

Rita Sanchez: An Oral Interview

Conducted by Rudy P. Guevarra, Jr.

Rita Sanchez can best be described as a teacher, activist, writer, mentor, mother, grandmother, wife, daughter, sister, *compañera*, and life long advocate of the Chicana/Chicano experience. Born May 20, 1937, in San Bernardino, California, seventh of eleven children, Rita was destined to be an educator. She graduated from San Bernardino High School in 1956 and was one of the first Mexican Americans to go to college where she majored in Journalism at San Jose State University. She earned her BA and MA in English at Stanford University in 1974, and then, as a Ford Foundation Fellow, went on to pursue her PhD in Literature at the University of California, San Diego. From 1974-1984, she taught in the Mexican American Studies Department at San Diego State University.



Rita Sanchez, advocate of the Chicana/Chicano experience. Photo courtesy of Rita Sanchez.

She is currently semi-retired from San Diego Mesa College, where she has been teaching since 1990. The following interview with this amazing woman tells how she inspired generations of writers in education and the arts because of her involvement in the Chicano movement.

How did you get involved in the Chicano Movement in San Diego?

At first I just wanted to finish college. Then observing civil rights activism, I wanted to do something to change the world. I had been married for ten years and was now a single mother of two daughters, Lisa and Lauri. In 1970, I entered Stanford at the peak of the Civil Rights Movement. The Chicano movement was blossoming. I would not be the only “Mejicana” in a classroom anymore. No one

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could be excluded, or told that they could not go to college because they were poor, as I was told by a counselor. We could also feel pride in discovering our true ancestry. My children were also involved at their schools. They went with me to special programs and cultural events. They took Spanish classes so we could recover our language, and went to rallies for justice in education. They participated in the Chicano Movement for civil rights with me.

At Stanford I was the first woman to become a Chicano Fellow after proposing a course in writing and another for Chicanas. From there, I edited student writings for a Chicana journal, *Imagenes de La Chicana*, that we published in 1973. I was then invited to participate in various conferences, one at UC Berkeley and another at San Jose State, a Latin American Women's Writers Conference. That year I presented, "Chicana Writer: Breaking Out of Silence." My contribution to the importance of writing for women was published by *Aztlan Journal* along with other women's work.

In 1974 I was offered a position at San Diego State University and drove my two young daughters and myself there. When I arrived, the first person I met introduced me to Chicano Park in Logan Heights and the Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park. The Chicano Movement was in full swing and activities were ongoing at the Park, in the community, or in the streets. The United Farm Workers Movement was foremost in people's minds and the students enacted its needs and concerns in *teatro*. Workers were suffering in the fields due to low wages and poor working conditions, especially Mexicans and Filipinos. Films were being shown on campus to heighten awareness. I had seen the film, "I Am Joaquin," by Rodolfo Corky Gonzalez as a student and now I was showing it to my students at SDSU. I recall how affected I was by that film. I had never before seen a film with the Mexican people as the heroes. I was so personally affected by the Chicano Movement concerns that I wanted to do something. I thought by teaching, writing, I could contribute.

Another way that I became involved was with Chicana women. At Stanford I had taught a first course there. Now feeling alone at SDSU, I tried hard to keep up with my friends at Stanford. They sent me the latest flyers with events. One day I got a flyer telling me more about a young American college student from UC Santa Cruz named Olga Talamante who had been unjustly arrested, accused of being a radical because she was working in a free clinic. As a tourist from the U.S. she had traveled to Argentina. Olga's volunteer services for the poor became illegal under a new dictator and she found herself caught up in the middle of a coup and was incarcerated with the Argentine students. That coup came to be known as the Dirty War in Argentina or *La Guerra Sucia*.

With the help of the U.S. Embassy and other community activists she was released. I invited Olga Talamante to come to San Diego to speak. She came and stayed with my children and me in our home. I had been working on the Third World Literature Conference at SDSU with professors Jacqueline Tunberg and Prescott (Nick) Nichols in the Comparative Literature Department and so Olga Talamante was our keynote speaker.

Soon after, I proposed a student journal of writings at SDSU. Maria Avila Felix interviewed Olga Talamante, one of the first interviews to be published. Olga was not a radical militant as Chicanos were often called. She was a humanitarian woman whose heart went out to others. I was fully invested in Chicano Movement concerns like this.

What were some of your most memorable experiences during the Chicano Movement in San Diego?

I began to learn more of the history of the Mexican American Movement for civil rights in San Diego. I saw the mural art around San Diego that revealed the people's struggle for equal education and for a park in San Diego. I heard about the teachers who were here before me who had fought for Mexican American Studies at SDSU.

The Chicana class that I taught for ten years, however, was most important to me, along with advising "Las Chicanas" on campus. First of all, it connected me to students' needs and to the women who came before me and to the work they had already accomplished. It also made the work that I did at Stanford and was doing at SDSU more meaningful, realizing that we were all working together for a larger cause.

The art at Chicano Park and the Centro Cultural de la Raza was as valuable as the work I was doing at SDSU. It represented the people and a place to call their own. I had found strength and courage in their actions. And I have remained here to build wherever I found work to do. Despite being alone as the only Chicana in the department, I have worked to make sure that will never happen again and that it should be against the law to have only one woman in any department.

I decided that I wanted to continue the work they had been doing. I wondered what I could contribute. I wanted to be there for the students by giving them a needed mentor. At first I felt alone because all the women who had started Mexican American Studies were no longer there. It was a difficult transition but a hopeful time of change. I had two children to raise and now a PhD degree to complete, so I decided to do what I had done at Stanford. I proposed a student journal of writings. I gathered around some women who were already working there: Dianne Borrego, Elizabeth Alvarado, and Maria Felix to help complete the project. I edited the writings while student artists designed it. *Vision de La Mujer de La Raza* was published at SDSU in 1976. I included my first published essay "Chicana Writer: Breaking Out of Silence," renaming it "Writing as a Revolutionary Act."

Besides the journal of Chicana writings, I promoted the film "Salt of the Earth," about women in a mining strike in New Mexico, producing fundraisers for various student causes by inviting Clint Jencks, one of the activists in the film, to speak. I did so not knowing that one of my ancestors was in that strike, Charles Coleman and Susana Montoya, my mother, Macedonia Acuña's cousins. Another highlight of my involvement included the anti-nuclear movement. I gave a speech as part of an anti-nuclear program at SDSU on the steps of Aztec Center. I protested a U.S. proposal to put a nuclear waste dump in a New Mexico neighborhood where residents had shared communal lands for centuries. Now southern New Mexico was being treated as a nuclear waste dump. The theme was common, dumps in the Mexican American neighborhoods and now this was the worst—radioactive tailings were to be transported across the state and stored in the New Mexico earth. What made the cause so more important to me was that this was my ancestor's homeland. I invited Rachael Ortiz of the Barrio Station to talk about the toxic wastes in Barrio Logan and how they were harmful to the people of San Diego, especially those families with children living there. Someone came up to me afterwards and said my speech and the topic I addressed set a dramatic stage. To me, I was just talking passionately about something I strongly believed.

What experiences led you to become a professor?

It was all accidental. First, I loved to read as a child, thanks to Mama. I first majored in Spanish although English was my first language. I was in love with learning to speak it and just maybe someday I might teach it. But as the subject became more and more difficult, I regretted not being a native speaker. My mother had taught us Spanish, but because the schools promoted English-only, I lost the language. My mother had learned to read in both languages from her mother and passed that on to us. Although we didn't have a TV for a long time, we read. We went to the library on weekends, and perhaps that is what kept our family of twelve so quiet!

Realizing that I would never be able to teach as a non-native speaker, I changed my major to English. Everyone warned me not to major in English because, at the time, there were no teaching jobs. I decided not to listen and so began my journey of reading literature. That's when I met the San Diego poet Alurista. My Comparative Literature professor at Stanford asked me to pick him up from the airport. Alurista had been invited to read his poetry along with the Nicaraguan Poet Laureate Ernesto Cardenal. On opening night of the presentation he told me that I should apply for a position at SDSU. And so began my teaching career.

As a professor, what sorts of projects were you involved in during the movement? What was your role and how did it affect your teaching?

My first priority was to help organize Chicana women on campus. I had heard about, and later met, Sonia Lopez, Enriqueta Chavez, Olivia Puente Reynolds, Carmen Adame, and other Chicana activists like Elizabeth Alvarado and Maria Avila Felix; I met community activists and artists like Gracia Molina de Pick, Senora Herminia Enrique, and her daughters. All were inspirational to me. My teaching job at SDSU and my graduate studies at UCSD were overwhelming and I could barely get through the day and so I needed the examples of these women to give me strength. As a UCSD grad student I used to meet with other students at Alurista's house to talk about our work projects, the movement activities, and our lives. That is where I met Mario Acevedo. We began to do art projects together and got married in 1977. We had two children, Lucia and Pablo.

Some highlights involved meeting other artists. I met Judith Hernandez, Carlos Almaraz, Barbara Carrasco, Frank Romero, Willie Herron, Gronk, and many others whose studios I visited. I got to see how they were expressing the Chicano people's struggles in their work. I met Yolanda Lopez of San Diego and heard her talk about her *La Virgen de Guadalupe* art series. She soon after became one of the most notable artists of the CARA Exhibit at UCLA, and widely respected among Chicana/o artists. It was a privilege to meet these activists in the arts in the 1980s. I was privileged to be co-owner of one of the first commercial art galleries in San Diego, Acevedo Gallery, first established by Guillermo Acevedo, my father-in-law, a noted international artist living in San Diego. I was able to learn about the gallery business from masters like him. I helped design and exhibit many shows from 1983 to 1990 that allowed San Diegans to see and purchase local art. These were turbulent times, activism, adventure and, after twelve years, divorce.

After ten years teaching *La Chicana* at SDSU, I taught the class on *La Mujer* at

San Diego Mesa College for another sixteen, 1990-2006. In 1995, I was chair of the Committee against Racism after the Rodney King incident. As chair of the Department of Chicano Studies at Mesa in 1998, I became the head writer for the academic review supporting and documenting Chicano Studies at the college. In 2004, as the first full time Chicana professor at Mesa College, I invited Dolores Huerta, United Farm Workers, Vice President, to speak at our campus; we had a march, a rally, and even a Mass. In 2006, I invited Gracia Molina de Pick, founder of Chicano Studies at Mesa College, to be our Hispanic Heritage Month keynote speaker. That same year I recommended a change in our department's name from Chicano Studies to the department of Chicana and Chicano Studies. Most recently, I have been involved in a committee to develop a Chicana/o Studies Historical Archive at San Diego State University.

As a professor of literature and teacher of composition, my role has been, most of all, to train and inspire the emerging generation to believe in themselves and be willing to express their souls on paper. It is not an easy thing to do, but as a teacher you have to be vulnerable enough to get them to share themselves and their, sometimes painful, stories. Thus, I learned that students do need and deserve role models.

I hope I have been a role model for many Chicanas. I have, in fact, felt a great responsibility, even love for my students, enough to encourage them to write.

In 1999, a definitive work entitled *Chicana Feminist Thought, The Early Chicana Writings*, reprinted my essay, "Chicana Writer: Breaking Out of Silence." In 2008, Cal State Los Angeles Professor Michael Soldatenko mentions it in *The Biography of a Discipline: The Genesis and Development of Chicano Studies, 1967-1982*. His analysis refers to my 1973 essay as part of a shift in the paradigms of Chicano Studies away from a male-centered, colonialist model.

How do you see the future of Chicana and Chicano Studies and what can we learn from the past?

The future of Chicano Studies is in good hands. We have the strength of our ancestors, the roots of our history. They have been inspirations to me and I know will continue to inspire the next generation. When a student asked, "How can we make it on our own from here?" The answer is they can stand on the shoulders of their ancestors. They suffered through hard times we can never imagine, and have taught us to be strong in the face of hardship. The leaders of Chicano Studies today are more confident than we were in their intellectual foundations. They have gone beyond us in some ways, for instance, in our agonizing over questions of terminology. They may not all call themselves Chicanos, but they have acquired that strength. They know how to form coalitions and have learned from our mistakes. They are privileged to have a huge and growing body of published literature and studies by and about Chicanas and Chicanos in the U.S.

We can learn that the struggle is ongoing, and that we still have to continue to speak out. We must learn that we can't get comfortable. That is easy to do, especially when you are tired, or feel like you have put in enough time. When you do get soft, and look away even for a minute, the ugly head of racism or exclusion emerges to remind us to wake up raza! Just as it did in those days gone by. In 2004, Richard Griswold del Castillo and I both presented at a breakthrough

conference, "Latinas and Latinos in World War II," by Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez. My writing was published in her book, *Mexican Americans & World War II* as, "The Five Sanchez Brothers," (Austin: UTexas Press, 2005). And the following year I traveled with Richard as his wife to Washington D.C. where he presented his work.

Recently the unthinkable happened, because we forget, and think people are politicized, or at least educated on issues of the diversity demanded by our Commissions on Civil Rights in America. Chicanos were excluded from an important film.

The Ken Burns film "The War" was made entirely without addressing the huge participation of Hispanos, Latinos, and Filipinos in World War II. My uncle died in the Philippines during WWII. Worst of all, the Burns film was ready for production despite the omission of Latino contributions with the approval of PBS. We have to learn from the past. Just when we thought exclusion could never happen again in the United States, especially by such a conscientious organization as PBS, we had to speak out, write letters, walk in picket lines, protesting the exclusion of people like my father and four uncles who contributed to the war effort. Latinos had been excluded from the monumental story. The hardest part was addressing the problem to get an affirmative response. A new committee had to be formed by Gus Chavez and Maggie Rivas Rodriguez called Defend the Honor to get anyone to listen. We have to learn from the past.

Today, the new generation has new energy. They also have resources that contain much more than we had. We still have major problems of poverty and mis-education and the new generations are becoming very aware of them and are continuing the struggle. That is good news. So the *grito* continues, ¡*Que Viva La Raza!*