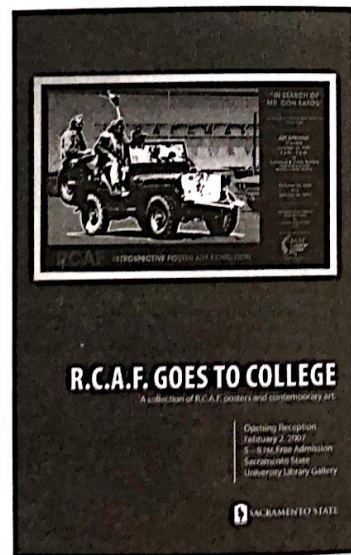


Figure 2. Announcement card for R.C.A.F. Goes to College exhibition, California State University, Sacramento, February–March 2007. Author's collection.

in which their art could be understood and provided a bridge that RCAF artists used to connect Chicano movement politics to their praxes. It also produced a shared sense of witnessing on the part of the artists and audiences.

To interpret the RCAF's air force persona, I use vocabulary established in Chicana/o theater. In many ways, the RCAF enacted the "necessary theater" of the farmworkers' movement because the air force persona developed out of the group's collective experiences on several frontlines of the Chicano movement (Huerta 1989). While visualizing the air force persona, Cid's mural and Favela's posters served political agendas of the UFW. The RCAF also performed the air force persona in response to real danger, and they used it to articulate a defense of Chicana/o art during a period of its destruction in Sacramento.

This essay begins with an overview of "necessary theater," a term coined by Jorge Huerta (1989) to describe farmworkers' theater in the 1960s and its development over the next several decades. Necessary theater gave rise to Chicana/o theatrical traditions beyond the farmworkers' movement, but I focus on its earliest phase, paying particular attention to the *actos*, or "short, succinct, collectively created pieces used to dramatize the social inequities of the farm labor system and to generate support for the Grape Strike" (Elam 1997, 20). Of course, important developments and divergences took place in Chicana/o theater over nearly fifty years of its production and performance. But the earliest period of this theater provides a valuable lens for analyzing the RCAF's "necessary theater" because it aligns with the collective's artistic purpose, which was to make art committed to social and political change and, specifically, to uplift farmworkers and Sacramento's Chicana/o community.

Following an overview of necessary theater, I examine a selection of RCAF artworks for their visualization, performance, and articulations of the air force persona. I reveal how the original form of necessary theater, the *acto*, influenced the RCAF's performance style long after Chicana/o theater broadened beyond the farmworkers' struggle (Elam 1997; Huerta 1989, 1994). I continue my investigation of the RCAF's air force persona in the third section by focusing on gendered performances within the collective. I rethink what constitutes performance in the RCAF by considering the labor of the collective's women, who not only performed for but sustained a Chicana/o air force. I also examine how one Chicana artist used the air force persona to perform against traditional expectations of gender. Seen in this light, women members move from the margins of the RCAF to its center because their actions matter in the broader performance of the collective's air force persona. The final section turns to an air force performance in which the RCAF interrupted mainstream portrayals of militant madness in the Chicano movement by satirizing them. I explore this performance through the RCAF's motto, *locura lo cura*, to contextualize the RCAF as a performance-driven visual arts collective that operated within the framework of necessary theater.

Rise of a Chicana/o Theater

A necessary theater emerged in the 1960s in response to the social, political, and economic exclusion of Chicana/os in the United States, especially Chicana/o farmworkers in California's San Joaquin Valley. In 1965 Luis Valdez approached César Chávez and Dolores Huerta of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) about creating a farmworkers' theater (Elam 1997; Huerta 1982, 1994). Valdez had studied theater at San Jose State University and trained with the San Francisco Mime Troupe for a year before joining the farmworkers' movement. He recognized that the "guerrilla theater" tactics of the San Francisco Mime Troupe were a good fit for farmworkers because the performances took place outdoors, they were lively, and they involved physical comedy (Huerta 1982, 14; Valdez 1967, 72–77). Collaborating with farmworkers as actors and as a primary audience, Valdez formed El Teatro Campesino. The troupe created *actos*, which were not plays but live actions that relied on the "expressive gestures, bodily movement, and farcical timing" of performers (Elam 1997, 3). Originally staged on the flatbeds of farm trucks, *actos* were flexible: they could be performed on-site in the agricultural fields and were mostly improvised, with props being pantomimed (Elam 1997, 75; Huerta 1973a, 14).

Farmworker *actos* first emerged during the Delano strike in order to sustain the strikers (Rosales 1997, 138; Valdez 1967, 77). But they were not a new form of theater (Jiménez 1975, 104). Other didactic theaters existed prior to El Teatro Campesino. In his dramatic education, Valdez encountered the learning pieces of German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht as well as Russian agitprop theater, both of which influenced political theater in the United States during the early twentieth century (Huerta 1982; Jiménez 1975; Valdez 1967). Contemporaries of El Teatro Campesino, such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Bread and Puppet Theatre, also utilized the "dramatic structure" of the *acto* (Jiménez 1975, 194).

What made El Teatro Campesino's *actos* distinctively Chicana/o was their content, which focused on labor relations, fair wages, and safe working conditions in the agricultural fields (Rosales 1997, 138). *Las Dos Caras del Patroncito* (1965) and *Quinta Temporada* (1966) were two of El Teatro Campesino's first *actos*, and they dramatized the labor exploitation of the farmworker by the farm owner and the farmworker's experiences working in different seasons of the agricultural cycle (Jiménez 1975, 102). "Subject to no other critics except the pueblo itself," *actos* revolutionized farmworker consciousness because they fostered "an appreciation of social change, on and off the stage" (Valdez 1971, 2).⁶

The physical comedy that was essential to El Teatro Campesino's performances also relied on the content of *actos*. Valdez defined the "serious humor" of farmworker theater as both an asset and a weapon, two terms that reflected its utilitarian purpose and rebellious agenda (1967, 77). Seeing their everyday exploitations acted out had a way of "turning on" farmworker audiences because

it publicly acknowledged their social reality (Jiménez 1975, 109; Valdez 1967, 78). Moreover, many *actos* satirized the forces of oppression by performing what farmworkers would like to do in response to their exploitation (Elam 1997; Huerta 1982; Valdez 1971). Scenes of a farmworker slapping an abusive boss, for example, produced a collective catharsis for viewers.⁷

In addition to the European theater that Valdez studied in college, the Mexican *carpa* greatly influenced farmworker *actos* (Jiménez 1975, 100). In the early twentieth century, vaudeville-like tent shows took place across northern Mexico and the US Southwest, geared toward Mexicans and Mexican Americans caught up in geopolitical and economic upheaval in an era of war and new binational labor policies.⁸ Farmworker *actos* relied on the "rasquachi aesthetic" of this earlier era of *carpa* performances (Broyles-González 1994, 36). Alicia Gaspar de Alba defines *rasquache* as a theory and a practice of "popular pleasure as a uniquely working-class strategy of resistance to dominant aesthetic codes in the art world" (1998, 10). Accordingly, *carpa* performers juxtaposed "corporeal movements interlaced with slapstick actions and pratfalls" and skillful verbal puns that often mocked upper-class norms (Ybarra-Frausto 1991, 159).⁹ *Rasquache* performances did not produce "meanings and practices in the interest of power" (Gaspar de Alba 1998, 11). Rather, they "evade[d] being controlled" by dominant institutions and culture because they happened outside of them (Fiske 1989, 49).¹⁰ Because *actos* were part of a Mexican oral culture, El Teatro Campesino did not rehearse them using scripts (Broyles-González 1994, 5–10). Prior to the publication of Valdez's *Actos: El Teatro Campesino* in 1971, the performative action—the gesture, the action, the utterance—were more important in Chicana/o theater than printed text (Huerta 1989, 209).

Remarking that El Teatro Campesino happened "somewhere between Brecht and Cantinflas," Valdez recognized the continuity between *actos* and *carpas* in Chicana/o culture (1966, 55).¹¹ Cantinflas was a noted performer of the "popular Mexican Rasquachi performance aesthetic" (Broyles-González 1994, 10). Most farmworkers were unaware of the didactic theater of Bertolt Brecht, but they were familiar with Cantinflas, whose clever wordplays and physical comedy delivered irreverent but socially just messages for Mexico's masses (8–11). Chávez was one of these farmworkers, and he realized the political potential of a *carpa*-like theater for the UFW (11). Indeed, Chávez's support of El Teatro Campesino was based on more than the presumption that popular theater was a way of reaching farmworkers with varying levels of literacy. Rather, it was a theatrical tool that utilized a "specific cultural language," and the cultural capital, of an "overwhelming majority of farmworkers" (11).¹²

Chicana/o theater as a farmworkers' theater was short-lived. In 1967, El Teatro Campesino left the farmworkers' movement to establish a permanent location where they began teaching and honing "a more aesthetically astute company of actors" (Huerta 1982, 43). Outside the immediate context of the farmworkers' movement, El Teatro Campesino had also "inspired other Chicanos

to form their own *teatros*, collectively creating *actos* relevant to their particular struggles" (Huerta 1994, 38). In 1970 Jorge Huerta became director of El Teatro de la Esperanza (1969), a theater group composed of students at the University of California, Santa Barbara (Huerta 1977, 37). Changes in venue, actors, and audiences altered the subject matter of *actos* and reshaped their form. Huerta mentions that Teatro Libertad in Tucson, Arizona, performed *Los Pelados*, a comical piece deemed a "superacto" because it was "directly related to that Valdezian form" but was much longer than the farmworker *acto* (1982, 38–39).¹³

Huerta's Teatro de la Esperanza produced *Guadalupe* in 1974 and *La Víctima* in 1976, creating a new form of Chicana/o theater called docudrama (Huerta 1977, 37–46; 1989, 210). Docudrama dramatized actual events within a Chicana/o community, not only focusing on a common labor experience. And in a benchmark advance for Chicana/o theater following its departure from the farmworkers' movement, Valdez created *Zoot Suit* in 1979 and adapted it for film in 1981.

But while superactos, docudramas, and film adaptations of Chicana/o plays demonstrated "a world beyond the agricultural fields of California," they maintained the "air of urgency" that had inspired farmworker *actos* (Huerta 1989, 7–8; 1994, 38). As an art form that developed out of the struggles of oppressed people, the project of necessary theater was not limited to the farmworkers' cause. Instead it used performance to direct audience attention to various types of social injustice. The humor and lightheartedness with which Chicana/o theater informed people and united them as an audience also remained essential to its dramatic structure.

The Formation of an Air Force Persona

Returning to the RCAF, this historic Chicana/o arts collective was not a *teatro*, although members performed poetry, dance, music, and drama. The core artists of the collective worked in visual fields. The group's air force persona also developed after El Teatro Campesino left the frontlines of the farmworkers' movement. Nevertheless, the RCAF's air force persona is rooted in farmworker theater because the majority of RCAF members had experiences on several frontlines—serving in the armed forces, student organizing, and, most important, farmworking. All of these experiences deeply influenced the collective's air force persona.

In his preliminary outline of necessary theater, Huerta echoes Valdez by declaring that "Teatro Chicano is a living, viable weapon in the struggle for social justice" (1973b, 3). The RCAF understood this phrasing—a coded language that described a theater that was aware of itself and the sociopolitical milieu in which it took place. RCAF artists incorporated the idea of using art as a "viable weapon" into their air force persona because working on UFW labor rights campaigns could be as dangerous as fighting on any battlefield. RCAF photographer Hector González explained that "César Chávez and the RCAF were brothers.

Every time he came to town he would always call on them for security" (LaRosa 1994). RCAF member Juan Carrillo recalled that while he was guarding Chávez at a local speaking engagement,

someone was spotted with a rifle. There's certainly enough stories of people dying in this country on freedom marches of one kind or another . . . there's a sense of your mortality when you're involved in politics in this country. . . . But you're moved by the spirit of knowing that that's the only way change comes: if you put it on the line. (LaRosa 1994)

Acting as Chávez's security was a real response to real danger for the RCAF. But it is a response that should be explored for its "performative quality," because the provision of security took place in the context of "dramatic social events" and became part of the drama (Elam 1997, 25). Harry Elam Jr. contends that the "protest demonstrations, draft card burnings, and acts of civil disobedience on the Delano picket lines" were "public performances before audiences," placing "actual bodies in live performance" (25). The RCAF's performance falls into this category. Their staging of a security team was both real and theatrical. It performed and participated in the "drama of the picket line" (Huerta 1982, 13). By protecting the UFW leader, the RCAF "dramatized the politics of survival" for those performing and for those watching (Huerta 1989, 5).

In fact, Carrillo's reflection on guarding Chávez demonstrates Tiffany Ana López's concept of "critical witnessing," a theatrical strategy that evolved out of necessary theater and transforms the role of the audience into agents of change. López traces a line of continuity between farmworkers' *actos* and contemporary Chicana/o theater through their urgency, or the "long standing relationship between Latina/o drama and social action" (2003, 26). She argues that the tradition of public pedagogy in necessary theater continues in contemporary Chicana/o and Latina/o drama, especially in works that confront institutional violence and its manifestations in Latina/o communities (López 2000, 2003). Like the farmworker audiences who experienced *actos* as a call to action, "critical witnesses," writes López, "understand themselves to be distinctively implicated in the fate of the person or persons they are watching" (2003, 33).¹⁴ Carrillo understood that he was "implicated in the fate of the person" he was watching; he was aware that he not only protected Chávez but put his own body on the line for the social justice platforms of the UFW (33).

The RCAF's performance of a policing force resonates with the Black Panthers and Brown Beret movements of the 1960s and 1970s. But the RCAF's air force persona also included a defense of Chicana/o art. In making this distinction, I do not mean to suggest that the Black Panthers or Brown Berets were unaware of the pragmatic value of visual art (Davalos 2008; Durant 2007; Gaspar de Alba 1998; Romo 2011). Grassroots civil rights organizations used art as a direct means of communication in their communities and for protest in the broader public sphere. Karen Mary Davalos highlights the role of visual art in the

working relationship between Chicana artist Yolanda López and Emory Douglas, "minister of culture and image maker for the Panthers" (2008, 41). After seven Latino activists, two of whom were López's colleagues, were accused of murdering a police officer in 1969, she and others formed Los Siete de la Raza in San Francisco's Mission District (39).¹⁵ The Black Panther Party "offered Los Siete one side of its weekly newspaper, which had a circulation of over 100,000 in 1969" (40).

Working with Douglas on four editions per month, López favored photomontage because of its visual pragmatism. Davalos writes,

López could include a range of faces and figures to demonstrate the diversity within the movement or connect social injustice across racial groups, national borders, and political causes. Photomontage was thus a powerful way to suggest shared oppression. It also allowed for multiple photos to appear when the paper faced a shortage of space. But the collage and retouched photographs also reminded readers of the construction of the image—each photo had been cut (literally) from its original context before being placed in the newspaper. (43)

A mixture of political consciousness, financial feasibility, and design innovation drove López's use of photomontage and shaped an early Chicana/o aesthetic more broadly. Chicana/o artists directly engaged viewers in formal contemplations of the image and of the interconnections between social, political, and technological changes. They did so outside traditional channels—the museum and the gallery.

The intersection of form, function, and location in López's photomontages also applies to the production of RCAF's posters because many were made to disseminate UFW news. Former Sacramento mayor and California state assemblyman Phil Isenberg recalled the RCAF as "the graphic arts arm of the union in the Sacramento Valley. They would do the arts. They would do the posters" (LaRosa 1994). Chávez also acknowledged the RCAF's service to the farmworkers' movement. "Over our 26 years of struggle," Chávez proclaimed, the "RCAF has inspired and helped through its art countless of Raza in the fields to continue La Huelga" (1989).

Beyond their content, RCAF posters were particularly useful to the farmworkers' cause because they were frequently produced in front of their target audience. José Montoya (2004) explained,

The poster was probably the fastest way that we were able to get the point across to the people, what we were about, because [silkscreen production] was so quick to set up. We could set it up in a Volkswagen van and start putting out multiples of images, announcing important events. Who's coming to town; what route is going to happen; there's a band here, and so on. [We had] learned in college silkscreening—which in my school they called "serigraphy" because they wanted to keep it as a fine art.

Setting up silkscreen stations in Volkswagen buses was a collective response to the urgent needs of Sacramento's Chicana/o community. It allowed the RCAF

to make a fine arts practice work as an informational tool for farmworkers and all Chicana/os. Clearly aware of the highbrow and lowbrow connotations of the terms "serigraphy" and "silkscreening," respectively, Montoya acknowledged the mixed origins of Chicana/o poster art. His recollection of taking what he learned in college and making posters in Volkswagen buses echoes the origination of farmworker *actos*, which emerged from Valdez's education in European theater traditions and a preexisting knowledge of Mexico's *carpa* tradition.

Moreover, Montoya's memory suggests that poster making was a performance. The RCAF's production of posters inside Volkswagen vans used the vehicles as on-site theatrical spaces that were "flexible and easily transportable to each new performance site" (Elam 1997, 75). Making posters in vans became a type of "traveling performance," one that recalled the earliest period of El Teatro Campesino's *actos*, in which actors staged performances on the beds of farm trucks. Bound to real notions of labor, the farmworker's truck was "a dual symbol" for farmworker audiences. It reminded viewers of "those other flatbeds that served as the primary means of transportation for the migrant farmworkers," yet it was also a space that "connoted and promoted rebellion" (75). Likewise, the RCAF moved silkscreening out of the academy and into Volkswagen buses, identifying their art as labor and rebelling against traditional notions of where art can happen.

In addition to performing their visual art process, RCAF artists used poster art to historically document air force performances. RCAF artist Luis González created *Yes on 14* (circa 1976) based on a black and white photograph taken by his brother Hector González (fig. 3). On the day of the photograph, José Montoya and Hector González were in Yuba City, California, assisting a UFW labor strike. Hector González recalled that when he "worked with José in his Barrio Art Program . . . he would always ask me to document the farmworkers movement." González "took many shots of José and the workers who walked out of the fields."¹⁶ In one frame, he captured Montoya in an air force-inspired pose, one hand holding a large UFW flag, and the other holding a lowered bullhorn (fig. 4).

Luis González recast his brother's photograph in vivid block colors. Only



Figure 3. Luis González, *Yes on 14*, ca. 1976. Courtesy of California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives, University of California, Santa Barbara. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 4. Juan Carrillo (left) and José Montoya next to Hector González's photograph of Montoya, at the Washington Neighborhood Center, 2011. Author's collection.

Montoya's head and hand maintain the black and white of the original photo, signifying Montoya's authenticity as a historical figure on the front lines of a labor walkout. The bursts of color that surround him highlight the construction of the image, echoing Davalos's observation of Yolanda López's photomontages (2008, 41–43). González's application of text to the poster also emphasized the construction of the image. Using text in posters was a favorite technique of his because it compelled viewers to "pay close attention to the formal workings of the poster" and "the play of words and image" (Noriega 2001, 23). Chon A. Noriega has explored Luis González's use of text with image, particularly in his 1976 artwork *This Is Just Another Poster* (20–23). Like this other poster, *Yes on 14* pushed the visual form through a satirical wordplay. González superimposed "Huelga" onto the photograph of Montoya, using a wraparound style that made an unfamiliar line break in the word. In doing so, González literally "breaks the strike." The visual pun seems an odd juxtaposition with Montoya, who, in his air force pose, is calling for a walkout. But González eased the tension between the two by writing in very fine print "Boycott Gallo C/S" in the foliage off to the side of Montoya's face. In other words, González visually conveys that his pun is made *con safos*. He respectfully acknowledges the historical moment of the Gallo boycott and Montoya's air force performance and reminds viewers to support California's Proposition 14, a pro-farmworker initiative.¹⁷

Complementing their posters, the RCAF contributed an impressive number of murals to the UFW and the Chicano movement. Soon after the group's formation, the RCAF embarked on a citywide mural campaign in Sacramento that coincided with the city's redevelopment of neighborhoods that were predominantly Chicana/o.¹⁸ In addition to *Por La Raza United Flight*, for example, Cid created *Ollin* and *Ollin-Sunburst* between 1973 and 1977 in the Alkali Flat neighborhood.¹⁹ Cid's works were near another RCAF mural, *Emergence of the Chicano Social Struggle in a Bi-cultural Society* (1969). *Emergence*, painted by Villa, remains in its original location in the gymnasium of the Washington Neighborhood Center.

The RCAF also created murals on the campus of California State University, Sacramento (CSUS). RCAF co-founders José Montoya and Esteban Villa were art professors at CSUS, and many of the RCAF members were college students at the time of the group's founding in 1969. But while RCAF murals in Sacramento's Chicana/o barrios sustained their communities and were not painted over until demographic changes occurred, those painted at CSUS in the 1970s did not survive the year they were created, much less the decade. Only one of the original Chicana/o student murals from the 1970s remains on school grounds. Titled *Tlaloc*, it was painted in 1972 by Enrique Ortiz in Sacramento Hall (Rios 2007).

John Pitman Weber and others have challenged the assumption that 1970s community murals, Chicana/o ones included, were destroyed because they were inferior artworks that did not meet the standards of Western art (Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft 1998; Lippard 1990; Weber 2003). "The loss of the early murals has little to do with their real or perceived aesthetic quality," Weber writes, "but everything to do with the short life span of urban America, as neighborhoods change and property changes hands" (2003, 5). The institutional eradication of murals at CSUS, however, was the result of a deliberate policy passed in 1973 by the California State University board of trustees, which consolidated power over public art projects in the university president's office.²⁰ CSUS president James Bond exercised his authority over Chicana/o murals between 1972 and 1978, resulting in the destruction of many.

In 1974, for example, Villa and his students were in the midst of painting *Pandora's Box*, a mural on the exterior of the campus pub, when they were stopped by campus security. The mural was intended to "represent the story of *Pandora's Box* . . . but with a modern twist" by comparing aeronautical imagery with hypodermic needles, representing the downside of innovation. Villa was officially accused of "defacing the walls," and the mural was whitewashed. He commented in the campus newspaper that the administration either didn't "want anything controversial or they don't like color" (Austin 1974). All kidding aside, Villa did not have Bond's permission to paint on university walls.²¹

Also during this time, Bond destroyed a mural titled *La Cultura* (Hernández 1976). This mural was a gift from the Chicana/o community to the university in 1970 and was funded through the Sacramento Concilio, a local Chicana/o

service organization (Kuss 2006, 2). *La Cultura* was painted by members of Sacramento's Chicana/o community under the direction of Sacramento artist Edward Rivera (Hernández 1976). Ironically, Bond's predecessor, President Otto Butz, presided over *La Cultura*'s dedication, along with the Sacramento Concilio president and a Sacramento city councilman.²² Just four years later, however, Bond authorized *La Cultura*'s removal due to the "renovation of buildings and normal maintenance" (Bond 1976b). The destruction set off a wave of written protests from Chicana/o faculty, community members, and the RCAF, to which Bond replied by claiming no knowledge of the partnership between CSUS and the Chicana/o community around the mural. He also wrote to the Sacramento Concilio president that an official policy would be implemented to ensure that such an event never happened again (Bond 1976a). But he did not, notably, relinquish his control over public art on campus.²³

Reflecting on the sociopolitical milieu in the 1970s, Villa assessed the larger context of institutional violence against Chicana/o murals for the RCAF:

It should go on record that we definitely do not—with our art—want to destroy this country. That's not our purpose—to be destructive and bring down the government. It seems that way, and we've been accused of that. But not as educators. . . . In fact, education is constructive and what was interesting is what they were opposed to: our connecting with history. (E. Villa 2000)

For Villa, the question of who had legitimate access to public space—in this case, at the local state university—was central to the creation of Chicana/o art. The right to public space, and the rights of "students and faculty to pursue regular curricula without administrator interference," was part of the right to access Chicana/o histories and cultural memories (Barnett 1984, 433). Official recognition of these rights became a huge concern for Villa as a professor within an institution that was exerting censorship.

So the stakes were high when Villa and Montoya returned to school in the fall of 1976 and "found that seventy student murals on campus had been whitewashed." Villa "flew into a rage and began painting an impromptu mural until restrained by security personnel. The mural survived only forty-five minutes . . . and Villa himself hardly lasted longer, since efforts were made to fire him for defacing public property" (433). Villa's performance was further dramatized after campus painters arrived to paint over the piece (Mendel 1978, A2).

In reaction to the systematic destruction of murals, the RCAF expressed a public position that claimed Villa's action as part of their air force persona. "For every mural whitewashed or demolished," the RCAF warned, "we will paint two more" (Walls 1984, 5). The RCAF's strategic declaration was both ominous and humorous, threatening to respond to the destruction of Chicana/o art by making more Chicana/o art.

The RCAF made good on their threat by moving off campus and assaulting blank walls in other public spaces deemed off limits (Walls 1984). In 1978 Villa

painted a pedestrian walkway that connects Old Sacramento to the K Street Mall (Mendel 1978, A1). Ironically, the site was the future home of the RCAF's 1984 mural, *L.A.S.E.R.I.U.M.*, which stands for *Light Art in Sacramento, Energy Resources in Unlimited Motion*. But at the time of the unauthorized painting a city official remarked bluntly to the *Sacramento Union*, "I can tell you right now that it won't remain" (A1). Villa claimed his unsanctioned mural was an attempt to "bring more attention to how murals are being painted over throughout the city without proper permission from the artists" (A1). His efforts were swiftly countered by police, prompting a letter from Favela to the mayor of Sacramento, Phil Isenberg. At the time, Favela was director of the Centro de Artistas Chicanos, an umbrella organization for the RCAF and Chicana/o programs in Sacramento.²⁴ Using official letterhead and beginning "Dear Alfredo," Favela (1978) explained to the mayor,

Sacramentos "finest" decided to ask Mr. Villa for his permission slip (obviously forgetting Mr. Villa's many fine contributions to the city). Basically, Phil this is just information I thought you'd be interested in, and don't be surprised if you receive a midnight call from me asking you, again, to get Mr. Villa and probably myself out of jail.

Using terms like "Sacramentos 'finest'" and "permission slip," Favela appropriated the language of officialdom, or the "norms created and upheld by upper-middle-class institutions," to undermine notions of official access to public space and those who control it (Broyles-González 1994, 41–42). He complemented his sardonic tone by informally addressing the mayor and reminding "Phil" that he would go to jail if need be—a statement that was funny but also conveyed his seriousness.

Favela's linguistic strategies resonate with El Teatro Campesino's use of language as a "viable weapon" for meeting the needs of farmworker audiences in performances that were humorous but also "dead serious" (Broyles-González 1994, 27). Yolanda Broyles-González notes that early farmworker acts were "rehearsal[s] of freedom" because they staged the "overturning of established relations through comedic means" (40). She elucidates her point with a comparison to *Las Dos Caras del Patroncito*, an *acto* in which a farmworker trades places with an "agribusiness boss." Favela did not necessarily trade places with the "boss" in his letter, but he met the mayor in his official capacity as director of the Centro de Artistas Chicanos. He also concluded his letter with a "rehearsal of freedom" for Chicana/o art by assuring the mayor that murals would continue to be created in public space: "We welcome whatever help you may deem necessary for the continuation of aesthetics and spiritual ceremony as a way of life. Again, I remain yours truly, in community growth" (Favela 1978). The right to public space, be it the campus of a public university or the walls of a pedestrian underpass, was the core concern of Favela's letter. His linguistic maneuvers articulated the RCAF's air force persona as it combined humor and agency to defend Chicana/o art in Sacramento.

Gender Performance in the RCAF

The RCAF's air force persona provided members a way to protect themselves against violence and take a stand against the destruction of Chicana/o art in Sacramento during the 1970s. It was also an identity that artists visualized, performed, and articulated for artistic, political, and historical reasons. But the air force persona did not happen in a vacuum. RCAF members were influenced by the same sociopolitical factors that shaped the larger Chicano movement, particularly gendered divisions of labor, leadership, and art (Arrizón 2000; Davalos 2008; Gaspar de Alba 1998; Latorre 2008; Ochoa 2003; Pérez 2007). María Ochoa writes that the Chicano movement was problematic for Chicanas because its civil rights platforms were constructed on a "traditional hierarchical family structure [in which] men were allocated a central space from which to operate and women were relegated to a subordinated position" (2003, 17). Alicia Gaspar de Alba states more bluntly: "el Movimiento was deeply sexist" (1998, 156).

In regard to the RCAF, numerous women worked within the organization, and each performed the air force persona differently. It should be stated at the outset that the gender politics of the RCAF was far more complex than it is made out to be in Chicana/o art history accounts. Scholars assume that the RCAF was an all-male organization (Gaspar de Alba 1998; Martínez 1997; Ochoa 2003; Pérez 2007; R. H. Villa 2000). Ten of the twelve visual artists in the RCAF were male, and this may be why some make the assumption of an all-male arts collective—because of the visibility of the visual artists through their posters and murals.²⁵

The fact is that the RCAF included many women who worked as the group's administrators, program coordinators, educators, activists, fundraisers, cultural practitioners, and artists.²⁶ These women included Rosemary Rasul, who worked for the Centro de Artistas Chicanos and co-directed the creation of *Southside Park Mural* (1977) with Favela. Irma Lerma Barbosa was an RCAF artist, co-founder of the Chicana collective Comadres Artistas (1992), and innovator of the Breakfast for los Niños program, a service that emerged out of Lerma Barbosa's and Mariana Castorena's studies with CSUS professor Senon Valadez.²⁷ Celia Herrera Rodríguez, a former student of Villa's at CSUS, was an affiliated RCAF artist, and Simona Hernandez, also a former student of Villa's, was co-founder of the Comadres Artistas. Gloria and Irma Rangel were singers in the 1970s RCAF Band and members of the cultural affairs committee. Juanita Ontiveros was a UFW labor organizer and a board member of the Centro de Artistas Chicanos. Jennie Baca, also a board member of the Centro de Artistas Chicanos, was a volunteer with Breakfast for los Niños. Lorraine García-Nakata was an artist who joined the RCAF in 1973.²⁸ Terezita Romo was a co-founder of La Raza Galería Posada, which was started in 1980 in conjunction with the preexisting La Raza Bookstore (1972).²⁹ Graciela Ramirez, a former Spanish professor at CSUS, was a board member of Galería Posada and co-founder of Los Escritores del Sol.

Other RCAF women included Lupe Portillo, a volunteer for the Breakfast for los Niños program and member of the cultural affairs committee; Gina Montoya, affairs committee; Melinda Rasul, a member of the cultural affairs committee; Francisca Godínez, a student worker for La Raza Bookstore and the Centro de Artistas Chicanos;³⁰ Isabel Hernández-Serna, a former CSUS administrator and UFW supporter; and Josie Talamantez, a cultural worker who retired in 2011 as director of programs for the California Arts Council. And there were more. I have listed these women and the duties they performed not to exclude other members of the RCAF, but to attest to the number of women working in the collective and to counter claims that the RCAF was an all-male organization.

Montoya (2004) also conveyed the centrality of women in the RCAF when he remarked,

There's people that accused us of [being] macho oriented. . . . But the critics forget that there were a lot of women in the RCAF. So, when people say that the RCAF was a specifically male thing, they are privileging the artists over all other components. . . . You couldn't tell my comadre, Jennie Baca, that she wasn't RCAF. Jennie [and] Rosemary Rasul were powerful ladies. They were the proposal writers and the administration that kept our airplanes flying. When they gave us our orders, we went and did it.

Using air force terms to describe the ways in which Chicana members sustained the RCAF, Montoya raised important questions about how RCAF art history is constructed. Was it only male chauvinism that led to the RCAF's designation as an all-male group? Or do scholars evaluate labor differently in the RCAF, "privileging the artists," particularly the visual artists, "over all other components" of the group's membership? While there is no doubt the RCAF celebrated male visual artists more frequently than others, the tendency of Chicana/o historiography to focus on RCAF sexism has neglected the tremendous contributions of women in the collective.

If we rethink what counts as labor—and the performance of labor—in the RCAF, other contributions emerge. An undated, typewritten document titled "Southside Park Mural," for example, reveals intersections of gender, labor, and performance in the group during the creation of one of the RCAF's most important public artworks, *Southside Park Mural* (1977).³¹ Discovered in a folder of RCAF papers housed at the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives at the University of California, Santa Barbara, the one-page document appears to be an attachment to a grant proposal or financial contract. It lists the RCAF members who worked on the mural in six categories that include "Artists," "Apprentices," "Assistants," and "Photographers." Fascinatingly, "Clara Cid, Frances [Godínez] Gonzalez, Juana Polendo [Ontiveros] and Jennie Baca" are named in the category "Food Coordination." That the women's labor is listed along with that of artists, apprentices, assistants, and photographers indicates that

"food coordination" was counted in the projected overhead for the mural.³² The simple record presents details of a bigger picture—what the effort to produce a Chicana/o mural actually looked like in 1977. In charge of purchasing the food, cooking it, and transporting it to the mural site, the food coordination committee was an RCAF unit that worked on and off the site of *Southside Park Mural*.

Using a wider lens for evaluating the RCAF's art "work," Lerma Barbosa described the complex experience of a Chicana/o arts collective that was philosophically opposed to labor inequality and racial-ethnic injustice but not necessarily opposed to patriarchal gender roles. One of the few female artists in the RCAF, Lerma Barbosa recalled in an interview with María Ochoa that she dressed differently from other female members, who "thought I was some kind of tramp because I worked as an artist, side by side with the men. So I knew I had to handle myself a certain way in order to get their respect. So I'd be sitting around in my combat boots, while the girlfriends would be flittering around the men like butterflies" (Ochoa 2003, 68–69). Lerma Barbosa's memory of her "combat boots," more than any other material marker, reveals that she dressed to "combat" sexism in the RCAF and, more generally, in the Chicano movement.

Lerma Barbosa alludes to an internal stage within the RCAF, one on which women members enacted different gendered roles for different reasons. To the suggestion that her characterization of the "girlfriends" as "flittering butterflies" seems reductive, or casts other women members as inconsequential to the (art) work taking place, Lerma Barbosa responds that "any position for any woman in the RCAF was 'reductive'" since "women were never acknowledged to be leaders."³³ In fact, the idea that Lerma Barbosa could become an RCAF leader was met with resistance, which also was articulated through the air force persona. She recalled one evening when the RCAF artists were gathered together:

The guys were drinking, and everyone was kickback. José [Montoya] says, "Well, tonight's the night we're going to give Irma her general's wings." One of the guys objected. He said, "No, this is not right. She's a woman." . . . This member was famous for having fits, throwing tantrums. So nobody wanted to make him mad because he would hold a grudge. . . . I didn't get my rank as a general. I was hurt and pissed, you know? José told me I would have to become a general of women. (quoted in Ochoa 2003, 69–70)

Lerma Barbosa's memory suggests that while the air force persona was a defensive strategy for RCAF members on the frontlines of UFW events and a defense for Chicana/o art, it did not protect her, a Chicana who pursued gender equality within the collective.

Despite her marginalization in the RCAF leadership, Lerma Barbosa created artwork that was central to significant group shows. In 1988 La Raza Galería Posada held La Raza's Quinceañero, an anniversary show featuring RCAF artwork. Along with an image by Carrillo, Lerma Barbosa's silkscreen poster *Sacramento* (1987) was featured on the cover of the exhibition catalog (fig. 5).

In its content and form, Lerma Barbosa's poster explores performances of gender between RCAF members and within Sacramento's Chicana/o community. To create *Sacramento*, Lerma Barbosa collaborated with Luis González, using the photograph-to-serigraph technique that he used in his poster *Yes on 14, Sacramento* was based on a photograph of Lerma Barbosa and "a few other original Sacramento Brown Berets



Figure 5. Irma Barbosa, *Sacramento*, 1987. Courtesy of California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives, University of California, Santa Barbara. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

standing on the outdoor stage of Southside Park where the Chicano community regularly held community events."³⁴ The Sacramento Brown Berets worked as security for these community gatherings at Southside Park, paralleling the RCAF's performances of a policing force for UFW events. Lerma Barbosa had joined the Brown Berets prior to joining the RCAF and was one of four female members in the Sacramento chapter.

Sacramento also visualizes a significant performance space for Sacramento's Chicana/o community: the Southside Park stage, the venue for multiple performances associated with the Chicano movement, including performances of the RCAF's air force persona (fig. 5). Standing with her arms folded, Lerma Barbosa is center stage with other Brown Berets. They are encircled by several young men and a Chicana, all of whom are dressed in plain clothes. A mariachi musician stands at a distance from the group, unsure of "what to do next." Lerma Barbosa intended the spatial arrangement of these diverse personas to "compare the different relationship that our Mexican American parents held with the dominant culture from the relationship we as 'revolutionaries, activists, and progressive Chicanos' were determined to create." Yet, despite their differences, everyone stands "together in solidarity," committed to the larger goal of self-determination. Notably, the stage panels behind the group are blank, indicating that the photograph and Lerma Barbosa's serigraph predate the RCAF's *Southside Park Mural*. "Our presence on that stage was very powerful in that we demonstrated leadership to our own people," Lerma Barbosa observes. *Sacramento*, then, is a historical account of Lerma Barbosa's experiences with pushing the front lines of gender equality through performance in the RCAF and the Chicano movement.

Locura Lo Cura: Craziness Cures

During the 1970s, as we have seen, the RCAF developed an air force persona that responded to the social reality of the Chicano movement. From guarding against the threat of physical violence to defending Chicana/o art against

destruction to negotiating gender dynamics within their collective, the RCAF balanced the serious side of their air force persona with humor and farce as a means of artistic and cultural rebellion. The collective was well known during the Chicano movement era for the expression *locura lo cura*, or "craziness cures." The idea that craziness was a healing strategy for the RCAF suggests that humor was more than a survival tactic: it was also a remedy for the sociopolitical ills of the milieu in which the RCAF operated. Montoya elaborated, "Our sense of humor, which we call our *locura*, our insanity, was precisely what allowed us to move on and to accomplish the things that we accomplished" (LaRosa 1994). Defending both Chicana/o activism and art, the RCAF used the *locura lo cura* philosophy to parody the mainstream media's depictions of Chicana/os as a dangerous and unstable element in US society. In doing so, the RCAF implemented the dramatic structure of the farmworker *actos*.

Valdez witnessed one such performance in 1971, when the RCAF arrived at a statewide gathering of artists in San Juan Bautista, California. Valdez, along with the RCAF and other Chicana/o artists, had established an arts council during the Chicano movement. It emerged in "the late '60s and early '70s," according to Carrillo. "When Chicana/o groups began to appear, centros began to also appear up and down this state, and we met as artists . . . groups in different cities would host a gathering and artists would come from various parts of the state and there would be great meetings" (2004). These gatherings led to the inception of a statewide organization called Concilio de Arte Popular.³⁵

Valdez, recalling the RCAF's arrival that evening, remembers

a bunch of vatos dressed up as World War II pilots, flying into San Juan Bautista one night in '71 in a noisy squadron of Volkswagen buses and parking in an empty lot, one by one, as José Montoya, wearing goggles and one of those dog-eared pilot's caps, flagged them in, vigorously, like a flagger on some aircraft carrier at sea. It was brilliant *vacilada*, a little sardonic and more than satirical, but a hellavu a lotta laughs . . . *que curada*. In fact the motto of the RCAF said it all: *locura lo cura*. Craziness heals.³⁶ (Valdez 1989)

Complete with squadron gestures and a runway-style entrance, the RCAF circled the gathering of artists and parked. They opened the van doors and, as Carrillo recalled, spilled out "wearing World War II helmets. It was like instant theater" (LaRosa 1994). This performance resonates with the *rasquache* aesthetic of farmworker *actos* because it was short in duration, largely pantomimed, and performed on-site. Valdez agreed with Carrillo that the entrance was instant theater, adding that the "entire RCAF pose was performance art" (1989). The RCAF's arrival in San Juan Bautista captivated Valdez, just as the *actos* by El Teatro Campesino used to "turn on" the farmworkers who witnessed them (1967, 77).

The RCAF had used the perception of militancy and madness in the Chicano movement for its own ends, yielding a collective catharsis for an audience of Chicana/o artists. These artists needed a break, not only from the real dangers of the Chicano movement but also from its mainstream depictions.

Randy Ontiveros has examined the "scant coverage of Mexican American issues in the early years of television," noting that "the story of César Chávez and the California grape strike" was the first Chicana/o story and, possibly, the only one "that networks covered substantively" (2010, 904). But the mainstream media's focus on Chávez was not in service to the farmworkers' movement or the "progressive Chicana/o politics" of the Chicano movement (904). Rather, it broadcast a "visual binary" in which Chicanas/os were perceived "as suffering saints or (more often) as dangerous revolutionaries. On one side was the figure of Chávez. On the other side were those violent, undifferentiated masses threatening to bring the American experiment to an end" (904, 909). Referring to the founding fathers' nickname for the United States as the "great experiment," Ontiveros claims that the mainstream media framed Chicana/o protesters as un-American troublemakers whose activism did not participate in a national tradition of political dissent (908).

The lack of fair coverage or historical contextualization of the Chicano movement also undermined the credibility of Chicana/o activists. Ontiveros cites ABC's report on Reies López Tijerina and his "admittedly theatrical effort to make a citizen's arrest" of Supreme Court nominee Warren Burger in 1969 (908). Tijerina staged the event to draw attention to his organization, the Alianza Federal de las Mercedes, and the ongoing struggle for Hispano land rights in New Mexico (Rosales 1997, 154–70). But in the television news story, Tijerina "came across as a lunatic, and (worse) his cause was made to seem like a farce" (Ontiveros 2010, 908). Between Chávez, the docile saint, who staged a hunger strike in 1968, and Tijerina, the threatening militant, who attempted to arrest a Supreme Court nominee, the media projected the madness of the Chicano movement. It was this "visual binary" to which the RCAF responded (904). After all, craziness cures.

If farmworkers' *actos* were meant to "educate and entertain, exposing issues and offering possible solutions" for farmworkers on the frontlines of a labor strike (Huerta 1989, 6), the RCAF's performance in San Juan Bautista also offered a solution to an important issue for Chicana/o artists—or, rather, offered them a cure for the insane notion that Chicana/os, and gatherings of Chicana/os, posed a threat to US society. Using *locura*, the RCAF mocked the media's portrayal of militant madness in the Chicano movement for an audience that was well aware of their own social reality. As Carrillo's experience guarding Chávez at UFW events illustrates, RCAF members endured threats of violence rather than posing any such threat (LaRosa 1994). This was a similar reality for farmworkers who "crossed over to the El Teatro stage" to watch *actos* (Elam 1997, 76). Farmworkers faced brutal consequences for participating in the UFW and El Teatro Campesino, including attacks by "guard dogs, sulphur insecticide spray, arrests, and physical beatings," Harry Elam Jr. writes. Under such circumstances, "the performance of the *actos* [. . .] constituted far more than entertainment" (76).

Flying into San Juan Bautista that night in 1971, the RCAF's performance united the performers and the audience in a "symbolic overthrow of oppression" (Elam 1997, 17). According to the RCAF's *locura lo cura* philosophy, one way to defeat oppression is to make fun of it. Montoya captured this sentiment with verbal flair eight years after the San Juan Bautista performance, when he and his colleagues posed as a Chicana/o air force for the *Los Angeles Times*. "It is a serious organization," Montoya quipped, "but we use this RCAF kind of insanity to keep from getting too serious" (Hillinger 1979, 20). Through their dynamic visualizations, performances, and articulations of the air force persona, the RCAF contributed to a major dramatic restructuring of Chicana/o theater as they pushed the front lines of Chicana/o visual art.

Notes

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1. During the Korean conflict, José Montoya served in the US Navy, Esteban Villa served in the US Army, and Sam Rios Jr. served in the US Air Force. During the Vietnam War, Armando Cid, Hector González, and Juanishi Orosco served in the US Army.

2. The grape boycott, organized in November–December 1965 by César Chávez's National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), primarily targeted Schenley Industries and the DiGiorgio Corporation. The NFWA merged with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) in 1966, becoming the United Farmworkers Organizing Committee (UFWOC), and winning a contract from DiGiorgio that same year (Ontiveros 2010, 904, 922 n. 39; Rosales 1997, 145, 280). The UFWOC later became the United Farm Workers (UFW).

3. The inspiration for Favela's poster was a photograph by Harold Nehei that captured Favela, José Montoya, Esteban Villa, and David Tafoya driving a World War II jeep through Woodland, California. While driving, they accidentally drove into a Mother's Day parade. Later, they received word that they won second place in the parade's float competition. The story was shared with me in e-mail correspondence from Hector González in September 2011. RCAF members also tell this story in the documentary *Pilots of Aztlán: The Flights of the RCAF* (LaRosa 1994).

4. *In Search of Mr. Con Safos* was designed by Favela and printed by his RCAF colleague Luis González.

5. Scholars who use the RCAF's air force identity as an introduction to their visual art include Barnett (1984), Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft (1998), Cockcroft and Barnett-Sanchez (1993), Goldman (1990), Gaspar de Alba (1998), and Latorre (2008).

6. The use of the term *acto* was intentional. Valdez explains, "We could have called them 'skits' . . . but we lived and talked in San Joaquin Spanish (with a strong Tejano influence). . . . We needed a name that made sense to the Raza" (1971, 5). In Spanish, *acto* means an act or action and "can also be used in the theatrical sense for an 'act' of a play" (Huerta 1982, 15). Yet the *acto* was not a part of larger performance, "but a complete statement in itself" (15). The cause and effect nature of the *acto*—the verbal and physical action—resonated with farmworkers, who understood and employed the theatrical form as a "political statement, a declaration of dissatisfaction with the status quo" (15).

7. Valdez provided this example in his 1967 interview with Beth Bagby.