

CHICANA MILITANT DIGNITY WORK:

Building Coalition and Solidarity in the Los Angeles Welfare Rights Movement

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the 1960s welfare rights movement in Los Angeles as one example of social justice activism based on Black-Brown coalition building and solidarity across various social movements. Within the larger welfare rights movement, a fundamentally feminist cause, Escalante advocated for the specific cultural, linguistic, and legal needs of the Spanish-speaking community. Participating in Black-Brown solidarity for multiple social justice causes in Los Angeles and nationally, Alicia Escalante faced arrests and police violence, modeling and inspiring her children and others, then and now, to militant dignity work.

Keywords: social justice activism; Chicana militant activism; welfare rights coalition; militant motherhood; Escalante, Alicia; dignity work

“For those of you mothers who may think I may not be a good mother because I am militant, on the contrary, my children are well taken care of in every respect. Viva La Raza!”¹

As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, multiply aggrieved and marginalized Black and Brown communities within America’s urban centers continue a legacy of organizing and fighting for the recognition of their human dignity.

1. Alicia Escalante, “Chicana Mother,” *Chicano Student Movement*, October 1968.

Large cities such as Los Angeles have been hotbeds of this struggle for decades given the reality of highly concentrated populations subject to demeaning low wages, over-policing and police violence, and exorbitant housing costs, which are the third highest in the nation. California has the highest level of poverty in the country, despite having the largest economy in the nation and the fifth largest economy in the world.² Social protections and public services for the poor, the working poor, and the working class have been continually hollowed out since the late 1960s and this process continues today.³ Whose life is deemed worthy of value and care has been laid especially bare in the context of the current global pandemic. Those bearing the brunt of these conditions, largely Black and Brown communities, have organized themselves into collectives and coalitions across the state of California to do the dignity work necessary to advocate for their communities' basic human needs, humanity, and social justice.

The current battle for human dignity is not new, however; it has a legacy, and is rooted in a historically shared genealogy of mutual struggle, coalition building, and political solidarity between Black and Brown communities and supported by other racial and ethnic groups.⁴ Though current popular conceptions of Black and Brown

2. This poverty ranking is based on the percentage point difference between the national poverty rate and the supplemental poverty measure based on U.S. Census data that considers geographic variations in cost of living, additional expenses such as medical and taxes as well as poverty subsidies such as unemployment insurance, food stamps, etc. Evan Comen, "In States Such as California and Maryland, Poverty May Be Worse than You Think," 24/7 Wall St, *USAToday*, November 12, 2019, Accessed July 6, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/11/12/15-states-where-poverty-is-worse-than-you-might-think/40569843/>
3. Although the 1960s are often depicted as the era of the war on poverty, it is also the decade in which we see the early process of neoliberal assault on the poor. In California, under the governorship of Ronald Reagan beginning in 1966, the Medi-Cal program, which provided access to healthcare for the state's impoverished population, was under threat of cutbacks. In 1967 Congress passed a series of amendments to the federal Social Security Act establishing the first mandatory work requirements for recipients of Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) and later Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC) through the Work Incentive Program. This policy was an early representation of welfare reform that shifted the responsibility of public support from the government to the poor and that would snowball throughout this period into the 1990s with the passage of the Personal Responsibilities and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 under President Clinton. PRWORA mandated that the federal agency of AFDC be converted to block grants administered by the states under a program called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). The new program added stricter work requirements, established a five-year time limit for eligibility, and denied aid to children born while their mothers were on welfare. Mimi Abramovitz, *Under Attack, Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 142.
4. In this article I am largely focused on Black and Brown solidarity and coalition building in the welfare rights movement. Undoubtedly there were and are coalitions and political solidarity with other

communities in Los Angeles often situate them at odds and in competition with one another, the reality is they have a long legacy of historically intertwined community building and organizing.⁵ The welfare rights movement in Los Angeles provides us an opportunity to explore these interconnections and histories of coalition building and political solidarity. My exploration of this movement departs from established histories that largely focus on the grassroots organizing of Black women alone within the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) while tacking on other women of color as an afterthought. A significant portion of the literature on the welfare rights movement remains in the Black and white binary and is largely centered in the eastern United States, which overlooks Chicana, Native American, and Asian American women's activism.⁶ This scholarly practice forgoes an opportunity to explore what welfare rights and human dignity meant for other racialized groups such as Chicanas and the strategies they employed to articulate their needs and meet them. It also occludes key components of Black women's and Chicanas' organizing, politics, and feminisms that centered

racialized groups but that is not my focus here. I am currently working on a manuscript project that explores a broader multiracial coalition for economic justice and human dignity.

5. For work that explores these legacies and this history, see: Abigail Rosas, *South Central Is Home: Race and the Power of Community Investment in Los Angeles* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019); Gaye Theresa Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow & Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Josh Kun and Laura Pulido, *Black and Brown in Los Angeles: Beyond Conflict and Coalition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Jenna M. Loyd, *Health Rights Are Civil Rights: Peace and Justice Activism in Los Angeles, 1963–1978* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Lauren Araiza, *To March for Others: The Black Freedom Struggle and the United Farm Workers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Brian D. Behnken, ed., *Civil Rights and Beyond: African American and Latina/o Activism in the Twentieth-Century United States* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016).
6. Guida West, *The National Welfare Rights Movement: The Social Protest of Poor Women* (New York: Praeger, 1981); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Nadasen, "Welfare's a Green Problem': Cross-Race Coalitions in Welfare Rights Organizing," in *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second Wave Feminism in the United States*, ed. Stephanie Gilmore (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Exceptions to this approach are Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); and Allison Puglisi, "Identity, Power, and the California Welfare Rights Struggle, 1963–1975," *Humanities* 6, no. 14 (2017): 14–25, although they still remain in the Black and white binary. In this essay I use the term Chicana, which is how Alicia Escalante identified. Chicana refers to women of Mexican origin who were born in the United States. This identifier was widely used in the 1960s and 1970s. Chicana, like the term Chicano, also refers to a political identity.

building coalitions and practicing political solidarity across social movements and racial lines while remaining committed to the self-determination and liberation of their people.⁷

Focused on a key, though largely unknown, Chicana welfare rights activist, Alicia Escalante, and the organization she founded in 1967, the East Los Angeles Welfare Rights Organization (ELAWRO), this article examines her Chicana militant dignity work and politics. Through an investigation of Escalante's political development into a Chicana militant and the militant dignity work and politics she assumed, the complexities of the Los Angeles Welfare Rights movement and its participants become discernable. Significantly, Escalante's activism and politics permeated the welfare rights, Chicano, Poor People's, and broader civil rights movements while concentrating on women's issues, which illuminates her commitment to challenging overlapping forms of oppression. Her activism and politics demonstrate the feminist project at the center of her organizing: to fight for justice for single mothers on welfare by challenging the system that robbed them of their dignity. Her participation in the social movements of the 1960s and the 1970s also emphasizes the multiply insurgent and interorganizational dynamics of this era.⁸ The history of Escalante and the ELAWRO creates an avenue to delve into what welfare rights and human dignity meant for poor Chicana and Latina mothers and the strategies they employed to achieve those goals. Thrust into activism in 1967 as a result of neoliberal attacks on the poor and their families, Escalante joined the ranks of a multiracial coalition including disabled and able-bodied Black, Chicana, and white women advocating for the preservation of access to healthcare for the poor. From this point forward, she would sustain this collective style of organizing, and this experience would inform her Chicana militant dignity work and politics.

7. See the important work of Sherie M. Randolph, *Florynce "Flo" Kennedy: The Life of a Black Feminist Radical* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015) and Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

8. I want to acknowledge the important work of welfare rights scholar Premilla Nadasen for her pioneering work on the NWRO and her analysis of the organization's disruption of traditional boundaries between social movements such as the civil rights, poor people's, and women's rights movements. Her work is also critical for situating welfare rights activists as articulating their own Black feminist vision as well as practicing cross-racial coalition. Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*; Premilla Nadasen, "Expanding the Boundaries of the Women's Movement: Black Feminism and the Struggle for Welfare Rights," *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 271–301; Nadasen, "'Welfare's a Green Problem'."

DIGNITY WORK

Along with others with whom she was engaged politically, Escalante practiced and was committed to what I call *dignity work*, which encompassed advocating for the recognition of the human dignity and autonomy of single poor women on welfare and of poor people in general by organizing for their basic human needs and rights at the local and national levels. This dignity work included the practice of a *militant dignity politics* that centered poor people's day-to-day lived experiences of poverty and the strategies of resistance they practiced to carve out dignified lives for themselves, such as deploying direct-action tactics. These tactics were comprised of demonstrations, pickets, vigils, marches, providing testimony, and confrontations with county and educational administrators, law enforcement, and government officials. The militant dignity politics practiced by Escalante and others also required building bridges across differences, forging coalitions, and exercising solidarity with others on the margins of society. Their politics and tactics were militant because of the incessant threat and increased level of brutality towards the human dignity of poor racialized people encountered from local, state, and national welfare policies and persistent forms of structural inequality embedded in the justice, housing, labor, and educational systems.

Mothering—often considered mundane and certainly unacknowledged labor—also characterized dignity work. I contend that Escalante and the Black women and other women of color who engaged in struggles for economic justice and human dignity practiced a *militant motherhood* that was central to their militant dignity politics.⁹ They militantly advocated for their ability to choose to bear and

9. For work that is focused on radical motherhood, mothering, and motherwork see: Patricia Hill Collins, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood," in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai'a Williams, eds., *Revolutionary Mothering on the Front Lines* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016); Cecilia Caballero, Yvette Martínez-Vu, Judith Pérez-Torres, Michelle Téllez and Christin Vega, *The Chicana M(other)work Anthology* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019); Karen Buenavista Hanna, "When Mothers Lead: Revolutionary Adaptability in a Filipina/o American Diasporic Community Theater Organization," *Amerasia Journal* 45, no. 2 (2019): 188–206. For work focused specifically on welfare mothers and the centering of that identity, see: Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace*; Anne M. Valk, "'Mother Power': The Movement for Welfare Rights in Washington D.C., 1966–1972," *Journal of Women's History* 11, no. 4, (Winter 2000): 34–58; Sylvia Morales, dir., *A Crushing Love: Chicanas, Motherhood, and Activism*, film, *Women Make Waves*, 2009.

mother their children with access to basic human needs such as adequate housing, healthcare, nutrition, and education in order for them to live dignified lives. Historically, Black women and other women of color have not enjoyed the same privilege as white women who can mother their children full time and not work outside of the home for a low wage.¹⁰ These militant mothers wanted their labor in the home to be recognized, as well as autonomy over their lives by being able to choose if they would labor in the home or outside of it for a wage.¹¹ They utilized their role as mothers to make claims on the state to provide for their well-being and that of their families. For welfare mothers involved in the welfare rights movement there was no separation between their roles as mothers and their activism; for many, being mothers is what spurred their activism in the first place.¹² For Escalante, her militant motherhood also meant modeling activism, solidarity, and coalition building to her children, thereby teaching them to fight for their right and that of others to human dignity. I assert that Escalante and many of the Chicanas, Mexicanas, and Black women with whom she was engaged in the welfare rights movement were at the forefront of feminist struggles.¹³ Their specific social location necessitated that they struggle against multiple forms of oppression simultaneously, and their organizing specifically on behalf of welfare mothers is a markedly feminist project.¹⁴

Dignity work is about making visible the invisible, it is centering the everyday reproductive labor of women in the home as care providers, cooks, housekeepers, educators, and as emotional support systems not only for their children, but also for their elders, their neighbors, and other people in their communities.¹⁵ Dignity work is the militant activism and political practice that women undertake to

10. Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*, 280, n. 35.

11. Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors*; "Expanding the Boundaries of the Women's Movement."

12. This was the case for Escalante, who joined the movement because of the threat to her access to healthcare for her children under Governor Reagan in 1966. Nadasen, "Expanding the Boundaries of the Women's Movement," 278.

13. I am using the term "Mexicana" to include women of Mexican origin who were not born in the United States.

14. Unlike other feminists of the 1960s who challenged the notion of motherhood as a form of gendered subjugation, women in the welfare rights movement sought to value mothering. Nadasen, "Expanding the Boundaries of the Women's Movement," 278.

15. I want to point out that I in no way seek to romanticize Escalante as a mother. She, like many mothers of her generation, faced difficult circumstances and made many mistakes in the process of raising her children. No doubt the experience of having an activist mother was a difficult one to endure.

secure the recognition of their human dignity in a system that denies their labor, their bodily autonomy, and their humanity. I am using the notion of dignity as one that is tied to the lived experiences of Escalante and other poor women involved in the welfare rights movement. Many of these women endured the daily indignities of being a part of an unjust and demeaning welfare system that policed their morality, robbed them of their autonomy, and served as a form of social control. Reflecting on the origins of her activism in one of the first Chicana feminist journals a few years after the founding of the ELAWRO, Escalante wrote:

I have experienced the life of a welfare recipient, I have seen what it can do to people[.] This has inspired me to do something about it[.] There came the day over five years ago that I was ready, that I was looking, that I was hurt enough to fight back! I grasped for something that would enable me to gain back everything that I had lost. They had tried to strip me, as a woman, as an individual, as a human being.¹⁶

Being stripped of her human dignity by a system that was meant to help poor people is what propelled Escalante into a life of activism. A key component of dignity work is the transformation of both individual and inherited generational pain, trauma, and “hurt” specifically experienced by poor women into political action to reclaim that which is essential to human life: dignity.¹⁷

The concept of dignity I am engaging is not rooted in traditional terms of labor or wage “work” but rather the invisible work of poor women on welfare and women generally. Welfare rights activists vigorously challenged the selective notion of whose work is worthy of dignity. Writing in 1973 about her experience going with her mother to apply for public assistance due to her mother’s inability to work as the result of a medical condition, Escalante concluded, “[t]he main thing is that I am a human being. I am a mother. I want to be treated with dignity, with respect. And this is a thing all people have the right

16. Alicia Escalante, “Canto De Alicia,” *Encuentro Femenil* 1, no.1 (1973): 5–11.

17. I am grateful for a fruitful conversation with Marlene Furth, the daughter of Dr. Pauline Furth of the First Street Medical Clinic, in helping me to conceptualize and articulate one of the important roots and power sources for Alicia Escalante’s activism. Dr. Pauline Furth and Dr. Herbert Karlow founded the First Street Medical Center in East Los Angeles in 1965 and were pillars of the community. These Jewish doctors serviced the East Los Angeles community for over forty years and were committed to social justice and were in solidarity with their clients, providing free medical care for those who could not afford to pay for it. Dr. Karlow was a key figure in supporting Escalante’s activism and assisting her in founding the ELAWRO. Marlene Furth, telephone interview by author, May 19, 2020.

to have.”¹⁸ For Escalante the basis of the right to dignity and respect is rooted in one’s humanity. Here she lays claim to her identity as a human being and as a mother to argue for her right to be treated with dignity and respect that is not connected to her role as a wage earner. Escalante is also not rooting her right to dignity and respect to her citizenship status, either, which is a strategy and claim made by Black women in the welfare rights movement.¹⁹ For her it is the right that “all people” have regardless of their status as wage workers or as members of the nation’s population.

ALICIA ESCALANTE, WELFARE RIGHTS, AND HISTORY

The process through which I came to Alicia Escalante’s history is connected to seeking to dignify my own lived experience of poverty and being raised in a household led by a single mother on welfare, and by the experience of the women before me in my family by locating us within history. By writing Escalante’s history I have been able to speak truth to power for poor Chicanas like Escalante, like myself, across generations, but more importantly for future women of color who seek to find themselves in history. In this sense, dignity work is also a part of my method as I seek to dignify and make visible a historical actor and history that has long been invisible. I became interested in Alicia Escalante, her dignity work, and her militant dignity politics when I was an undergraduate transfer student at UCLA. I began to build an archive focused on Escalante and the ELAWRO that would serve as the basis for my first master’s degree. After completing that degree, I had the opportunity to meet Escalante by serving as a consultant for an interview that would be conducted with her through the Chicana Por Mi Raza Digital Memory Collective and Archive.²⁰ From that point on I conducted several oral history interviews with Escalante between 2012 and 2018. Other than the few documents that were shared with Chicana Por Mi Raza, I was the first scholar to be allowed access to Escalante’s personal collection.

18. Escalante, “Canto De Alicia.”

19. Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights*.

20. Chicana Por Mi Raza Digital Memory Collective and Archive, <https://chicanapormiraza.org/>; Alicia Escalante, interview by Maria E. Cotera, February 23 and 24, 2012, Sacramento, CA, Chicana Por Mi Raza Digital Memory Collective and Archive. I would like to thank the co-founders of CPMR, Dr. Maria E. Cotera and Dr. Linda Garcia Merchant, for making it possible for me to meet and interview Escalante and for their unyielding support over the years.

With the support of her youngest son, Alex, who carefully maintained and organized her collection, I helped to facilitate the deposit of her personal papers at the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archive at UCSB in 2017, creating public access to her extensive collection. I have been committed to doing this work for over ten years now. Writing the history of a poor Chicana single mother on welfare from East Los Angeles to tell a much more expansive social and feminist history of a collective struggle for economic justice and human dignity is a part of the living legacy of the dignity work Escalante and so many others undertook over fifty years ago that continues today.

My approach moves beyond the insular compartmentalization of these social movements and their participants that has contributed to the invisibility of Chicana activism and leadership that often took place in between and within them. I seek to amend this pattern within the historical scholarship of social movements in the 1960s and 1970s by bringing to the fore the Chicana militant dignity work and politics at the confluence of these movements. As racialized, classed, and gendered people, Chicanas such as Alicia Escalante bore the full brunt of these oppressive conditions and did not hierarchize these experiences but rather combated them instantaneously. This practice of resistance to various forms of oppression and analysis of this lived experience is characteristic of the activism, organizing, and feminisms of Black and other women of color that often led to their simultaneous participation within the multiple movements of the 1960s and 1970s.²¹ Though recent scholarship has made inroads for Chicanas in the historiography of the Chicano and feminist movements, much work remains to be done, especially when it comes to documenting the interventions and contributions of Chicanas and Latinas in the history of the welfare rights movement, which often overlaps with these other movements.²² I engage these movements collectively

21. Maylei Blackwell puts forth a critical historiographic model which situates women of color as “multiply constituted political subjects . . . who were multiply insurgent . . . and who struggled on numerous fronts to confront multiple oppressions.” Blackwell, *Chicana Power!* 21.
22. Marisela R. Chavez, “‘We Have a Long Beautiful History’: Chicana Feminist Trajectories and Legacies,” In *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 77–97; Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Power!*; Dionne Espinoza, Maria E. Cotera, and Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Movidas!: New Narratives of Activism and Feminism in the Movement Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018); Vicki L. Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Virginia Espino, “‘Woman Sterilized . . . Gives Birth’: Forced Sterilization and Chicana Resistance in the 1970s,” in *Las Obreras: Chicana Politics of Work and Family*, ed. Vicki L. Ruiz.

because it is a rich site of historical inquiry into the ways that Chicanas and Latinas not only participated in them but also shaped them and their political agendas. Chicana and Latina history is, at once, the history of the Chicano, welfare rights, women's, poor people's, and civil rights movements in the United States.

Beginning with a narrative of how Alicia Escalante became enmeshed in the Los Angeles welfare rights movement, this article will explore the development of her Chicana militant dignity work and politics by focusing on key events and struggles taking place in 1968. Through these events the coalition building and political solidarity taking place between the Black and Brown communities and social movement organizations and participants becomes evident. Also coming to the fore is the feminist project at the center of Escalante's and Black women's welfare rights activism. These women keenly rooted their fight against racism, sexism, and economic injustice within the confines of their daily lived experiences as poor women and mothers on welfare. From this position they would take on the multiple forms of oppression that impinged on their everyday lives and that of their communities while working closely within and between movements. Lastly, the article will close with a brief discussion of some of the particular welfare rights and dignity issues faced by the Spanish-speaking community on the East Side of Los Angeles and why this history is relevant to the current struggle for human dignity.

EARLY RUMBLINGS OF A CHICANA MILITANT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF HER DIGNITY WORK AND POLITICS

In 1962, Escalante gave birth to her fifth and last child, Alex. She was recently divorced after being married for almost a decade to an addict who was often incarcerated. During that time Escalante was raising her family in the Ramona Gardens housing project in Boyle Heights and

(Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Publications, 2000); Alma M. Garcia, *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Dolores Delgado Bernal, "Grassroots Leadership Reconceptualized: Chicana Oral Histories and the 1968 East Los Angeles School Blowouts," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 19, no. 2 (1998); Elizabeth Betita Martinez, *500 Years of Chicana Women's History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Lorena Oropeza, *¡Raza Si! ¡Guerra No! Chicano Protest and Patriotism during the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Gabriela F. Arredondo, et al. *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Dionne Espinoza, "Revolutionary Sisters': Women's Solidarity and Collective Identification among Chicana Brown Berets," *Aztlán* 2, no.1 (Spring 2001).

was on public assistance because she had limited support. She experienced humiliating conditions while on welfare and was subject to demeaning welfare policies that policed her morality, attempted to control her life choices, and robbed her of her dignity. The man in the house rule was one such policy, where social workers would come into her home incredibly early in the morning and go through her belongings to search for evidence of a man living there. These practices would also take place late at night and were known as the “midnight raids.” They were based on the assumption that if a man were living in your home he should assume responsibility for household and familial expenses. This policy upheld notions of the nuclear family with men as the head of the family and household and further served as a form of social control over women’s intimate lives. Escalante also endured instances where social workers would ask her very invasive questions such as whether she was on birth control. After a few years of these experiences Escalante faced yet another threat to her and her children’s dignity. In 1966, when Ronald Reagan became governor of California, he sought to slash government spending on a brand-new vital healthcare program for the poor, the Medi-Cal program. This threat would serve as the impetus to thrust Alicia Escalante into social and political action.

The impending cuts to the Medi-Cal program were brought to Escalante’s attention by her family physician, Dr. Herbert Karlow.²³ She recalled that on “one of my visits with my children to his office he informed me that the medical cuts were taking place and he told me that [this] basically meant he would not be able to see my children as he usually did.”²⁴ He then informed her about a demonstration planned for downtown to protest the proposed cuts and encouraged her to attend. The demonstration was to take place a few days after their visit and Escalante remembered the day vividly,

that day, I packed my kids’ lunches and sent them off to school, and I took the bus. I always had a pickle jar full of change, it was for occasions like that and I took the bus. Sure enough, as soon as I got off the bus there was a large group of people physically disabled in wheelchairs and so forth, going back and forth in front of the city hall.²⁵

23. Alicia Escalante, interview by author, November 10, 2012, Sacramento, California.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid; Eric Malnic, “Medi-Cal Changes Vital, Reagan Says: Governor May Seek Federal Law Revisions to Cure ‘Sick’ Program,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 21, 1967, 3; “Pickets Protest Medi-Cal Cutback,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 21, 1967, A7.

At the demonstration she met Molly Piontkowski, a lead organizer with the Committee for the Rights of the Disabled (CRD), who welcomed her and told her about a strategy meeting scheduled a few days later and urged her to attend.²⁶ Invigorated by the experience, she recalled, “I took the bus back home and, I was kind of excited because in my thinking I was [like] hey you know I’m going to join them, and sure enough I attended a meeting that they held a few days after.” The meeting place was packed and there were many representatives from welfare rights organizations from South Los Angeles and from disabled rights organizations. When she entered the meeting, she later reported, “I sat down and I kept my eyes and ears open,” and found that “I liked what I heard, they were very adamantly opposed to the cuts and they were obviously intent on doing something about it.” Reflecting on the impact of that strategy meeting on her political involvement, she explained, “by the time I left that meeting I was chairwoman of East L.A., [laughter] they had nobody else from East L.A. but that was ok[.] I intended to do something about it and that was the beginning.”²⁷

With the support of Dr. Karlow, Escalante attended the demonstration and joined the ranks of a multiracial coalition, the Committee for Better Health and Welfare, to fight back against the impending cutbacks to Medi-Cal. The Committee for Better Health and Welfare was a county-wide coalition that consisted of multiple organizations that collectively launched the Save Medi-Cal Campaign. Her involvement with the committee led her to become further politicized by those she was organizing with, including disabled rights activists such as Molly Piontkowski of the Committee for the Rights of the Disabled (CRD), Black welfare rights activists such as Catherine Jermany of the Los Angeles County Welfare Rights Organization (LACWRO), and unionized activist social workers. This collective style of doing dignity work shaped her activism and would be characteristic of her organizing approach from this point on. Her dignity work on behalf of herself and her children through the Save Medi-Cal campaign would lead her to become immersed in the Los Angeles Welfare Rights movement, which, in turn, led her to establish the East Los Angeles

26. Molly Piontkowski was from the Ukraine and immigrated to Chicago in the early 1920s before moving to Los Angeles. She became a part of the Leadership of the Committee for the Rights of the Disabled in the mid-1960s.

27. Ibid.

Welfare Rights Organization (ELAWRO) in November of 1967 as an affiliate to the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO).

After Escalante had participated in the demonstration and strategy meeting in the early fall of 1967, she returned to Dr. Karlow to inform him that she was now getting active, to which he was very supportive. Reflecting on his encouragement in those early days, Escalante recalled him telling her, “if you need anything let me know’ and I would just hear him and I’m wondering why is he willing to do all of this. We were friends besides him being the physician of my family. He knew the importance of people becoming educated about such an issue and he offered whatever resources.” Dr. Karlow had mentioned to her that he was friends with Art Garcia, who had just set up the police malpractice center across the street and that they had space. “He says, ‘that they got a Xerox machine, they got phones in fact they got space there, you’re welcome you know.’ I said I can’t go in there[,] they’re going to want rent. [H]e says, ‘I will take care of that, you need a phone, I will take care of that too.’” Though Escalante was leery of his offer to assist her in this capacity she agreed because she knew it would be an immense help for her and the organization. “That’s how he helped the people in that community. He took a lot of patients without insurance, without Medi-Cal[,] and he helped them, and he was doing the same thing for me and he did.”²⁸ Soon after that conversation, Escalante established the ELAWRO office there on First Street with the generous assistance of Dr. Karlow.

Dr. Herbert Karlow, whose last name was originally Karpelowski, was of Jewish ancestry. His father was an immigrant from the Ukraine and his mother was born in New York. He and his younger sister Lenore were born and raised in Queens, New York. He attended local schools and participated in Young Judaea, a Zionist youth movement, which is where he developed his early left-leaning cultural and political perspectives. He went on to attend Brooklyn College and New York University to study medicine before moving to Los Angeles in 1957. Initially joining a medical practice in southeast Los Angeles in the city of Bell, he soon moved to another medical practice in East Los Angeles called the Indiana Medical Group.²⁹ While

28. Escalante, interview by author, November 10, 2012.

29. Lenore Rodah, Telephone interview by author, June 8, 2020. Rodah is the younger sister of Dr. Herbert Karlow, who passed away in his home in Manhattan on December 24, 2018.

practicing there he met Dr. Pauline Furth and they had an instant friendship and bond. Furth had a long history of political involvement in organized labor and in radical socialist circles before becoming a physician.³⁰ She was born in 1916 at the County of Los Angeles General Hospital; both of her parents were Jewish immigrants from Russia who settled in Boyle Heights. She attended Garfield High School before going on to attend the University of California, Berkeley, where she became active in the Young People's Socialist League.³¹ Together, Furth and Karlow set off to establish their own medical practice in East Los Angeles, called the First Street Medical Center, in the early to mid-1960s. The two doctors were both fluent Spanish speakers and would serve the East Los Angeles community for over forty years. They were both also very committed to social justice issues, were dedicated to treating their patients with dignity and respect, and supported Escalante in her efforts.³²

Catherine Jermany, of the Los Angeles County Welfare Rights Organization, was another key and vital collaborator of Escalante. They would become especially connected during this time and together they forged important alliances between the Black and Brown communities in Los Angeles. In fact, Escalante would become the first vice chairman of the LACWRO with Jermany serving as its president from 1968 through 1969. Further, they both would represent the state of California on the National Coordinating Committee of the NWRO, with Jermany serving as the state delegate and Escalante as alternate state delegate between 1968 and 1970.³³ They would often travel together to the national meetings of the NWRO and they participated in local events jointly. Catherine Jermany was born in Chicago, Illinois, and moved to Los Angeles with her family as an

30. Furth, Telephone interview by author, May 19, 2020.

31. Ibid.

32. Furth, Telephone interview by author, May 19, 2020; Rodah, Telephone interview by author, June 8, 2020.

33. "List of State Reps and Alternate Reps NCC," November, 1968, Box 8, Folder 7, George A. Wiley Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin (hereafter, Wiley Papers); "Attendance Sheet for the National Coordinating Committee of the NWRO," Jackson, Mississippi, February 21–24, 1969, Wiley Papers, Box 7, Folder 11; "NCC list of state reps and alternates," October 3, 1969, Wiley Papers, Box 8, Folder 7; "Mad and Militant Welfare Recipients," *Los Angeles County Welfare News*, June 30, 1969, California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento, California. The NWRO's structure consisted of a large membership base, a national coordinating committee that met four times a year, and an executive committee that included a paid staff and leadership that met eight times a year.

infant. She was raised in Los Angeles and had been active in welfare rights organizing since the late 1950s. She would play a critical role in the formation of the statewide California Welfare Rights Organization and would go on to serve on the executive committee of the NWRO.³⁴ These movement-building efforts between the Black and Brown communities are significant given that this era was better known for the rise of cultural nationalist and identity-based organizations. What is often left out of this history, however, is the coalition and solidarity building taking place simultaneously between them.

1968: A YEAR OF MOVEMENT, COALITION, AND SOLIDARITY BUILDING

In their important study on Black and Brown Los Angeles, scholars Laura Pulido and Josh Kun hone in on two events in the 1960s in Los Angeles that, they argue, mark this era of “political change and activism”: the Watts uprising in 1965 and the Chicana and Chicano high school walkouts of 1968.³⁵ Locally and nationally, 1968 also saw the rise of critical coalitions between the Black and Brown communities along with other marginalized populations including Native Americans and poor whites. The nationwide Poor People’s Campaign was a significant event that marked the coalescence of multiple constituencies grappling with poverty. Organized by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the campaign provided Escalante and many others active within the multiple and overlapping social movements of the era the opportunity to practice solidarity and build coalitions with the poor across the country. For Escalante, the multiple issues facing the Chicano community and other marginalized communities were not separate, though they did have their distinctions. For her and others the campaign would be an opportunity to address many issues, such as “the issues of civil rights, of police brutality, [and] of welfare abuse by administration.”³⁶ Her leadership praxis empowered

34. Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein, eds., *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 98; Puglisi, “Identity, Power, and the California Welfare Rights Struggle, 1963–1975,” 16.

35. Kun and Pulido, *Black and Brown in Los Angeles*, 13.

36. Alicia Escalante, interview by Gordon Mantler, cited in Mantler, *Power to the Poor: Black-Brown Coalition & the Fight for Economic Justice, 1960–1974* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 144, n. 83.

those living in impoverishment and sought to build bridges across differences such as race. The campaign would serve as an important training ground in the development of her militancy and her dignity politics. Though the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered before he could see his vision come to fruition, the Poor People's Campaign proved to have an immense impact on its participants, including Escalante.³⁷

Alicia Escalante's participation in the Poor People's Campaign is unique given that she attended the historic event on two separate occasions. Her first trip to Washington D.C. was as a member of the leadership of the NWRO, which was largely constituted by Black women, to participate in what was supposed to be the opening day of the campaign on April 22nd but the event was delayed as a result of King's assassination on April 4th. The Poor People's Campaign would instead be opened by a Mother's Day March on May 12th led by the NWRO and supported by feminist groups and the recently widowed Coretta Scott King. Originally, Dr. King was to have participated alongside the leadership of the NWRO on April 22nd to demonstrate against the recently passed amendments to the Social Security Act in 1967. The 1967 Amendments to the Social Security Act, or public law 90-248, were meant to reduce the welfare rolls by establishing the first federally mandated workfare policy targeting recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children benefits. The amendments established the Work Incentive Program, more commonly known as the WIN program. These reforms would make eligibility requirements more stringent by implementing a work and/or training requirement and would reduce the amount of benefits. Most recipients on AFDC were single welfare mothers and would be directly impacted by this policy.

The NWRO's opposition to the amendments was entrenched in dissatisfaction with the inadequate training, lack of childcare provisions, and placement of recipients in demeaning low-wage jobs. They were also rooted in an awareness that the legislation directly impinged on the agency of welfare mothers to make decisions for themselves and their families. The struggle against the 1967 welfare reforms was directly tied to the fight for the recognition of poor women's human dignity and autonomy over their lives and the lives of their children.

37. For more on the Poor People's Campaign, see Mantler, *Power to the Poor*, passim.

The demonstration planned for April 22, 1968, but never held, was intended to illuminate their militant motherhood by emphasizing their right as mothers and human beings to choose whether they would work outside of the home for a low wage. It was also organized to bring the issues of poor women on welfare to the forefront of the Poor People's Campaign. Out of respect for the Rev. Dr. King Jr., the NWRO leadership decided to go forward with their initial plan to gather in D.C. on April 22nd but instead of having a demonstration, they decided to hold a midnight vigil to publicly mourn his death.³⁸

On April 22, the NWRO leadership gathered from across the country. Included were several members of the National Coordinating Committee, among them California delegates Catherine Jermany and Alicia Escalante. They were accompanied by local clergy and members of the NWRO executive staff, among them executive director Dr. George A. Wiley. Holding candles and crosses, they collectively marched towards the capitol grounds where the group was confronted by local law enforcement. The marchers were subsequently arrested for unlawful assembly. They individually went before a judge over the following two days; they were released on bond made by the NWRO and told by Judge Halleck not to return to Washington D.C.

Escalante's experience of being arrested and criminalized for a planned and peaceful midnight vigil contributed to the development of her militancy. This was the first time she had been arrested and she wrote about this experience in *La Raza* newspaper upon her return. She reflected, "we were hauled off in police wagons and taken into jail, booked, fingerprinted... Let me tell you most of us had never been to jail before but this makes no difference to the law, you are still treated like a criminal!" Escalante continued that, "if anything[,] the experience has shown me the fight is just beginning. I hope all mothers join me in organizing and fighting this bill and for better treatment and respect for welfare recipients and poor people."³⁹

38. The Mother's Day March was planned as an independent event from the Poor People's Campaign and was the result of a negotiation between the NWRO leadership and the SCLC. The March was meant to bring attention to the overwhelming impact of poverty on women and the unjust 1967 amendments to the Social Security Act. Mantler, *Power to the Poor*, 134.

39. "Letter from Alicia Escalante," *La Raza* (newspaper) 1, no. 12 (May 11, 1968), 7.

The experience of her first arrest for participating in a vigil to publicly mourn the slain Dr. King impacted Escalante deeply. She was outraged at the treatment that they received by both the police and the judge who presided over their bail hearings. The lack of respect for the vigil and for the vigil participants by law enforcement only further contributed to the development of Escalante's radicalization. Just preceding the vigil, Washington D.C., like many other large metropolitan areas, had been the site of mass uprisings due to the assassination of Dr. King, resulting in millions of dollars of

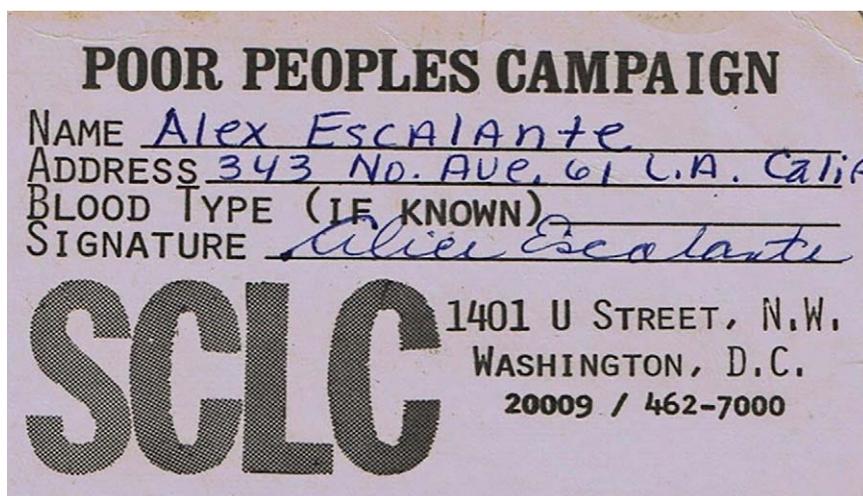


FIG. 1. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) issued identification cards for participants in the Poor People's Campaign, including this one for Escalante's son Alex, then five years old. *From personal collection of Alex Escalante. Courtesy Alex Escalante.*

property destruction. Judge Halleck let his disdain for “welfare recipients, the federal anti-poverty program, and any peaceful non-violent action poor Americans initiate on their behalf,” be known by subjecting the vigil participants to a “cruel and contentious flow of verbal abuse.”⁴⁰ Following Escalante's release, she traveled back to Los Angeles only to return to Washington D.C. a few weeks later, this time with her five children in tow, as part of the Western Caravan to the Poor People's Campaign. Her decision to go back to D.C. following her experience reflects her commitment to the cause of poor

40. NWRO, “Statement Regarding Judge Halleck,” April 23, 1968, Washington D.C., Box 33, Folder 1, Wiley Papers.

people and the development of her militant dignity politics. Her inclusion of her children on this trip is indicative of her militant motherhood as she wanted her children to be a part of this historic event and the struggle for the poor despite the potential for danger. Escalante not only practiced her militant dignity politics but also modeled it for her children. Her children ranged from the age of sixteen to five years old at the time. Her eldest was Lorraine, followed by Raul, Julie, Tony, and the youngest, Alex. The conditions to which they might be subjected at the Poor People's Campaign are demonstrated by the inclusion on the registration card for the campaign of a space for the participants' blood type should they find themselves in need of a blood transfusion as a result of violence. [Figure 1] Police violence, unfortunately, was a common occurrence for racialized groups, especially for Black and Brown people, as well as in political activism, regardless if children were present and especially in the context of the huge collective demonstration that was planned by the campaign.

Escalante had been contacted by the regional representative of the SCLC at the ELAWRO office and was asked if she would be willing to support the campaign by recruiting families from her community to participate.⁴¹ She was told, "we need families, we need children,' I packed that bus with about thirty-five people."⁴² On May 15th, campaign participant hopefuls gathered at Will Rogers Park in Watts in preparation for departure for Washington D.C. They were greeted by rally speakers Jesse Jackson, representing the SCLC, and Reies Lopez Tijerina of the New Mexico-based La Alianza Federal De Mercedes (Federal Alliance of Land Grants). Several attendees from the Mexican American community had been personally recruited by Escalante, many of them single mothers with children who were her neighbors in the Ramona Gardens housing project.⁴³ Judy Kracow, a social worker in East Los Angeles and close ally and friend, also attended and traveled on the same bus with Escalante and her family.⁴⁴ Also in attendance were members of the Brown Berets,

41. Escalante, interview by author, November 10, 2012.

42. Ibid.

43. "3 Buses Take L.A. Poor to 'March on Washington'," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 16, 1968, A1; Paul Houston, "123 People Leave Watts for Washington: Marchers Will Stay 8 Days at Capitol; Many Children Along," *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1968, 3; Alex Escalante, e-correspondence with author, June 13, 2020.

44. Lorraine Escalante, telephone interview by author, June 16, 2020.

a paramilitary community youth organization, including Gloria Arellanes, their prime minister of communication. Arellanes worked for a War on Poverty program called the Neighborhood Adult Participation Program Project (NAPP) and she felt compelled to attend to express “solidarity with other poor and minority communities.”⁴⁵ Unfortunately, due to financial limitations, only three buses departed from Will Rogers park instead of the five initially planned, leaving some behind without a seat.

Arellanes had been with a group of Brown Berets who were running late, but they managed to make it onto a bus. The group included Carlos Montes, David Sánchez, Ralph Ramirez, and three others, and they found themselves at the back of the bus that was occupied primarily by African Americans. They were happy to join them.⁴⁶ Over the eight-day trip that traversed eleven states and over thirty-two hundred miles, participants built community on the buses and at the rest and overnight stops. In total, eight caravans, traveling from different regions and adding participants along the way, were to converge on Washington D.C. to participate in the Poor People’s Campaign. They included the Western caravan, that departed from three locations, one from Los Angeles, another from San Francisco, and the last from the Pacific Northwest, which was dubbed the Indian Trail caravan. There were three caravans from the southeast: the Southern caravan, the Mule Train, and the Freedom Train. The Freedom Train, which included Ralph Abernathy of the SCLC, arrived just in time to also take part in the Mother’s Day march held by the NWRO and Coretta Scott King on May 12th. The others were the Eastern and Midwestern Caravans.⁴⁷ During this trip Escalante and her eldest children, Lorraine and Raul, began forming bonds with members of the Brown Berets. Lorraine and Raul would join that organization upon their return, further reflecting their own development as militants. They would also form critical ties with

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45. Mario T. García, “Gloria Arellanes,” in *The Chicano Generation: Testimonios of the Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 161.
46. García, “Gloria Arellanes,” in *The Chicano Generation*, 162; Carlos Montes, interview by author, Los Angeles California, January 18, 2018; Ralph Ramirez, interview by author, Fullerton, California, July 14, 2018; Mantler, *Power to the Poor*, 145.
47. “City of Hope: Resurrection City and the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign Poster Exhibition,” Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, Washington D.C., 2017, <https://www.sites.si.edu/s/topic/oTO1Qo0000U4xHWAS/city-of-hope-resurrection-city-and-the-1968-poor-peoples-campaign-poster-exhibition>; Mantler, *Power to the Poor*, 134–36.

Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, of the Denver-based Crusade for Justice, and his family. The camaraderie built on the Western caravan to the Poor People’s Campaign was at times dampened by threats of violence and experiences of hatred. At an overnight stop in El Paso, Texas, for instance, participants found their welcome rally at the Coliseum cancelled because of a bomb threat and were subject to the “protection” of the Texas Rangers.⁴⁸ At another point, when the bus that Escalante and her children were on travelled through Kentucky, they were met by an angry mob at a gas station that rocked the bus and verbally attacked them with racial epithets.⁴⁹

When the Western Caravan arrived in D.C. on May 23rd the opportunities to build community and solidarity continued to occur along both inter-racial and intra-racial lines as well. Due to the slowed construction of the tents and infrastructure at Resurrection City where campaign participants were to be housed, located at West Potomac Park on the National Mall, many campaign participants were diverted to other locations nearby.⁵⁰ Instead of staying at Resurrection City, which housed twenty-five hundred people at its peak, Escalante and her family, along with many of the participants from the Western and Indian Trail caravans, lodged at the Hawthorne School, a private secondary school.⁵¹ There, they were provided with much more desirable accommodations, despite being two miles away from Resurrection City. The school accommodations were secured a week prior to the arrival of the Western Caravan by the Crusade for Justice’s Richard Romero and local ministers. Western Caravan participants would utilize the basement of the school along with the cafeteria, restroom, and shower facilities. The Hawthorne School proved to be an important space for intra-racial community and coalition building. Its inhabitants included Chicanos and Chicanas, Native Americans, Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and poor whites. It was also where leaders of the Chicano movement stayed, including Rudolfo “Corky” Gonzales and his family, Reies Lopez Tijerina, and of course Escalante and her five children.⁵² Many at the Hawthorne School would also participate in

48. Mantler, *Power to the Poor*, 146; García, “Gloria Arellanes,” in *The Chicano Generation*, 162.

49. Lorraine Escalante, telephone interview by author, June 16, 2020.

50. Mantler, *Power to the Poor*, 136.

51. Mantler, *Power to the Poor*, 152.

52. *Ibid.*, 156.

a significant demonstration at the Supreme Court building to protest a recent ruling against Native American fishing rights. The plan for the demonstration had originally been brought to the SCLC by Hank Adams (Assiniboine-Sioux), whose activism began on his reservation in the state of Washington when he was fourteen years old. Though the idea was initially rejected, Adams reached out to the Chicano leaders, who adamantly agreed to support him and the protest. In the end, Gonzales, Tijerina, and Dr. George A. Wiley of the NWRO convinced Ralph Abernathy of the SCLC to sanction the demonstration.⁵³

The fishing rights demonstration took place on May 29th in front of the seat of the Supreme Court, the nation's highest court. The event would have reverberations beyond its intent to put Native American issues at the forefront of the Poor People's Campaign. As hundreds of participants began to leave the demonstration to go their different ways, the contingent from the Hawthorne School, which included several families with children, was subjected to police violence. Police on motorcycles began an attempt to break the ranks of the group, almost running over children in the process. A group of young men that included Ernesto Vigil of the Crusade for Justice and Danny Tijerina, Reies Tijerina's son, were attempting to protect some of the children and were subsequently viciously beaten and arrested.⁵⁴ Alicia Escalante and her children were present during that police attack and her eldest daughter, Lorraine, remembered that day explicitly as the "first time I experienced watching police brutality . . . I looked down on the ground and this cop had his boot in my friend Ernie Vigil's face. It was horrifying to me because I had never experienced anything like that."⁵⁵ Lorraine Escalante also recalled having to cover up her five-year-old brother, Alex, with her coat because of the use of mace by the police.⁵⁶ This event was seared into the minds of many and would serve as a vivid reminder of the treatment of poor people by law enforcement. It would also be a catalyst to their militancy and radicalization.

Beyond the violence experienced at the Poor People's Campaign, the event proved to foster a space for community building across race

53. Ibid, 162.

54. Ibid, 154.

55. Lorraine Escalante, telephone interview by author, June 16, 2020.

56. Ibid.

and social movements. It also bolstered connections between activists across regions. This was especially the case for participants involved in the Chicano movement.⁵⁷ Escalante's experience at the PPC expanded her networks and strengthened her commitment to continue to do the Chicana dignity work necessary to create change for poor people across the country. Reflecting on her experience at the Poor People's Campaign, Escalante shared, "To see all these people of all colors, of all races, of all creeds get together," she recalled, "it's really something, you know, and I'll never forget it—I'm very proud that we participated in that." Though the campaign was certainly not without its conflicts among the leadership and its participants, it is significant for bringing together a diverse group of people representing the many faces of poverty in the country and as a grand exercise in multiracial solidarity and coalition building.

In the early spring of 1968, prior to the Poor People's Campaign, tensions on the East Side of Los Angeles over inadequate education in the high schools boiled over in the first week of March with an estimated ten thousand students walking out of their classrooms. A coalition of Mexican American and Chicano high school students, college students, radical teachers, community activists, and youth organizations such as the Brown Berets, came together and launched the East Los Angeles high school walkouts or "blowouts." They were collectively responding to a legacy of unequal education that included overcrowded classrooms, run-down facilities, inadequately trained teachers, racial discrimination, a tracking system that funneled Chicana/o students into vocational instead of higher education, and an astoundingly high drop-out rate. Walkouts or Blowouts such as these were occurring not only in East Los Angeles but across the county.⁵⁸ Sal Castro, a social studies teacher at Lincoln High who supported the blowouts, was dismissed from his teaching position for his involvement. During the first week of June, Castro, along with twelve other individuals involved in varying levels of organizing and or participating in the demonstrations, were indicted and arrested on felony charges for conspiracy to disturb the peace. Collectively they were called the East LA Thirteen and the Chicano community quickly rallied to their support, protesting their arrests and Castro's

57. Mantler, *Power to the Poor*, especially chapter six.

58. Mike Davis and Jon Wiener, *Set The Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties* (London: Verso, 2020).

dismissal. Alicia Escalante supported these efforts and became involved with the formation of the Chicano Legal Defense Committee and fund.⁵⁹

Although Escalante and the ELAWRO were part of the welfare rights movement, they were also deeply engaged in the Chicano Movement and were committed to the many overlapping issues that impacted the Spanish-speaking community.

I think that basically one of the things that we always tried to do was if there were other issues, which there were, we all supported each other. Even though the goal of the organization was to address all the issues that had to deal with the single mom and with the welfare system we always got called when there were other issues facing the community.⁶⁰

Ultimately their greater goal was to work towards the recognition of the human dignity of the marginalized. This quote also reflects Escalante's leadership and the organization's centrality in the East Side community. To Escalante, educational struggles were human dignity struggles, and she would militantly advocate for the human dignity of her children and youth in the community who were directly impacted by unequal conditions in the education system. Escalante's two oldest children, Lorraine and Raul, were students in the East Los Angeles high schools and her younger children would soon also be potentially subject to the educational inequities unfolding at the schools. It should also be noted that as a family, Escalante and her children would only become further entrenched in the Chicano Movement as the decade of the 1960s came to a close and entered the 1970s. With their mother's support, Lorraine and Raul Escalante participated in anti-war efforts through their involvement in the Brown Berets and took part in the multiple Chicano Moratoriums held in Los Angeles in 1969 and 1970. At the first Chicano Moratorium, held on December 20, 1969, which was advertised as the "March against Death," Alicia Escalante would exclaim at the rally following the march that, "I'd rather have my sons die for La Raza and La Causa than in Vietnam."⁶¹

59. Mario T. Garcia, *Blowout!: Sal Castro and the Struggle for Educational Justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2011), 213.

60. Escalante, interview by author, November 10, 2012.

61. Escalante quoted in, Oropeza, *¡Raza Si! ¡Guerra No!*, 141–42; *People's World*, December 27, 1969, back page.



FIG. 2. US Organization marches in support of the ELA Thirteen during rally at Placita Olvera, June 1968. *La Raza* staff. Courtesy of the Chicano Studies Research Center, *La Raza Photograph Collection*, University of California, Los Angeles.

Those who were indicted and arrested for their involvement in the Blowouts included Sal Castro, Lincoln High school teacher; Eliezer Risco and Joe Razo, of the *La Raza* newspaper staff; David Sánchez, Carlos Montes, Ralph Ramirez, Gilbert Cruz Olmeda, and Fred López of the Brown Berets; Carlos Muñoz Jr. and Moctezuma Esparza, who were college students involved with United Mexican American Students; and Richard Vigil, Henry Gómez, and Pat Sánchez.⁶² The East L.A. Thirteen had been arrested between Friday, May 31st, and Saturday, June 1st, with the community quickly organizing a rally at the Placita Olvera in downtown followed by a march to the Los Angeles Police Department's Parker Center headquarters. The Black community was also responsive and supported the efforts to release and to drop the charges against the East L.A. Thirteen. Walter Bremond, one of the leaders of the Black Congress, an umbrella organization for many Black groups in Los Angeles that was founded following the 1965 Watts uprising, participated in the rally and march. Maulana Ron Karenga of the US organization,

62. Garcia, *Blowout!*, 205–06.

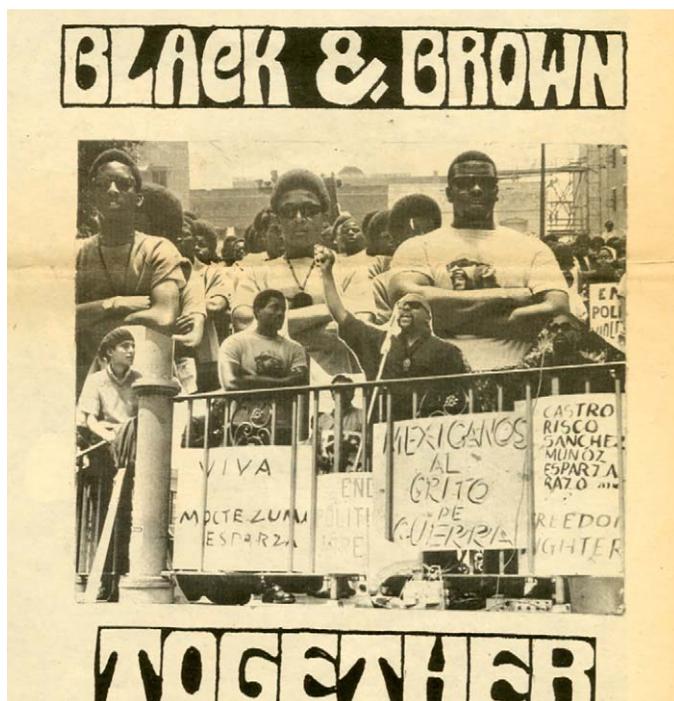


FIG. 3. “Black and Brown Together,” Ron Karenga of the US Organization speaks at rally in support of the ELA Thirteen. Published in *Chicano Student News* 1, no. 4 (June 12, 1968): 5. Courtesy of the Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.

which was an affiliate of the Black Congress, also made a presence along with several members of US.⁶³ [Figure 2] The Black and Brown solidarity at the rally and march was documented in the *Chicano Student Movement* newspaper with a brief description of the event reading:

At the placita, Walt Bremond of the Black Congress and Maulana Ron Karenga of US expressed the sympathy, support, and commitment of the Black brothers for the cause of the Chicano. Black and Brown Together! The oppression is the same! The cause is the same! We cannot lose. The man is alone and he knows it.⁶⁴ [Figure 3]

While incarcerated, some of the East L.A. Thirteen declared a hunger strike and released a statement calling for solidarity from “La Raza

63. US stood for United Slaves, but also served as a moniker for Us Black people. Scot Brown, *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, the US Organization and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

64. *Chicano Student Movement*, vol. 1, no. 4 (June 12, 1968), 5.

Unida, in the Southwest, to our Black brothers, to our Puerto Rican *carnales*, to our Indian brothers, and to all those Anglos who see through the farce of a system that preaches freedom and practices oppression.”⁶⁵ These open calls for solidarity and the excerpt above illuminate an understanding of their interconnectedness and that both the Black and Brown communities in Los Angeles had a shared legacy of struggle with law enforcement. It also illustrates the strategic deployment of solidarity as a necessary mechanism to fight back against the multiple systems of oppression that impacted all racialized groups on the margins of society, and most certainly Black and Brown people.

The response of the Black Congress to the East L.A. Thirteen’s call for solidarity did not occur in a vacuum but rather was a continuing commitment between the two communities. The dignity work of coalition building and political solidarity between the Black and Brown community had been taking shape in the late 1960s within the welfare rights movement but also among overlapping militant cultural nationalist and community organizations. These connections became particularly solidified in early 1968 in what was called the Afro-Mexican Proposal that was funded by a grant of \$43,000 from the general special convention program of the Episcopal Church.⁶⁶ The Afro-Mex proposal was developed by members of the Black Congress and its Mexican American or Chicano counterpart, the Acción De Bronze Colectiva. The Black Congress was an umbrella organization that included several groups including the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, the Los Angeles chapters of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Self Leadership for All Nationalities Today (SLANT), US, and the Los Angeles County Welfare Rights Organization to name a few. The organizations under the Acción De Bronze Colectiva included the ELAWRO, the Educational Issues Coordinating Committee (EICC), the Brown Berets, and *La Raza*, among others. Alicia Escalante served on the board of the Acción De Bronze Colectiva and, uniquely, was also a member of an organization under the Black Congress, the LAC-WRO. The \$43,000 secured from the Afro-Mexican proposal was split down the middle between the Black Congress and the Acción

65. Ibid., front page.

66. This was a considerable-sized grant that would translate to over \$300,000 in today’s value.

de Bronze Colectiva and sought to provide for each other's community empowerment and support.⁶⁷

The Afro-Mexican proposal of 1968 represents an important history of Black and Brown coalition building, organizing, and radical community care. Commentary on the proposal by the general special conventions program of the Episcopal church observed that the coalition between the Black and Brown communities had created a united front in Los Angeles that made their collective efforts towards common issues more effective than their ethnic organizations alone. The funds from the proposal went towards several different causes in the Black and Brown communities, including the organizing of the blowouts, preparations for the Mother's Day march held by welfare mothers at the Poor People's Campaign, securing a building for the first theater in Watts, planning for a large co-op project, recruiting for local summer jobs, and funding the publication of *La Raza* and the *Black Voice* newspapers. These newspapers and others that served as the underground press during the movement era were vital to Black and Brown organizing and are often significant sources of these collaborative histories.⁶⁸

The ramifications of the blowouts continued throughout 1968, and on October 2, Escalante and thirty-four other individuals were arrested following an eight-day sit-in at the Los Angeles Board of Education. [Figure 4] The sit-in was in response to the refusal of the board to respond to student demands following the East L.A. High School blowouts and the board's refusal to reinstate Castro to his teaching position. The thirty-five were all arrested and jailed until they individually made bail. They were charged with trespassing, but eventually the charges were dropped.⁶⁹ As a single mother of five children, Escalante viewed an adequate education as integral to her children's human dignity. Escalante documented her participation in

67. *Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970); "Violent Get Cash Grants," *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1970, C2; Gene Blake, "Five Violent Groups Shared in \$6 Million Gifts, Senators Told: GRANTS," *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1970, B1. These articles are directly referencing the hearings report above.

68. This is especially the case for the histories that I am sharing in this piece as well as many others. Further analysis and information regarding the "co-op project" referenced above and the Afro-Mexican proposal generally is pending research from the Episcopal Church archive, which is currently closed due to COVID19.

69. Mario T. García, "Raul Ruiz," in *The Chicano Generation: Testimonios of the Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 51.



FIG. 4. Participants in the Los Angeles Board of Education sit-in just prior to their arrest on October 2, 1968. The sign reads, "Fools and Schools don't mix; Racists out, Castro's In." Photograph by Devra Weber. Courtesy of Devra Weber and the Chicano Studies Research Center, La Raza Photograph Collection, University of California, Los Angeles.

the sit-in and her subsequent arrest in an article she wrote for *Chicano Student Movement* following her release. She justified her actions by saying,

I am a Chicana mother and was one of the 35 arrested in the Board of Education sit in . . . Since my children were old enough to speak . . . [t]hey were taught to speak up when abused, to fight back tooth and nail, to get their rights as human beings. I, for one, won't hide behind the cloak of hypocrisy and say these things do not exist . . . Only some mothers are still not willing to face reality so there will be many mothers who will criticize me. The same mothers who are critical of the word "Chicano." I am at least raising my children to be proud of their heritage [and] to demand their rights. For those of you mothers who may think I may not be a good mother because I am militant, on the contrary, my children are well taken care of in every respect. Viva La Raza!⁷⁰

In this brief article Escalante makes a pointed claim to her identity as a Chicana, a mother, and also a militant. For Escalante, these identities were not mutually exclusive but rather were the result of one

70. Alicia Escalante, "Chicana Mother," *Chicano Student Movement*, October 1968.

another. She openly and proudly articulates that her mothering included teaching her children about their Chicano heritage and the importance of them fighting for their rights and using their voice to do so. Escalante was willing to put her life on the line for her children, for the human dignity of poor women on welfare, and for her community. She would demonstrate this time and time again throughout her activism. The corresponding photo for this article depicts Escalante being led out of the Los Angeles Board of Education conference room with a big smile on her face while rain drops fell. [Figure 5]



FIG. 5. Alicia Escalante being escorted in the rain to the police paddy wagon following her arrest at the Los Angeles Board of Education, October 2, 1968. Photograph by Devra Weber. Courtesy of Devra Weber and the Chicano Studies Research Center, La Raza Photograph Collection, University of California, Los Angeles.

The inter-organizational dynamics of this era and the Black and Brown solidarity and coalition-building taking place within and between the Los Angeles welfare rights and the Chicano movements are especially highlighted by the November issue of the *Los Angeles County Welfare Rights Organization Newsletter*. Edited by Catherine Jermany, the president of the LACWRO, the November 1968 issue captures the celebration of the militant advocacy of the thirty-five arrested at the L.A. Board of Education sit-in as well as the efforts of the Brown Berets, and the Chicano Legal Defense Committee that

played active roles in the E.L.A. High School blowouts and following it. According to the newsletter, the Black Political Liberation Organization, which was the political arm of the Black Congress, held a benefit cocktail party for the Brown Berets and the Chicano Legal Defense Fund “in an attempt to show our appreciation for their gallant stand and dedication to the liberation of our people.” The fact that the words “our people” were being utilized is a powerful example and act of solidarity as was the intention to provide support via a benefit social event. The gathering also represents community building outside of the realm of demonstrations and rallies, but rather in celebration, through a party where they can be human, get to know each other, commune, laugh, and toast.

Further the benefit was also held to, “encourage Black and Brown unity in an effort to build political solidarity between Black and Brown people.” The brief article openly declares that the benefit cocktail party was an act to build political solidarity, demonstrating that these were goals of Black and Brown organizations in Los Angeles to build political power. The remainder of the newsletter contains articles pertinent to both communities, such as those focused on a lawsuit against the Los Angeles Police Department, information about new welfare policies in Los Angeles County, an article directed toward Black social workers, and a piece about a celebration dinner held by the Brown Berets for the thirty-five arrested at the LA Board of Education sit-in. The issue also includes several advertisements for the ELAWRO, the Committee for the Rights of the Disabled, and the SEIU social worker union Local 535. Taken together, the November issue of the LACWRO reflects the multiracial coalition work that was taking place in Los Angeles regardless of the rise of cultural nationalist, identity-based organizations, and politics. It is also noteworthy that the production of the newsletter itself was representative of these collaborative junctures, with Gloria Arellanes, the prime minister of finance and correspondence for the Brown Berets, serving as the secretary-illustrator to this issue of the *LACWRO Newsletter*.

CHICANA WELFARE RIGHTS AND WHY THIS HISTORY MATTERS

Alicia Escalante was committed to addressing the concerns impacting poor women’s lives on welfare and particularly for Spanish-speaking

women in her community. For Escalante, organizing for welfare rights was necessary for the recognition of Chicana and Mexicana human dignity and for people to become aware of the problems experienced by women on welfare. She explained,

I grew up in the barrio, I know my fight is here with Chicanos on welfare—especially the women. You don't know the many problems for women on welfare. Too many people believe the lies about people on welfare. They don't know what it is about. I'm not afraid to fight and they can't stop me.⁷¹

The ELAWRO was one of the earliest documented Spanish-speaking welfare rights organizations affiliated with the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) and one of the earliest Chicano movement organizations in Los Angeles. Escalante was a recognized East Los Angeles community leader who advocated for women's rights, welfare rights, and economic justice while also remaining committed to the interlocking issues impacting the Spanish-speaking community. These issues included but were not limited to those mentioned above as well as access to healthcare and an adequate education, an end to police suppression and police brutality, anti-war efforts, and immigrant rights. For Escalante, all these issues had to deal with human dignity.

Escalante and the ELAWRO were crucial for focusing attention on welfare rights and human dignity issues that directly impacted the Spanish-speaking community but were not adequately addressed in the broader welfare rights movement. In addition to demeaning welfare policies that policed women's morality and did not recognize their labor in the home, Escalante and the ELAWRO also had to contend with issues of language, culture, and citizenship. To be treated with human dignity, respectful communication from social workers and administrative staff was paramount and essential. Clear communication is also integral to providing the adequate services needed by welfare recipients. Most social workers and welfare administrators in Los Angeles county were not bilingual, nor were the required welfare forms translated to Spanish. There was also no cultural sensitivity training and a lack of Chicano or Latino social workers and administrative staff. These were key areas of advocacy for Escalante and the ELAWRO. By the summer of 1969, Escalante and

71. *La Raza* newspaper 2, no. 5, March 28, 1969.

the ELAWRO would have an impact through the implementation of a community welfare advisory board, Spanish-language training, as well as the hiring of more bilingual staff and social workers. Key to this success was also the establishment of a social worker organization within the Los Angeles County Department of Social Services called SALUD or Social Action Latinos for Unity Development that pushed for similar changes from within. SALUD and the ELAWRO would form a powerful coalition during this time to get the needs of the Spanish-speaking community met.⁷²

Citizenship was another area that Escalante and the ELAWRO had to attend to in their community. In her testimony before the Senate Committee on Nutrition and Hunger in May of 1969, Escalante testified that one of the best illustrations of hidden hunger in America is based on the experiences of those without citizenship. Many of the families that Escalante and the ELAWRO served were undocumented families. Several of these people had lived in the U.S. for decades and many for most of their lives, yet they did not have citizenship status. In her testimony, Escalante detailed that in the past it had been the policy of the Los Angeles County welfare departments to report those with unclear citizenship status to immigration services and that this practice often deterred families from seeking the support they needed even though they were entitled to these benefits. As a result, their families suffered from hunger. She explained that many of these families have to survive on “handouts from friends and neighbors, many of whom don’t have enough to feed themselves. This is real hunger, but hunger few outside the East Los Angeles community know or care about.”⁷³ While these issues were not at the forefront of the national welfare rights movement, they were integral to the human dignity of Spanish-speaking welfare recipients, and Escalante and the ELAWRO brought them to light. She did so by speaking truth to power, by providing testimony at government hearings such as that mentioned above in May of 1969. Escalante and the organization also held several meetings with the County of Los

72. Miguel Garcia, telephone interview by the author, May 14 & May 21, 2020; Mike F. Garcia, “SALUD Speaks Out against Victimization of Welfare Recipients” *Chicano Student Movement*, October 1968; “WRO,” *La Raza* newspaper 2, no. 8., July 1968.

73. *Hearings before the Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs of the United States Congress* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969).

Angeles Welfare Director Ellis P. Murphy to address the treatment of non-citizens in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These meetings were often coupled with direct action tactics such as demonstrations and marches against repressive local policies that resulted from efforts at the state level to establish more restrictive access to welfare benefits. Through their commitment to serve undocumented people, Escalante and the organization managed to assist some recipients by helping them to maintain access to their welfare benefits, but in the long run state and federal legislation would restrict access to welfare to non-citizens by 1973.⁷⁴

Within the Los Angeles welfare rights movement and the broader poor people's movement, Escalante and the ELAWRO played a critical role as bridge builders between the Black and Brown communities. The exploration of this history demonstrates the inter-organizational and cross-racial dynamics of social movement organizations in Los Angeles and the ways that these movements often overlapped. It highlights the militant dignity work and politics of strategically building coalitions and practicing solidarity while centering the needs of poor mothers on welfare and their families. This history provides another perspective on what welfare rights struggles meant for other racialized groups and provides a more complex view of its participants that includes the experiences of Chicanas and the Spanish-speaking community in Los Angeles. It also situates Escalante and the ELAWRO as integral parts of the Los Angeles based Chicano movement while fervently advocating for women's issues. She and the organization were engaged in early Chicana feminist activism within the Chicano and welfare rights movements. This feminist history pushes back against notions that women of color and Black feminism emerged as a response to the exclusion by and antagonism of the white-dominated feminist movement and sexist

74. Ibid.; East Los Angeles Welfare Rights Organization, "Reagan's Puppets," *La Causa De Los Pobres*, (n.d.), 2; East Los Angeles Welfare Rights Organization, "The Poor Confront DPSS," *La Causa De Los Pobres*, (n.d.), 4; "The Poor People's March," *La Causa De Los Pobres*, (n.d.), 5 [This is the first and only issue of a newspaper produced by Escalante and the ELAWRO. There are no bylines and there is no date included. However, based on some of the references made in the paper, I believe it was produced in the fall of 1970. In it she makes reference to the memory of *LA Times* reporter Ruben Salazar, who was killed on August 29, 1970, and then alludes to changes to next year's budget and gives the date 1971. Alicia Escalante Papers, California Ethnic and Multicultural Archive, University of California, Santa Barbara.]; Puglisi, "Identity, Power, and the California Welfare Rights Struggle, 1963-1975," 17-19; Cybelle Fox, "Unauthorized Welfare: The Origins of Immigrant Status Restrictions in American Social Policy," *The Journal of American History* 102 (2016): 1051-1074.

patriarchal cultural nationalist organizations. Escalante and the ELAWRO were doing Chicana feminist work within and among an array of movements.⁷⁵

The history of Alicia Escalante, the ELAWRO, and her Chicana militant dignity work and politics matters because it is pertinent to where we are now as a society. The poverty rate for single-mother-raised households is higher now than it was in 1973, and welfare policies have only become more stringent. Poor women, and particularly Black women and other women of color, have become hypercriminalized and are the fastest growing incarcerated population. Many of them are mothers.⁷⁶ This history reveals the continuity of the struggles that have only accelerated into the twenty-first century, but more importantly, it also brings to the fore the strategic continuities that are needed to continue our struggle. These strategies and tactics include building diverse coalitions, practicing solidarity with others by linking our struggles, and actively participating in civil disobedience. Escalante's history is vital because it teaches us about the critical role of individual and collective grassroots activism and leadership as a guide and inspiration for further movements for social justice and human dignity. It contributes to the historical memory of the coalition and solidarity building between Black and

75. For scholarship that views Black and women of color feminism as emerging in response to the exclusion from white women's feminist organizations and sexism within cultural nationalist movements, see: Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York: NYU Press, 2003); and Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). For works that situate women of color feminisms outside of the periodization of the second wave, see: Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000); and Wini Breines, *The Trouble between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

76. Drew Desilver, "Who's Poor in America? 50 Years into the 'War on Poverty,' a Data Report," Pew Research Center, January 13, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/01/13/whos-poor-in-america-50-years-into-the-war-on-poverty-a-data-portrait/>; ACLU, "Facts about the overincarceration of women in the United States," <https://www.aclu.org/other/facts-about-overincarceration-women-united-states>; INCITE! "Women of Color & Prisons," INCITE!, <https://incite-national.org/women-of-color-prisons/>; The Sentencing Project, "Fact Sheet: Incarcerated Women & Girls," The Sentencing Project: Research and Advocacy for Reform, Washington D.C., 2019, sentencingproject.org; Beth E. Richie and Erin Eife, "Black Bodies at the Dangerous Intersection of Gender Violence and Mass Incarceration," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma* (2020): 1–12; Andrea J. Ritchie, *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017).

Brown communities and critically highlights the women at the forefront of those efforts. It can provide us with an opportunity to learn about the legacy of our shared genealogies of struggle and resistance and a vision of a different world of possibility for human dignity. Lastly, it can provide us hope in what sometimes feels like a hopeless world.