

Militant Machismo: Hypermasculinity & The Brown Berets

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In August 1972, residents of Catalina Island off the coast of Southern California panicked as they witnessed a group wearing brown military uniforms raising a sizeable Mexican flag over the town of Avalon. Observers at the event worried that the Mexican army was invading their precious tourist island and petitioned the National Guard to intervene on their behalf.¹ In reality, the Chicano militant group, known as the Brown Berets, was staging a dramatic occupation of the island to bring attention to what they considered the oppressive colonial memory of the former Mexican territory. Their presence caused anxiety and attracted both police and media attention as reporters and investigators flocked to the island to observe this militant group setting up camp on a position now referred to as Burrito Point. Photos taken from the lengthy twenty-two-day occupation, however, revealed an uncomfortable truth about the organization's operations. Amongst the ranks of the proud uniformed men stood a sole woman donning the brown beret who actively participated in all the group's paramilitary drills and protests.² The gender imbalance presented within these images was no outlier for the organization; instead, it illustrated a harsh reality concerning the role of women within the Brown Berets. The men stood paramount as the faces of the militant group, whereas the women rarely occupied the positions of true revolutionaries within the organization.

Amid the energetic fervor of the Chicano movement during the late 1960s, a variety of Mexican American activists addressed the vast educational, financial, and political inequalities plaguing their communities. However, diverse splinter groups within the movement held considerably different views on how to realize the movement's broader goals. While some embraced passive resistance, others decided to address the issues with more force. The Brown

¹ Ariella Markowitz, "The Forgotten Occupation of Catalina Island," KQED, August 14, 2020, <https://www.kqed.org/news/11832103/the-forgotten-occupation-of-catalina-island>.

² Ibid

Berets, a paramilitary sub-faction within the Chicano movement, were a prime example of some Chicanos' willingness to employ a forceful activist platform. The organization's expression of machismo and its blatant stance against the oppressive brutality committed by the LAPD initially prompted a warm reception from Chicano communities nationwide. From 1967 to 1972, the organization had won support across the southwestern United States, attracting street youth who wanted to take immediate action against the oppressive state.

Since the organization's untimely collapse in 1972, the historical scholarship on the controversial paramilitary group has remained limited. Most of the analysis of the movement remains fixated on the shared similarities between the Brown Berets and the Black Panthers organization. For example, Paul Flores' comparative study titled "To Protect and To Serve: Effects of the Relationship Between the Brown Berets and Law Enforcement" examines some of the commonalities between the militant groups, such as the group's adoption of Malcolm X's ideologies and the social outreach programs launched by both organizations.³ Carlos Munoz examines the reasons for the collapse of the Brown Berets in his monograph titled *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement*. However, he noticeably provides a limited analysis of the organization compared to other organizations within the Chicano Movement. Other studies, like Edward Escobar's "The Dialectics of Repression: The Los Angeles Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968-1971," have paid close attention to the response prompted by law enforcement and undercover officers' infiltration.⁴ Lastly, studies like Mario Garcia's *Rewriting the Chicano Movement: New Histories Mexican American Activism in the Civil Rights Era*

³ Paul Flores. "To Protect and To Serve: Effects of the Relationship Between the Brown Berets and Law Enforcement," *History in the Making*: Vol. 5, Article 6, 2012.

⁴ Edward J. Escobar "The Dialectics of Repression: The Los Angeles Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968-1971." *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (1993): 1483–1514. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2080213>.

analyze the organization's willingness to contest colonial memory through various activist rallies in the southwest meant to symbolically reclaim stolen Mexican territory.

These studies provide nuanced examinations of the Brown Berets as they provide a thorough analysis of the activist platform and structures employed by the organization. In contrast, the analysis of the group's militant machismo culture remains noticeably underdeveloped within the current scholarship. It is undeniable that the Brown Berets' militant masculine identity significantly affected the organization's operations and its outward appearance to the community. Yet historians have provided minimal analysis on the significance of the hypermasculinity of the organization. As a result, this analysis explores the central question: What impact did the militant machismo culture have on the organization's rise to prominence and decline? The foundation of this analysis is based on Ramon Gutierrez's essay "Community, Patriarchy Individualism: The Politics of Chicano History and The Dream of Equality" which argues that Chicano men invested themselves with masculine images of power to reclaim a sense of political empowerment previously denied to them by the oppressive structure of the capitalist state.⁵ Gutierrez's analysis provides an excellent theoretical framework to analyze archival reports, newspapers, and oral histories to determine how the Brown Berets' expression of Chicanismo exhibited a cultural assertion of masculinity that provided empowerment. The militant machismo promoted by the Brown Berets played a significant role in propelling the organization to a state of relevance. Over time, however, the same militant masculinity caused internal and external friction, which ultimately contributed to the organization's collapse.

Police Brutality & the Rise of the Brown Berets

⁵ Ramon Gutierrez Community, Patriarchy, and Individualism: The Politics of Chicano History and the Dream of Equality." *American Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (1993), 71.

For most of the twentieth century, the barrios of Los Angeles, as in the southwest more generally, had a devastating legacy of police brutality. Within their respective communities, Mexican Americans were the targets of disproportional racial profiling and police harassment accompanied with unwarranted traffic stops, beatings, and shootings.⁶ For example, in examining one prominent episode of police brutality, police officers in East Los Angeles reportedly responded to a noise complaint on May 26, 1951, forcing entry into a house and assaulting an eight-month pregnant woman and a disabled man. According to the news reports from the incident, the police broke Frank Rodriguez's leg when he attempted to provide aid to the disabled man.⁷ However, fighting back against police brutality proved to be problematic as it often resulted in further accusations of illegal conduct by law enforcement. Charges against Chicanos for assaulting a police officer or resisting arrest were standard during this period. The increase in these charges was attributed to the training officers were given within the academy. In a legislative hearing on police-community relations held in East Los Angeles in 1972, Preston Guillery, a former sheriff's deputy in the 1960s, testified that it was standard police procedure to justify these assaults as self-defense: "in the sheriff's academy, officers are told that if you ever hit a suspect, or have to strike a person, that person shall be arrested for assaulting a police officer."⁸ As a result, police officers often excused their brutalities with a rationale that painted Mexican Americans as dangerous and violent.

Police also maintained a significant presence within the school system during the 1970s. Officers often patrolled the halls of schools, frequently harassing and detaining Mexican

⁶ Yolanda Alaniz and Megan Cornish, *Viva La Raza: A History of Chicano Identity and Resistance* (Seattle, WA: Red Letter Press, 2008), 68.

⁷ Acuña Rodolfo, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (Hoboken, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2020), 276.

⁸ Ian Haney-Lopez, *Racism On Trial The Chicano Fight For Justice* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 142.

American students under a false presumption of drug possession and gang affiliation. In contrast, white students were rarely ever the victims of this scrutiny.⁹ To many Mexican Americans, it seemed as if they were the targets of unfair police racial profiling and abuse no matter what space they occupied. One notable event of police brutality strongly impacted a young Chicano activist group, the Young Chicanos for Community Action. The group's initial mission focused primarily on educational issues and promoting political activism within the community. However, as police violence continued in East Los Angeles, the organization became more radicalized. Finally, in 1967, prompted by the news of the lynching of Danny Hernandez at the hands of a LA sheriff's deputy, activist David Sanchez rallied fellow members of the YCCA to picket the local Sheriff's department. In the process, Sanchez distributed the now iconic brown beret for his fellow members to don as they actively challenged the violence perpetrated by the Los Angeles Sheriff's department.¹⁰ This direct activist approach marked a significant shift in the direction of the young YCCA organization. Sanchez assumed a leadership position within the activist organization and the group's platform began to promote a more militant stance against police brutality.

In summary, the Brown Berets developed in the heart of East Los Angeles as an immediate response to the police brutality and inequality that Chicanos faced within the community. Mexican Americans faced constant harassment and assault at the hands of law enforcement agencies, who typically stereotyped and vilified Mexican Americans as typical gangsters and drug dealers. Officers of the law faced little to no ramifications for their misdeeds,

⁹ Gloria Arellanes, Interviewee, David P Cline, John Melville Bishop, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. *Gloria Arellanes oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline in El Monte, California*. 2016. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016655427/>.

¹⁰ Virginia Espino and David Sanchez. "La Batalla Está Aquí": The Chicana/o Movement in Los Angeles. Other. *UCLA Center for Oral History Research*. Regents of the University of California, December 20, 2012. <https://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu/catalog/21198-zz002hkcv5>.

even going as far as training recruits on how to justify their attacks against the Mexican Americans that they targeted. This constant cycle of violence and oppression prompted the Brown Berets to adopt a more militant tone in their activism and to contest their source of oppression directly.

Why Machismo?

No longer just another passive organization that blended cohesively within the broader Chicano movement, this new Brown Beret organization embraced a rhetoric of militant machismo to demand action by force. The organization committed itself to discipline and produced a ten-point plan reminiscent of the Black Panther organization. The platform outlined the goals for the organization, which incorporated its vision for police reform and addressing educational inequalities. The Berets also created a new organizational structure heavily influenced by the Black Panthers. However, men occupied most of the leading positions within the organization. The organization transformed dramatically within a short period, adopting new guidelines and uniforms that conveyed its new direction. David Sanchez was the Prime Minister, Cruz Olmeda held the post of Chairman, and Ralph Ramirez was the Minister of Discipline.¹¹ These titles effectively reflected the militaristic, masculine, and hierarchal nature of the group. Moreover, with their outspoken stance on police brutality and their growing visibility, the group quickly attracted the attention of many Chicanos within the community. The Berets became determined to transform the broader Chicano movement and contest police brutality through any means necessary.

¹¹ 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),47.

Since the inception of the Chicano movement, expressions of machismo have maintained a significant role in the operations of the more militant Chicano nationalist organizations. To many linguistically limited Anglos, machismo typically represents an aggressive expression of hypermasculinity. Various researchers and familiar observers such as Maxine Baca Zinn and Marvin Goldwert suggest that machismo manifests itself through various dysfunctional behaviors as it defines men as patriarchal and domineering.¹² However, historians' analyses of the concept often ignore significant gender-positive associations that some Latino men associate with the term. For example, researcher Omar Castaneda argues that “machismo is complex and multifaceted and too often, in Anglo-American interpretations, reduced to self-aggrandizing male bravado that flirts with physical harm to be sexual, like some rutting for the right to pass on genes. *Pues* (Well), there is another machismo that is quite different.”¹³ Moreover, the concept of Chicanismo developed from the masculine practices of bonding and friendship among young men and boys. According to Marc Simon Rodriguez, this exertion of machismo tied all Mexican Americans together in a family, transcending the barrios of Texas, California, Illinois, and other portions of the rural southwest.¹⁴ Although extreme expressions of masculinity did exemplify some negative characteristics, activists within the broader Chicano movement viewed machismo as a multidimensional concept that possessed positive affirming qualities. In effect the embracement of machismo signified masculine solidarity and fraternity within the Chicano community as well as a willingness to embrace forceful political action.

¹² Jose Torres, V. Scott H Solberg, and Aaron H Carlstrom. “The Myth of Sameness Among Latino Men and Their Machismo.” *American journal of orthopsychiatry* 72, no. 2 (2002), 167.

¹³ Omar Castaneda “Guatemalan Macho Oratory” in *Muy Macho: Latino Men Confront Their Manhood* Ed, R. Gonzalez, (New York, NY: Anchor Boos,1996) quoted in Jose Torres, V. Scott H Solberg, and Aaron H Carlstrom. “The Myth of Sameness Among Latino Men and Their Machismo.” *American journal of orthopsychiatry* 72, no. 2 (2002), 63–181.

¹⁴ Marc S. Rodriguez, *Rethinking the Chicano Movement* (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015),12.

Furthermore, many militant groups, including the Brown Berets, viewed machismo as a source of empowerment. The Black nationalist philosophies of Malcolm X heavily influenced the organization's founding principles. Malcolm X argued that the racist institutions and discrimination practices carried out by the US federal government had a damaging and emasculating effect on the average African American male. As a result, Malcolm X argued that the Black Power movement was a cultural assertion of masculine radical young men.¹⁵ The Brown Berets saw commonalities with the Black power movement, recognizing their own social emasculation and cultural negation within their communities. According to an analysis provided in a 1970 review article in *The New York Times*, militant groups such as the Brown Berets shared a kinship with Black separatist movements.¹⁶ The Brown Berets saw their vision for social empowerment following the same trajectory as the Black Civil Rights movement. Both racial groups considered themselves openly oppressed by Anglo institutions and deprived of their inalienable rights outlined in the US constitution.

The Berets also linked their past to a history of colonial oppression as white America had socially, culturally, and territorially segregated them.¹⁷ The Berets argued that since the end of the Mexican American War, invading American forces forcibly subjugated the Mexicans left behind in the aftermath.¹⁸ Although the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo promised to recognize the remaining Mexicans as full citizens of the United States, these Mexicans were never viewed as such in the eyes of the new occupying American government. Unwanted Anglo settlers willfully violated the territorial claims of the Mexican occupants as they vigorously divided the territories

¹⁵ Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1989), 120

¹⁶ John Leonard, "Books of the Times," NYT, February 3, 1970, 41.

¹⁷ Ramón A. Gutiérrez, "Community, Patriarchy, and Individualism: The Politics of Chicano History and the Dream of Equality." *American Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (1993), 45-46.

¹⁸ Chicano Power Explained By: David Sanchez, 2010.001, box 1, folder 1, Gloria Arellanes Papers Special Collections and Archives, John F. Kennedy Memorial Library, California State University, Los Angeles.

and forcibly segregated the Mexicans into smaller barrios. In schools, Mexican culture was under attack as school officials sought to “Americanize” the Mexican population. School officials strictly prohibited the Spanish language within the classroom, and anyone caught speaking the language was severely punished.¹⁹ Much like the Black Panthers, the social and cultural oppression caused nationalist groups like the Brown Berets to idolize masculine figures that fought against Anglo oppression. The Berets saw themselves as extensions of the same masculine legacies of Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, and Che Guevara, who willfully defied the American Empire.²⁰

Consequently, the Berets used their brand of activism to assert a form of masculine empowerment previously denied to them. The Brown Berets willfully embraced a militant masculine rhetoric to oppose the vicious inequalities brought forth by Anglo systems of oppression. They openly adopted masculine militant fashion because it represented pride, strength, and cultural heritage. The brown berets symbolized guerilla warfare and a shared identity that allowed them to be associated with the community.²¹ Furthermore, the Berets openly challenged and mocked police authorities whenever possible, even going as far as adopting and altering the motto of the LAPD, “To Protect and To Serve” for their purposes. The Berets' expression of militant machismo effectively empowered its members to openly challenge the oppressive law enforcement agencies which previously paralyzed Chicano communities with fear due to the rampant cases of police brutality. With their militant stance, the Brown Berets proudly proclaimed, *Ya Basta!* (I’m done) regarding their neglect and oppression.

¹⁹ Mario T. Garcia, *Blowout!: Sal Castro and the Chicano Struggle for Educational Justice* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ Of North Carolina Press. 2014),96.

²⁰ *La Causa* “El Maestro de Revolucion” September, 1971

²¹ College times August 9, 1969,

<http://imgzoom.cdlib.org/Fullscreen.ics?ark=ark:/13030/hb800010vw/z1&order=2&brand=oac4>

Expressions of Machismo & The Growth of the Organization

The Brown Berets' commanding macho imagery won this once low-key organization significant notoriety within the broader Chicano movement. The Brown Berets played pivotal roles in critical Chicano activist demonstrations serving effectively as the shock troops of the movement. For example, during the East Los Angeles Blowout demonstrations in 1968 in which young Chicano students protested the unequal and the unresponsive pedagogy of the Los Angeles Unified School District, the Brown Berets vigorously protected high school student protestors as they proudly walked out of their schools. Sal Castro, the key organizer of the Blowout demonstration, entrusted the Berets to serve as a protective buffer between the student protestors and the riot police.²² Castro did worry that the paramilitary uniforms would scare off the student protestors as they walked out of the schools and advised the group to participate in the movement without the paramilitary uniform they were synonymously known for wearing: "You're there to get in the way in case the cops get nasty, but if you come, don't wear your uniforms; Do college boy!"²³ However, despite Castro's wishes, the Brown Berets showed up to the demonstration in their paramilitary attire. The Berets further disobeyed the leadership of the protest as their impulsive behavior put pressure on the students to preemptively begin the walkouts without the knowledge of Sal Castro. During the protests, the Berets actions spoke louder than words as members stood in front of the young students and took the brunt of the police violence. In a *Los Angeles Times* article, David Sanchez reported, "We were at the walkouts to protect our younger people. When the police started hitting us with sticks, we went

²² Mario T. Garcia, *Blowout!: Sal Castro and the Chicano Struggle for Educational Justice* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ Of North Carolina Press. 2014),166.

²³ *Ibid.*,153.

in and did our business and got out. We put ourselves between the police and the kids, and we took the beating." ²⁴ In effect, the militant machismo of the organization won broad support among the students as the Brown Berets courageously confronted the police during the walkouts. The community praised the organization's efforts as the Berets served, observed, and protected the Chicano community.

The Berets' masculine militancy generated buzz around the organization, leading its numbers to mushroom within a relatively short period. Chicanos from all over the United States became enthralled by the organization's broader goals and their willingness to act against police oppression. Several organizations praised their resilience and aggressive activism after their involvement with the Blowouts. As one student remarked in a prominent Chicano School newspaper, "The Brown Berets take care of business and leave the politicking and mouthing to others.... Their numbers are growing, growing, growing! *Bueno ya no se dejan!* (Good, they don't let themselves)." ²⁵

In the aftermath of the Blowouts, the organization began the publication of their own newspaper *La Causa* which they hoped would provide the Chicano community insights into the organization's activists rallies. The militant machismo became an active part in the organization's recruitment efforts as the Berets aggressively published recruitment ads within the pages of *La Causa*. Although the organization accepted both men and women applicants, the advertisements were mainly marketed to male recruits. In one advertisement appearing in the February issue of *La Causa*, the organization identified their ideal candidate, "The man we are looking for must realize that he is dealing with a deadly serious and must act in the fullest

²⁴ Dial Torgersen. "Brown Berets Leader Quits, Dissolves Units" *Los Angeles Times*, November 1, 1972 (accessed February 24, 2022)

²⁵ 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),48.

capacity.... He must have a heart for his people, and he must be sensitive to the needs and wants of the people, and he must have huevos(balls), a will to stand for what he believes in."²⁶

The military uniforms, martial performances at rallies and protests, and aggressive flaunting of Anglo authority attracted young adults and teenagers to the organization. Moreover, the group's hypermasculinity prompted the Brown Berets to recruit otherwise questionable candidates in the hopes of producing an organization filled with reformed gangster activists who were willing to combat systemic oppression forcibly. The organization differed considerably from other Chicano activist organizations as they courted both educated individuals and local gang members. In various issues of *La Causa*, the Brown Berets actively published recruitment advertisements marketed to local gang members. In one clear example, the organization illustrated a drunk man in cholo garb with the caption stating, "*Bato Loco* (crazy brother) Yesterday." Another picture shows the same man in a Beret uniform standing proudly with his arm stretched out, and his fist clenched with a banner proclaiming Revolutionist Today Be Brown, Be Proud, Join the Brown Berets."²⁷ This active recruitment of low-income men had a significant impact on some local gang members. As David Montejano argues, the militancy espoused by the organization was seemingly a natural fit in a barrio world of gang conflict and street life.²⁸ The paramilitary and masculine culture of the organization provided gang members an outlet to transfer their combative street lifestyle to political activism. In return, the organization received an influx of new members who were devout and loyal to the organization's overall goals. The Berets also hoped to create a healthy nation of clean-living young men as they

²⁶ *La Causa* "Discipline" February 28, 1970.

²⁷ *La Causa* "Join the Brown Berets" April 1968

²⁸ David Montejano, *Sancho's Journal: Exploring the Political Edge with the Brown Berets* (University of Texas Press, 2012),6.

aspired to reform former gang members.²⁹ As a result, the organization actively courted homeboys, cholos, and *batos locos* who embodied poor working-class masculinity. The organization viewed these men as defeated by society or led astray by drug addiction. The Berets aimed to transform these rebels without a cause into rebels with a Chicano nationalist purpose.

Furthermore, the group's expression of hypermasculinity directly challenged other Chicano groups' activist platforms by labeling the middle-class non-confrontational approach as noneffective and out of touch. The Brown Berets believed that other groups did not go far enough to address the inequities of the Chicano community. They labeled other organizations that had middle-class financial support as *vendidos* or sell-outs to the broader movement. As early researchers of the organization, Rona Fields and Charles Fox argued, the Berets viewed other organizers as tokens and puppets used by the establishment.³⁰ As far as the Berets were concerned, these organizations should never be trusted, but instead, they were to be unveiled as enemies of their people. The Brown Berets also labeled other passive leaders as distant fathers within the Chicano movement. They considered prolific pacifist organizers like Cesar Chavez to be distant authority figures out of touch with the realities within the communities.³¹ In effect, the criticism of other organizers and leaders of the Chicano movement strengthened their position in the eyes of their members and potential recruits. The hypermasculinity of the group provided many members and outsiders with a sense of authenticity as the Berets embodied the forceful will to impart significant change.

The Brown Berets' machismo activism also won them significant favor within the barrios of East Los Angeles. The Berets' tough man image allowed others within the community to

²⁹ Ibid., 57.

³⁰ Rona Fields and Charles Fox, "The Brown Berets" in Chris Garcia's *Chicano Politics: Readings*, (New York: MSS Information Corp, 1973), 212.

³¹ Ibid., 202.

perceive them as vanguards. Their willingness to contest police brutality provided some Mexican Americans with a sense of security and peace within their communities as the Berets embodied their mission of serving, observing, and protecting.³² Although some older generations were slow to embrace the Berets as an authentic civil rights organization, the group's masculine militancy and discipline eventually won their respect. As Prime Minister David Sanchez asserted in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, "A lot of mothers' clubs help us with contributions. Men's clubs too. They're happy to see there is finally a militant effort in the community, and they like what we're doing with the gangs."³³ The respect for the organization effectively bolstered the trust within the community. The Berets assumed the roles of vanguards of the community who reformed the undesirable.

Another way the Brown Berets fostered trust within the community was in the opening of the East LA Free Clinic. The Berets recognized the dire need for an accessible clinic as they understood that the lack of an affordable healthcare facility exacerbated a growing health crisis within their community.³⁴ Mexican Americans living in these impoverished barrios were frequent victims of narcotic overdose, venereal disease, glandular disorders, and gunshot wounds. As a result, the Berets partnered up with various professionals within the community to provide free medical services in a small clinic located on Whittier Boulevard. The clinic's medical care extended beyond primary care, as it offered psychological services and parent education programs. Prime Minister David Sanchez later entrusted the women with overseeing the clinic's operations, appointing Minister Gloria Arellanes as the clinic director. Despite initial

³² Hector Gamboa, and David Sanchez. Interview With Brown Berets Prime Minister David Sanchez. Personal, April 16, 2022.

³³ Ruben Salazar, "Brown Berets Hail La Raza and Scorn the Establishment" *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1969 (accessed February 24, 2022)

³⁴ Dionne Espinoza, "'Revolutionary Sisters': Women's Solidarity and Collective Identification Among Chicana Brown Berets in East Los Angeles, 1967-1970." *Aztlan* 26, no. 1 (2001), 34.

concerns revolving around the inexperience of the leadership in managing a medical institution, the clinic eventually became a labor of love for the Chicanas of the Brown Berets. Arellanes worked diligently alongside many of the Chicana Brown Berets to provide for the clinic's needs and encouraged the community members to take advantage of their services.³⁵ Arellanes also organized volunteers, scheduled working hours for professional staff who donated their time, and wrote grant proposals that financially supported the clinic.³⁶ Moreover, the female leadership of the clinic allowed for the services to be attuned to the diverse needs of the community. As researcher Dionne Espinoza explains, at a time when women's health was becoming a platform within the broader women's rights movement, the clinic offered testing for sexually transmitted diseases, conducted pap smears, and increased access to birth control.³⁷ The clinic ultimately provided the Berets with additional positive public relations as the organization established an alternative and accessible medical institution that was locally managed by community members and volunteers. The diligent work of the women enabled the image of the organization to seem more approachable and respected by those that were wary of the overt aggressive militant rhetoric.

The group's utilization of militant machismo significantly contributed to the organization's early success. The Berets' aggressive platform prompted the organization to follow through with all their most ambitious actions and initiatives, providing an aura of authenticity that other Chicano activist organizations may have lacked in comparison. Initially serving as the shock troops during the walkout protests, the Brown Berets later assumed roles as vanguards

³⁵ Gloria Arellanes, Interviewee, David P Cline, John Melville Bishop, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. *Gloria Arellanes oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline in El Monte, California*. 2016. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016655427/>.

³⁶ Dionne Espinoza, "'Revolutionary Sisters': Women's Solidarity and Collective Identification Among Chicana Brown Berets in East Los Angeles, 1967-1970." *Aztlan* 26, no. 1 (2001), 35.

³⁷ *Ibid*

providing medical services to impoverished community members. By relying on empowering rhetoric and aggressive actions that reinforced hypermasculinity, the Brown Berets generated a captivating platform that attracted the attention of several outsiders. Compared to other organizations, many community members viewed the Berets as the true revolutionaries of the movement who were attuned with the harsh realities that Chicanos endured. Their masculine image proved instrumental in the group's dramatic expansion as the Berets actively recruited rebellious and ambitious youths willing to join the Berets' campaign for political and social transformation.

The Detrimental Impact of Militant Machismo

Within a short period, the organization expanded significantly throughout the southwest as many Chicano communities openly embraced the impactful platform of the Brown Berets. At its height, the organization boasted of having nine thousand members. However, just as the organization reached its pinnacle, internal and external frictions caused by its driving hypermasculinity threatened its survival. While initially helping to propel the organization's growth, the militant machismo of the Brown Berets played a significant role in destabilizing the organization because of the gendered tension that resulted from the exaltation of the masculine figure. The organization openly embraced Chicanas within their ranks, but these roles were often subordinate positions under the male leadership. The men of the organization frequently held meetings that dealt with the high-profile operations, such as the planning of demonstrations and discussing pivotal policies while the women met in separate buildings to discuss agendas on how to better support the male leadership. Historian Maylei Blackwell argues that Chicano Nationalism exhibited by the Brown Berets created a contradictory position for women.³⁸ Within

³⁸ Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin, Tx: University of Texas Press, 2015), 98.

the Berets organization, women occupied the roles as the bearers of tradition, culture, and family, and as a result, their positions within the movement revolved around caretaking and supporting the men in their activist efforts. One female member remarked during her tenure as a Beret, "The men wanted to make all the decisions, and we always got the shit jobs. At fundraisers, the girls did all of the cooking and always got stuck with the cleaning, and the guys would just hang around."³⁹

This gendered abuse and segregation within the Brown Berets prompted many women in the organization to adopt a pro-feminist platform that challenged the organization's machismo culture. The women argued that the men actively held the organization back by not letting women actively participate in all the organization's affairs. As one woman remarked in a 1971 issue of *La Causa*, "in order to have a successful revolution you must have full involvement from both Chicanos and Chicanas... There are certain things that the women can do that the guys can't, Adelitas can be a great asset not only to the Berets but to the Revolution as a whole."⁴⁰ They were convinced that if the women were given the opportunity to lead, the men could "get down to serious business."⁴¹ The men, however, often ignored the demands of the Chicana Berets and often overworked their female compatriots with more logistical tasks. In effect, Beret women developed an empowering rhetoric around their labor as they justified the double-time they put into the movement. Pieces published in *La Causa*, however, continued to show women's discontent within the organization. In one article titled "Palabras Para La Chicana," the writer argues that Chicanas have to strike out on their own, even if "not all our men have enough

³⁹ Marguerite V. Marin, *Social Protest In An Urban Barrio: A Study of the Chicano Movement, 1966-1974*. (Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 1991),160.

⁴⁰ *La Causa* "Love Letter to The Chicana" February 10, 1971

⁴¹ *Ibid*

courage to speak or be involved.”⁴² Furthermore, frequent episodes of abuse and reckless male behavior prompted Gloria Arellanes, the only woman in a leadership position, to provide the men with an ultimatum. She argued that the men needed to clean up the organization, or the women would willfully abandon their ranks.⁴³ By denying the women full and meaningful membership within the organization, the Brown Berets inhibited its female members from embracing a sense of community.

The lack of any meaningful response to feminist critiques on the part of the Berets’ male leadership ultimately prompted most of the women to abandon the Berets and create their unique organization that allowed them full participation within the broader Chicano movement. In a strongly-worded resignation letter to Aron Mangancilla, the Minister of Education for the Brown Berets, Gloria Arellanes and the other female members of the East Los Angeles chapter charged their male compatriots with oppression as they argued, "We have found that the Brown Beret men have oppressed us more than the pig system has, which is a serious charge in the eyes of revolutionaries."⁴⁴ Upon exiting the Los Angeles chapter of the organization Arellanes and the other female members created a new group called Las Adelitas de Aztlan. Adopting the name from the female Mexican Revolutionary militia group, the new organization sought to restore the women as a true revolutionary force within the broader Chicano movement. In addition, Las Adelitas took complete control over the East LA Free Clinic, effectively severing the ties with the Brown Berets organization. This, in turn, hurt the perception of the Brown Berets within the community as the clinic provided the organization with positive public relations. A year after the departure of the Los Angeles chapter’s women Berets, the Orange County Brown Berets

⁴² *La Causa* “Palabras Para La Chicana” February 10, 1969

⁴³ *Ibid*

⁴⁴ Gloria Arellanes Letter of Resignation, February 25, 1970, 2010.001, box 1, folder 1, Gloria Arellanes Papers Special Collections and Archives, John F. Kennedy Memorial Library, California State University, Los Angeles.

published an article in *La Causa* titled “The Adelitas Role en el Movimiento.” which called for the transformation of the male-dominated social movement culture.⁴⁵ However, Prime Minister David Sanchez dismissed the feminist charges against the organization. Instead, he argued that the women collaborated with outsiders in a conspiracy effort to take the clinic away from the organization.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the organization’s unwillingness to address the negative aspects of its machismo culture effectively fractured and destabilized the organization. The women’s departure ultimately provided a lethal blow for the Brown Berets as it significantly decreased the workforce and the operations of the male-dominant group.

The Berets’ overt expression of militant machismo also played a significant role in generating unwanted attention from law enforcement, effectively stunting the organization's growth. Initially, the Brown Berets rose to notoriety because of their response to the oppression faced by the racial patriarchal capitalist state. The Berets took back an empowered masculinity that they believed the state deprived them of with violent policing tactics. However, the group’s assertion of power and its flaunting of police authority generated a justification for federal and state agencies to launch a campaign of legal harassment against the organization. The state of California worked collaboratively with the FBI to dismantle the group after the agency had concluded that “the Brown Berets posed a threat to internal US security and would ultimately lead to violence against the government.”⁴⁷ As a result, federal authorities and local police departments used warrantless surveillance and infiltration to dismantle the group effectively. In one prominent example, federal agent Fernando Sumaya prompted the group to engage in

⁴⁵ *La Causa* “Las Adelitas Role En El Movimiento” February 28,1971

⁴⁶ Dionne Espinoza, ““Revolutionary Sisters’: Women’s Solidarity and Collective Identification Among Chicana Brown Berets in East Los Angeles, 1967-1970.” *Aztlán* 26, no. 1 (2001), 46.

⁴⁷ Jennifer G. Correa “The Targeting of the East Los Angeles Brown Berets by a Racial Patriarchal Capitalist State: Merging Intersectionality and Social Movement Research.” *Critical sociology* 37, no. 1 (2011),98.

terrorist activities by setting fire to the Biltmore Hotel on the day that Governor Ronald Reagan was set to deliver a speech.⁴⁸ Several Berets were immediately arrested when a fire broke out at the hotel; however, Sumaya notably received no jail time for his involvement in the arson. The Berets were aware of their infiltration issues as they published articles within *La Causa* urging members to be mindful as “the man is everywhere.”⁴⁹ This constant harassment and infiltration generated an extensive sense of paranoia within the organization's ranks. The continuous meddling caused distrust amongst the members as they were unsure who to safely converse with regarding the organization's daily operations. In effect, the harassment and the infiltration significantly impacted the organization's longevity as legal issues drained the organization of its necessary monetary and physical resources. The patterns of infiltration and harassment allowed law enforcement agencies to shift the organization's focus away from its broader goals of reform and empowerment to basic survival.

The infiltration by law enforcement agencies also succeeded in altering the organization's external image from masculine defenders of the community to a subversive and trouble-making nuisance. Law enforcement agents justified their overt harassment by depicting the Berets as a group of communist sympathizers. In a *Los Angeles Times* article, Mayor Sam Yorty accused the group of indoctrinating the minds of young Chicanos with their communist militant ideology.⁵⁰ As a result, the red-baiting rhetoric espoused by law enforcement agencies within commonly consumed media outlets ultimately transformed the organization's perceptions within the community. Other Chicano groups like The East Los Angeles Community Union openly

⁴⁸ Paul Flores, "To Protect and To Serve: Effects of the Relationship Between the Brown Berets and Law Enforcement," *History in the Making*: Vol. 5, Article 6, 2012, 91.

⁴⁹ *La Causa*. "Wanted Robert Avila Is a Traitor Vendido and Dog." May 23, 1968.

⁵⁰ "Keep Children Out of Rally, Yorty Urges," *Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 1971. Devra Weber Collection. Box 2. File 15. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

denounced the radical militancy of the Berets as they hoped to position themselves as the more moderate alternative to the paramilitary group.⁵¹ Moreover, the organization experienced a backlash from the local gangs, who no longer saw the group as a viable outlet due to the unwanted police attention that the Berets were attracting, and that these groups were trying to avoid. The gangs responded by setting fire to the organization's head office, indicating that the Berets were not welcome within the community.⁵² In sum, the rise of policing dramatically altered the communal acceptability of the organization. The machoism of the Berets became a detriment to the group as the unwanted police and media attention caused Chicanos to scorn the group's involvement in the broader movement.

The hypermasculinity of the Brown Berets generated a source of internal and external friction that ultimately destabilized the organization. The group's expression of its masculinity through its militant and aggressive rhetoric and activist platform posed an immediate threat to law officials. As a result, both federal and state law enforcement agencies worked cohesively to destroy the organization through legal harassment tactics. Moreover, in challenging the emasculating aspects of the patriarchal capitalist state, the hypermasculinity espoused by the organization reproduced a cultural gender hierarchy that relegated women's voices to the margins.⁵³ This gender imbalance and inherent sexism led many women to abandon the Berets to develop their own organization where they were free to participate as equal members of the Chicano movement. It was only within these groups that women could openly critique and dismantle the sexist institutions of the broader movement.

⁵¹Hector Gamboa, and David Sanchez. Interview With Prime Minister David Sanchez. Personal, April 16, 2022.

⁵² Photos of the Destruction of the Brown Berets Headquarters February 25, 1970, 2010.001, box 1, folder 1, Gloria Arellanes Papers Special Collections and Archives, John F. Kennedy Memorial Library, California State University, Los Angeles.

⁵³ *Ibid.*,97.

Conclusion

In 1972, Brown Berets Prime Minister David Sanchez dissolved the national center of the organization in East Los Angeles, attributing the group's demise to the lack of internal discipline and police subversion.⁵⁴ Although some other branches of the organization continued operations in the aftermath of the center's dissolution, the national organization never reclaimed the prominence that it once had. After a sustained period of absence, in 1992, Sanchez once again revived the dormant organization to promote barrio peace. However, noticeably different in the press coverage of the revival was the leader's moderate tone. Gone was his militant machismo, which aimed to transform the system radically; instead, Sanchez pledged to work to bring about change within the system.⁵⁵ Sanchez's rhetoric about the new direction of the revived group signified a dramatic departure from its radical origins. Instead, Sanchez's new platform for the group represented a more pacifist tone which the organization had previously scorned as being *vendido*.

Ultimately, this analysis of the Brown Berets illustrates both the transformative and destructive potential of hypermasculinity within the broader activist platform of the Chicano movement. Initially, its militant machismo helped garner support from the community as the organization represented an authentic revolutionary sect of the Chicano movement. The Brown Berets were the shock troops and the vanguards of the movement which brought words into action. Their macho militancy had a broad appeal as men and women of various backgrounds flocked to join their ranks. However, the machismo was also detrimental to the longevity of the

⁵⁴ Dial Torgersen. "Brown Berets Leader Quits, Dissolves Units" *Los Angeles Times*, November 1, 1972 (accessed February 24, 2022)

⁵⁵ Ashley Dunn. "Brown Berets Regroup to Fight Gang Crisis." *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, August 30, 1993. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-08-30-me-29465-story.html>.

group. The overt militant masculine rhetoric generated hostilities with law enforcement. The state-employed surveillance and infiltration tactics to disrupt the operations of the organization. Lastly, the militant machismo also divided membership as it forced women to adopt undesirable subordinate roles within the organization promoting the growth of a feminist movement that could not coexist within its patriarchal structure. Consequently, the Brown Berets' hypermasculinity represented a double-edged sword for the organization as it first propelled and later destroyed them. Studying the Brown Berets in terms of gender and masculinity provides an invaluable insight into why the Brown Berets and the Chicano movement more broadly failed to create sustainable social change during the 1960s and 1970s. The organization's overt masculine representation restricted some participation within the unified imagined Chicano ethnic community. This limited and segregated imagining ultimately hindered the empowerment and cohesion of the ethnic Mexican American community. Although the Brown Berets did little to change the status quo, the organization still bears some significance as their brand of activism reflected the grander desires of the Mexican American community's fight for representation and equality during the 1960s.

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