

Voices of Resistance: A Community Archive on Decolonizing Fiesta

By Dr. Liliana Saldaña



Mel Casas (1929–2014), *Humanscape #58 (San Antonio Circus)*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 96," collection of the Mel Casas Family Trust. Photo source: Ruben C. Cordova, from the exhibition "Getting the Big Picture: Mel Casas and the politics of the 1960s and 1970s," Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, 2015.

In 1971, at the height of the Chicano Movement, Dr. José Cárdenas, superintendent of *Edgewood Independent School District*, did what no other superintendent had done before in San Antonio. He boycotted the *Texas Cavaliers* of San Antonio's *Fiesta* and refused to allow them to visit any of the *Edgewood* schools which were majority Mexican and poor, largely a result of the state's systemic racism and inequitable funding system. The *Cavaliers'* school visits were short but strategic—or in the words of Dr. Cárdenas, a "public relations necessity" since San Antonio's Mexican American community attended the carnival which subsidized *Fiesta* activities, including those organized by the *Texas Cavaliers* (it's important to note that many *Fiesta* events were off-limits to Mexicans and Blacks, socially if not economically).

Before becoming superintendent, Cárdenas had served as a teacher and had witnessed the *Cavaliers'* grotesque behavior towards Mexican school children. In his 1994 self-published essay, "*The King's Exile*," Cardenas recalls the time when *King Antonio* and members of the *Fiesta* court arrived at his school and tossed coins at the students from their convertibles. The students, who were Mexican and poor, "threw themselves on the ground to retrieve the coins. The kids groveling in the dirt was found so amusing by the visiting royalty that they no longer attempted to toss the coins to the kids, preferring to throw them in the dirt to perpetuate the wallowing." This would be the last time *Edgewood* students would be publicly humiliated in their schools, at least on his watch.

Dr. Cárdenas' boycott was a just and necessary response to

the *Cavaliers'* pervasive racism and elitism where Mexicans were expected to behave as obedient and subordinate subjects. I share this story because few people in our community know about this act of social protest even though it was highly publicized (and twisted) by the media but supported by local Chicano civil rights organizations at the time. With some digging, I've found that artists, writers, musicians, and community organizers also have protested *Fiesta*. They've organized anti-*Fiesta* music events, curated art shows, and organized public events. They've also written essays in community-based publications like *La Voz de Esperanza* and created digital content to share on social media.

It is critical, more than ever, to document, share, and engage our communities in these voices of resistance, particularly when educational institutions are banning knowledge, criminalizing analytic frameworks that question power, and limiting our ability to teach and learn narratives that counter state-sanctioned histories and practices. With this in mind, I invite you to contribute to the "*Voices of Resistance*" community digital archive to help document the cultural organizing, artistic production, and public writings of people in our community who have resisted *Fiesta* on the margins. This community digital archive will be accessible to the public and will serve as a resource for present and future generations committed to dismantling racist public celebrations and colonized cultural tourist economies.



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