Latinos Against the Grain: Mexican and Puerto Rican Migration, Placemaking, and Activism in Michigan, 1920-1978

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Excerpt from the Introduction

Latinos Against the Grain examines the placemaking practices that Mexicans and Puerto Ricans used to make a home for Latinos in Grand Rapids in the early twentieth century. I reveal how Latinos calculated their strategies in resisting racism and discrimination in Grand Rapids, Michigan—a smaller city nestled in a region that remains pro-business, religiously conservative, and overwhelmingly white. Outside of their places of origins and areas with larger concentrations of other Latinos, this community exemplifies how a numerical minority with limited resources can transform an indifferent, and at times hostile, locale into a setting that meets their material and cultural needs. I argue that the interethnic relationships that Latinos formed and sustained were key to this process. Mexican nationals, Mexican Americans from Texas, and Puerto Ricans pursued parallel and, at times, interdependent and intersecting journeys to Michigan from the 1920s to the 1970s. Once arrived, structural forces and their personal agency compelled them to interact as they searched for housing, jobs, and recreated cultural practices in Grand Rapids. As such, they also fashioned a pan-Latino solidarity that crossed ethnic boundaries—and later with a small population of Cubans who joined the community in the 1970s—to develop a form of institutional activism that emphasized working within the system to advocate for social change. Latinos used this to challenge inequality in antipoverty funding, policing, and education. As this strategy evolved, it exposed and exploited the cracks in both overt and structural racism that bred Latino marginalization, though white and Black allies also contributed to this success. *Latinos Against the Grain* thus simultaneously reveals the intricate process of pan-Latino placemaking by amending Latino geographies via drawing attention to the Midwest and smaller cities, detailing solidarity formation, and illuminating

Latino responses to conservative environments using institutional activism and allies.

Work on Latinos in Grand Rapids allows us to see the importance of understanding the varied landscape of urban America, while also recognizing the various priorities of Latino immigrants and migrants in those areas. The scholarly and media attention given to the nation's largest metropoles can erase the reality that every place Latinos settled they faced an exclusionary environment to some degree. Ranging from xenophobia, immigration challenges, economic exploitation, housing segregation, English only policies, educational marginalization, police abuse, and general exclusion from belonging, Latinos across the country, in areas urban and rural, both small and large, have had to organize to ameliorate their conditions. Thus, every place in which a substantial number of Latinos settle, it is because they did the work to make that place viable. While this book begins with an examination of immigration and migration, the attention to placemaking and activism is essential. Without it, long-term settlement would be impossible. *Latinos Against the Grain* shows us what was necessary for a Latino community, and with that other communities of demographic minorities, to be established. That helps us to better understand our recent past, not just in Grand Rapids, but that of communities across the country.

Chapter 5: "Needs of the Community"

Despite the tension and infighting that plagued the Latin American Council (LAC) during the late 1960s, the LAC continued to play a significant role in the daily lives of many Latinos in Grand Rapids by the early 1970s. The organization especially influenced the Gómez family's sense of belonging and purpose in the predominantly white city, after they relocated from East Chicago, Indiana. For instance, when not working with the Model Cities Program (MCP), Cruzita Gómez provided translation services for the Spanish-speaking locals who frequented the Council. She also worked with her husband, Pedro, affectionately known as "Pete," to register voters through the LAC. The Council's employment program helped Pete find a job at Pak-Sak, a local materials producer facility. Laura Gómez, Pete and Cruzita's daughter, attended the LAC's various youth activities.[1]

The Gómezes were not alone. The Council had become a cornerstone of life for hundreds of Latinos in Grand Rapids. When surveyed, 69% of them agreed that the Council "does an excellent job at providing services." Beyond the council's multiple social service initiatives, Latinos also gained insight about local politics through LAC-sponsored discussions and enjoyed the LAC's myriad of entertainment options. The LAC functioned as a space where Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and even newly arrived Cubans continued to forge a pan-Latino solidarity, and it simultaneously emerged as a physical site of belonging outside of home and church, as seen in previous chapters. The MCP, which funded the Council since 1971, declared the organization performed an "excellent job of meeting the needs of the community."[2]

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[1] Cruzita and Pedro Gómez, interview with the author, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2011;
"Persons Hired and Place of Employment Report," August 1973, LAC, MC, PN-20, Latin American Council (LAC), Box 202, 4/12/4/1, Grand Rapids City Archives and Records Center (GRCARC).

[2] "First Year Evaluation: Latin American Council," June 20, 1972,10, Model Cities Program, Grand Rapids, Michigan, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.

Unfortunately, the exigencies of the national economy and President Nixon's tightening of the MCP's budget threatened the existence of the LAC. Ongoing federal spending on the war in Vietnam, a shift to the political right signaled by Nixon's election, and the tension arising from the slow progress in antipoverty programs coalesced to move national sentiments against locally administered antipoverty programs, leading to the loss of federal funding. While some cities had received Model Cities funding since the mid- to late-1960s, the LAC only started to accept funding in the early 1970s toward the tail end of the federal antipoverty initiatives. By allowing the funding for many of the Johnson-era programs to expire beyond their renewal dates, Nixon overhauled the fund distribution process, guided by his staunch opposition to sending federal money to local initiatives. For the few programs he left intact, he still greatly reduced the number of financial resources disbursed by the federal government. Instead, he recommended a "special revenue sharing" system that allocated federal funding with very few stipulations for how it was spent. Most cities under this system technically would receive more money, but there would be no requirement that these monies went to fund any anti-poverty programs.[3]

Thus, while Latinos mounted a campaign to meet their needs, they did so with only a portion of the funds that the City of Grand Rapids dispersed to its other municipal functions. As a local journalist predicted in 1972, "Projects not yet approved, such as the Latin-American Council… may be in for some trouble since they use almost 100 percent of Model Cities fund to operate."[4] To the frustration of the LAC, the City tied the allocation of funds to the organization's ability to prove their efficacy in monthly, weekly, and even daily reports. Still, the LAC's budget withered, and they continuously sought ways to stretch their ever-shrinking

[3] Bernard J. Friedan and Marshall Kaplan, *The Politics of Neglect: Urban Aid From Model Cities to Revenue Sharing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974), 239.
[4] Liz Hyman, "Model Cities Faces Project Cuts," *GRP,* February 19, 1972, B1.

coffers at a time when their community-controlled social services had finally started to have an impact.

Despite constant threats to their funding, Latinos involved with the LAC doubled down on their cross-ethnic solidarity efforts during the early 1970s, while also seeking creative responses to the LAC's limited budget. Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Grand Rapids, like others around the country, fashioned a form of cultural nationalism that fostered Latinos' pride as a marginalized people and on improving the plight of their community. The decades of living and working together insulated these two factions from any attempts to privilege one group's needs over another's. Rather, they focused their joint efforts on transforming the city around them to meet the needs of all Latinos. They ensured that the LAC facility, located at 929 Grandville Avenue in a green two-story house with a basement, remained a sustainable physical space in the heart of a burgeoning Latino neighborhood. To help Latinos carve out a unique political and cultural identity in the mostly white and Black city, the LAC carefully curated events, programs, and a community newspaper that celebrated pan-Latino solidarity for Latino youth, adults, and elders.

Latinos also learned to practice institutional activism. This strategy encouraged working to improve Latinos' material conditions by operating with already existing institutions. Their efforts produced lasting changes to the available prospects and resources for Latinos. Organizers around the country used similar strategies. For example, Puerto Ricans in New York used both identity politics and liberalism, seemingly contradictory frameworks, to demand that local government should meet their specific material needs and thus, brought about change to local community institutions receiving state aid.[5] While Latinos in Grand Rapids still suffered from

[5] José E. Cruz, *Liberalism and Identity Politics: Puerto Rican Community Organizations and Collective Action in New York City* (New York: Centro Press, 2019).

glaring disparities in accessible social services, the Council also established a wide variety of community-controlled programs to address those needs. In Grand Rapids, their offereins ranged from "well-baby" check-ups to employment services that assisted over 400 clients per month, facilitated by five full-time staff members, a handful of part-time employees, and volunteers.[6] The LAC also hosted political gatherings for many Latino youth and adults. Through the Council, Latinos became knowledgeable about burgeoning social movements, fueled in great part by Chicano and Puerto Rican nationalism. The growing social movements and nationalist ideology prompted political organizing at the local level, and many Latinos now looked to electoral politics to make substantive changes to their conditions.

Popular memory of Latino and Black social movements of this period acknowledge a shift from integrationist frameworks toward calls for self-determination, separatism, and community control over resources.[7] However, the LAC enacted a form of advocacy that expands our understanding of political activism during the late 1960s and 1970s. This chapter reveals a dual approach among activists that combined ongoing demands for integration within the context of community control that was more common than narratives of radical organizing describe.[8] In Grand Rapids, Mexicans worked together with Puerto Ricans and other members of the broader Latino community to gain access to local social service institutions, transforming them into spaces that grew more responsive to their communities. At times, their methods may have

[6] Hyman, "Model Cities Faces Project Cuts."
[7] Mario T. García, eds., *The Chicano Movement: Perspectives from the Twenty-First Century*, New Directions in American History (New York: Routledge, 2014), 6; Kenneth S. Jolly, *By Our Own Strength: William Sherrill, the UNIA, and the Fight for African American Self-Determination in Detroit* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013); Melanye T. Price, *Dreaming Blackness: Black Nationalism and African American Public Opinion* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Andrés Torres and José E. Velázquez, eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, Puerto Rican Studies (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 12.
[8] See Marc S. Rodriguez, *Rethinking the Chicano Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 66. Rodriguez, *Rethinking the Chicano Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), for a discussion of how more radical organized often existed alongside institutional approaches.

appeared conventional—or even somewhat conservative—in comparison to the more confrontational, direct-action tactics used in other locales. Nevertheless, in an era of political conservativism and reduced funding for social welfare programs, I argue Latinos in Grand Rapids attempted to secure resources for their communities in a self-directed "War on Poverty," but still radically insisted that social services represented entitlements that were long overdue for full-class citizens. Their increasing participation in the democratic processes of the city transformed local politics, which also provided leverage for their ongoing advocacy for all members of the Latino community.

This chapter reveals how a community defined their needs and what they saw as deserved of public funding to support themselves as residents of Grand Rapids. Latinos created publicly funded initiatives that addressed the harms done by assimilation and thus focused on building pride in cultural identity. Others addressed material needs that grew from years of discrimination. By examining social welfare programs that formed via activism during a time of waning state funding in the 1970s, this chapter shows how people adapted and innovated when the federal government would not provide for adequate funds for an equitable social safety net for all its citizens.[9]

The section immediately following describes the LAC's ongoing fight for funding from 1971 to 1973. The remaining sections chronicle the initiatives the organization created while operating with a limited budget and engaging in a sustained battle for funding. These proposals included youth programs, a community newspaper, a social services program, and a base for Latino electoral politics.

[9] Understanding activism for social welfare in the 1970s helps to put in perspective welfare activism in the 1990s during the Clinton administration's cutbacks. See Ellen Reese, *They Say Cut Back, We Say Fight Back!: Welfare Activism in an Era of Retrenchment* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011).

"They Don't Want to See the Latin American Go Forward": The Continued Fight for Recognition and Funding

During a time of waning federal funds for social programs, the LAC fought to convince the City of Grand Rapids that Latino residents needed and deserved funding.[10] Since 1971 when the organization first received funding from the MCP, the Council had difficulties funding its plethora of programs and services. As they attempted to execute their initiatives, the staff also investigated how to pull funding from other sources, including more money from the MCP; the City of Grand Rapids which oversaw the Model Cities budget; and the Kent Community Action program (KCAP), a countywide distributor of antipoverty funding. The federal cutbacks to antipoverty programs plagued the LAC, which first led the organization to negotiate with Model Cities, the City of Grand Rapids, and KCAP for help meeting their operating needs. Specifically, the LAC asked for funding to carry out a Latino census of Grand Rapids and of the people who utilized their organization to prove their need and efficacy. When those agencies resisted, the Council leaned on their allies who supported their cause in other social service and social justice-oriented organizations across the city, Michigan, and the Midwest. These efforts exemplified the challenges that Latinos faced in trying to organize with the limited funding and increased bureaucracy that governed the early 1970s.

The Nixon administration's trimming of federal budgets resonated at the local level and furthered the need for a Latino census. In July 1971, just months after the LAC became a Model Cities affiliate, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) refused to fund three different antipoverty organizations in Grand Rapids. With less and less money available, various

[10] Meeting Minutes, July 28, 1971, 2, Series 13-14, Box 7, 1965-1970, Community Relations Subject File, (CRSF) Michigan-NAIRO, Community Relations Commission (CRC), Equal Opportunity Department, GRCARC

levels of government in the Office of Economic Opportunity and HUD required accurate statistics to fund programs.[11] This motivated the LAC's desire for a Latino-specific census. City officials, both Black and white, did not support the LAC undertaking a separate census; they argued the 1970 US Census already provided ample data. The LAC director, Al Wilson, countered by saying, "Initial attempts in 1970 by the US Bureau of Census to count the nation's Spanish speaking inhabitants have produced controversial results, and as such they are of only limited usefulness."[12] According to the LAC, the 1970 federal census estimate indicated that only 5,400 Latinos resided in Kent County, but the Councils' estimate of the population in 1972 was 11,000—double the number of Latino residents reported in the census.[13] This finding fit the history of miscounting or inaccurately categorizing Latinos.[14] The Council also had anecdotal evidence of the ways the city had failed Latino communities from their monthly and weekly reports. However, the City insisted on relying on skewed empirical data and an overly bureaucratic processes to determine funding allocations. This preference for quantitative data in antipoverty programs regularly discounted the experiences of marginalized people that could not be captured in statistics. In Grand Rapids, the data obfuscated Latinos' lived realities as a minority in the city. Yet, without such data the LAC organizers possessed no means to lobby for the funding they desperately needed.

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[11] For more on how cities dealt with the waning funding from the OEO, see John R. Chávez, *Eastside Landmark: A History of the East Los Angeles Community Union, 1968-1993*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998.
[12] The Council came to this figure after working with a geography graduate student, Gene Smith, from Western Michigan University, who used the average growth rate of the community over the course of twenty-five years to estimate the community's population of 11,000 by 1972. Paul Aadrsma and Al Wilson, "Proposal and Study Plan: For a Census and Socio-Economic Survey of the Latin American Population of Kent County," August 15, 1972, 2, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC. Al Wilson, "Grand Rapids Latin American Population Tops 11,000, *Model Neighborhood News*, Volume 5, Issue 2, May-June, 1972.
[13] "Doubling of Local Latin Population Spurs Bid for More Aid," *GRP*, June 14, 1972, 2-E. The council based the number on the projections of Latino population growth in the early 1960s.
[14] See Clara E. Rodríguez, *Changing Race: Latinos, the Census, and the History of Ethnicity in the United States* (New York University Press, New York, 2000).

Documenting the presence of Latinos and continually putting pressure on city agencies developed into an essential strategy in securing a future for Latinos in Grand Rapids, where they were otherwise overlooked and underserved. The Council soldiered on in attempting to find funds for a census. At a June 1972 meeting, the LAC implored city commissioners to think about the ramifications of such a miscount: "One result of this lack of precise population information is that Kent County Latin Americans have often met with resistance from local government and community agencies… for publicly funded governmental and community services as well as proportionate participation in the delivery of these services."[15] Still, the City of Grand Rapids responded by insisting that funding a survey was a wasted investment and advised the LAC to pursue other avenues. Patrick Barr, the second ward representative, remarked, "We have a tight budget and yet we're the ones you're asking to provide cash."[16] Although he claimed to support the census in theory, he denied that it was the city's responsibility to provide the funding for it. The city's obvious disregard for the needs and voices of its Latino constituents did not deter the LAC from trying to convince the city's six commissioners to fund the survey. In one attempt to persuade the City of Grand Rapids, the LAC highlighted how a census could result in fundraising from other lenders. The LAC reasoned that a city grant for the survey would lead to more accurate information, which would in turn aid them when applying for grants outside of the City of Grand Rapids, placing less of a financial burden on the city in the long run. Their quest for self-sufficiency required the cooperation of Model Cities and the City of Grand Rapids.

The City eventually relented in late 1972 and supplied enough support for a preliminary census on the condition that residents living in the MCP target area were hired to help with the survey. This allowed the City and the MCP to approve the project through their Model Cities

[15] Aadrsma and Wilson, "Proposal and Study Plan."
[16] Liz Hyman, "City Shies from Footing Bill for Latin Census," *GRP*, August 2 1972, 3-B.

budget without earmarking additional funds to the LAC. With the limited funds, the LAC verified the addresses of 1,000 Latino families in Kent County and found another 1,000 unverified addresses. However, they were unable to verify all the addresses without the proper funding. The LAC used the rest of their census budget to conduct in-depth interviews with a random sample of thirty-five families in Kent County. The Model Neighborhood residents worked on carrying out interviews, and the Human Relations Commissions worked with the Latin American Council to have Paul Aardsma, a professional sociologist and research director at a local foundation, analyze the statistical data.[17] However, another threat to the LAC's funding emerged as the analysis of the census data was underway.

In late 1972, the LAC learned the application for their 1973 operating budget was denied due to the MCP's funding stipulations, exacerbating the Council's financial situation. The MCP, a program designed to stop urban blight, allotted money for projects that served urban communities—which they called Model Neighborhoods—within the city limits of Grand Rapids. The LAC, however, served clients that lived in and outside of their Model Neighborhood. Thus, the Model Cities approved only $56,000 of the $116,000 the Latin American Council requested for their 1973 operating budget. Ora Spady, director of the Model Cities Program, defended his position by saying, "Only about 20% of the Latin American community live in the Model Neighborhood [so we] felt we shouldn't be obliged to pay all the cost."[18] The MCP and the City of Grand Rapids, who oversaw the MCP budget, committed themselves only to funding the Council based on the number of Latinos in the Model Neighborhood per the MCP guidelines. Latinos, for their part, moved regularly between neighborhoods in Grand Rapids and from urban

[17]. Meeting Minutes, Human Relations Commission, November 19, 1970 Folder 2, Box 2, Series 13-14, HRCR, EOD, GRCARC.

[18] "Latins' Protest Over Budget gains them $19,000," *GRP*, February 7, 1973, D.

center to rural periphery due to migrant work schedules, lay-offs, and the search for better wages or more affordable housing. Though Spady correctly assessed that only 20% of Latinos in Kent County lived in the Model Neighborhood, it held the highest concentrated population of Latinos in the county.[19] Beyond helping Latinos in Grand Rapids and its outskirts, the LAC also assisted anyone who came through their doors, even if they were not Latino. Given their clientele and their specific needs, the money the MCP directed to the LAC was simply not be enough. MCP administrators acknowledged the breadth of the LAC's services to those in the city and around the county, which taxed their small budget, but those officials did not believe MCP funds should support that outreach.[20] This setback dealt a major blow to the LAC's prospects of widening community service initiatives for Latinos and also threatened the organization's very existence.

In response, the LAC board members launched an expansive letter-writing campaign to the mayor and city commissioners to appeal to them for a larger operating budget for 1973. Other anti-poverty organizations like The Urban League and the Grand Rapids' Tenant Union augmented the LAC's efforts by insisting that the city approve of the Council's proposed budget.[21] Writing in solidarity, Chester Eaglemen of the Grand Rapids Inter-Tribal Council wrote that "the local Indian community" was "familiar with a 'minor' minority attempting to upgrade the socioeconomic standard of our people" and supported the LAC's proposal of an increased budget.[22] Eaglemen's use of "'minor' minority" references how marginalized groups criticized the disbursement of funds by Grand Rapids among the various oppressed groups, charging that the Black community received disproportionate amounts of funding as outlined in

[19] Michael R. Haviland and Martin Morales, "Unmet Economic and Social Needs of the Latin American Community in Grand Rapids," October 10, 1973, 8, HRCF, GRCARC.
[20] "Latin-Americans Carry Budget Fight into City Hall," *GRP*, January 3, 1973, B.
[21] Francisco Vega to Lyman Parks, December 28, 1972; Jo Willis to Lyman Parks, December 27, 1972, Box 7, Series 28-2, 1970-1975, K-Ma, Mayor's General File (Lyman Parks), Executive Office—Mayor, GRCARC.
[22] To Mayor Lyman Parks from Chester J. Eagleman, Inter-Tribal Council, Box 7, Series 28-2, 1970-1975, K-Ma, Mayor's General File (Lyman Parks), Executive Office—Mayor, GRCARC.

Chapter Four. Jane González, local civil rights activist and a city councilwoman in nearby Norton Shores, Michigan, wrote to support this cause right before the end of the year. Her December 1972 letter stated that denying the LAC the funds they requested was tantamount to the City dismissing the work of the LAC over the past six years, which was "already well known, not only to [the] City Council, but throughout the Mid-west."[23] Shortly after the City received her letter, Ricardo Parra of the Midwest Council of La Raza (MCLR), one of the largest Latino advocacy organizations in the Midwest, wrote to support the LAC's "efforts to expand the 1973 budget to offer the Spanish speaking community of Grand Rapids true comprehensive services."[24] As the letter writers had discerned, the Council's work had gained a regional reputation.

At city and county commission meetings, the LAC's board members and activists continued to hold the City and Kent County accountable for their lack of funding by drawing attention to local authorities' history of underserving the Latino community. In February of 1973, Martin Morales, LAC's director at the time, accused the City of Grand Rapids of "never [wanting] to help the Latin American people although many of Latins live there… they don't want to see the Latin Americans go forward." Community organizers Richard Campos and David Rodríguez added that the refusal to adequately fund the LAC reflected "the city's usual treatment of Latinos."[25] They also decried the City's lack of progress in hiring an adequate number of bilingual or bicultural staff at its agencies, leaving it to the LAC to help Latinos. When KCAP also refused to add to the LAC budget, Morales reminded them, "The Council

[23] Jane González to Lyman Parks, December 28, 1972, Box 7, Series 28-2, 1970-1975, K-Ma, Mayor's General File (Lyman Parks), Executive Office—Mayor, GRCARC.
[24] Ricardo Parra to Lyman Parks, December 29, 1972, Box 7, Series 28-2, 1970-1975, K-Ma, Mayor's General File (Lyman Parks), Executive Office—Mayor, GRCARC.
[25] Liz Hyman, "Model Cities Faces Project Cuts."

came into existence because of discrimination against Latin Americans" including KCAP's failure to hire any Spanish-speaking staff members within its own organization.[26] Organizers also pointed to the city's continued neglect of Latinos in the area and the hypocrisy in their refusal to adequately fund the LAC while not making any changes to their staff. Their relentless lobbying and continued acts of solidarity from the community succeeded in increasing the funds for their operating budget. The City of Grand Rapids granted an additional $19,000 to the LAC for 1973. Though nowhere near their original ask, it was still significantly higher than what the MCP administration had first approved. The LAC now had to determine the best use for their limited resources to serve a growing clientele.

Within months of the new budget's approval, the results of the limited Latino census were ready, revealing what services people needed the most. Its coverage paled in comparison to what the LAC envisioned, but the census was a first step in documenting Latino's presence. Relying mostly on the interview information they obtained, the LAC supplemented that research with the available public data. After almost fifty years of being in Grand Rapids, the report the LAC produced based on their census, was "the first scientifically collected data which reflect[ed] the unmet social and economic needs of the Latin American Community."[27] The results of this momentous undertaking revealed precarious conditions for the Latino community. It found that in the Model Neighborhood, specifically the Grandville Avenue corridor wherein the Council was located, 40% of the Latino population was under nineteen years old; 25% of them had graduated from high school (compared to 54% of whites); and about 17% were unemployed (compared to 6.4% of whites). Respondents reported their specific need for access to health care like dental care and translators at medical appointments. The Latino community also needed

[26] Maury De Jonge, "Latin-Americans Ask Kent for Cash," *GRP*, May, 15, 1973, 2-D.
[27] Haviland and Morales "Unmet Economic and Social Needs of the Latin American Community in Grand Rapids."

driving lessons, youth programming, English lessons, clothing, and job assistance.[28] The Council now possessed the data to show that their young population did not have the basic social services they required. Moreover, the Latino community would need sustained educational efforts as well as immediate unemployment relief.

The Council set to work on improving their programming and devising even more innovative solutions to the challenges facing the community. While the LAC was not given the requested resources for the operating budget or the amount they needed for a comprehensive survey, they completed remarkable feats with what they had. Their persistent organizing and solidarity—with one another and other organizations—won them more self-determination. The LAC accomplished several initiatives from 1968 to 1973, all while they were fighting for adequate funding and resources.

A Place They "Can Call 'Their Own'": Youth and Adult Cultural Programming

By the early 1970s, LAC leaders had reached the limits of their patience with the City of Grand Rapids, which failed to provide adequate resources for their constituents. Yet, with few other options available, they realized that they still needed to work with city officials if they hoped to secure any funding at all. The cultural programming the LAC sponsored in the early 1970s reveals how the Council balanced their desire to connect the struggle of Latinos in Grand Rapids to broader national movements while operating with a limited budget. The LAC sought to design a rich and robust curriculum for Latinos to counter an environment that had largely suppressed the celebration of Mexican and Puerto Rican identities. They did so by creatively harnessing the talents of their community members, many of them Latinas. They also wanted to

[28] Haviland and Morales "Unmet Economic and Social Needs of the Latin American Community in Grand Rapids."

incorporate programming that further promoted Black and Latino solidarity, which had blossomed among young people in the community, although a funding scarcity often compelled leaders to accentuate interracial differences to avoid being forced to share already limited resources. With the available tools at their disposal, the Council generated compelling experiences for youth and adults in the early 1970s.

With forty percent of the Latino population under the age of nineteen, Latino administrators rushed to build a space where young Mexicans and Puerto Ricans could express their cultural identities with pride. Al Wilson, then director of the LAC, relayed the communities' concerns to the City, pleading with officials for more money to fund the establishment of such a space and the salaries for LAC personnel. He justified the proposal on the idea that Latino had "no center with permanent, on-going programs which they can call 'their own.'"[29] Indeed, there was no place in Grand Rapids where Latino youths could frequent and enjoy programming that centered on Latinos or provided bilingual services. The Community Action Program (CAP) sponsored social services for teen activities in two separate complexes located on the South Side of Grand Rapids, named the Franklin-Hall Complex and the Sheldon Complex, after the streets in which they were located. Latino and Black youth often attended at their leisure. However, young Latinos who did not speak English did not have the same experience as their English-speaking counterparts. One of the Latino community's greatest complaints about CAP services was that they employed hardly any staff members who spoke Spanish. Wilson used this absence to argue for a paid youth coordinator. He pointed out that before the LAC joined the MCP, the Council boasted a youth group with at least seventy members who availed themselves of the chance to participate in recreational and service

[29] Al Wilson to Gus Breymann, November 9, 1971, 2, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.

activities. However, the numbers fizzled out because the volunteers who ran the organization could not keep up with member demands while holding their full-time jobs.[30] With funding for a youth coordinator, they could host a club in the LAC's basement and extend programming for young people.

Wilson argued for the new Council position based on the idea that Latinos represented a distinct racial group. Although Wilson was white, his training and field expertise as a sociologist guided his argument for why the LAC needed to create this position: "Youth need to identify 'with their own kind' in order to achieve a sufficiently, self-assured personality and social base from which, subsequently, to engage in interpersonal and intercultural tradeoffs with youths who are perceived by them, and who in turn perceive Latin American youth, as significantly different."[31] Without using the words "race," Wilson highlighted some of the most pressing identity issues facing Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. For years, "Mexican," "Puerto Rican," and "Latino" did not register on the spectrum of racial identities people in Grand Rapids recognized. Thus, their identity formation often forced them to choose from two well-known racial categories—Black or white—lest they be completely othered, which many of them were.[32] This categorization left little room for Latinos to make claims to other racial and ethnic identities. For instance, some Latinos could be both racially Black and ethnically Latino or racially white and ethnically Latino. To add to this dilemma, Black and white communities rejected or failed to acknowledge the Latinos who espoused dual identities. And city officials still tended to lump communities of color together as one entity.

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[30] Wilson to Breymann.
[31] Wilson to Breymann.
[32] Native Americans were also kept off of this identity spectrum though the area had a large native population around Michigan. For work on Detroit, see Kyle T. Mays, "Indigenous Detroit: Indigeneity, Modernity, and Racial and Gender Formation in a Modern American City, 1871-2000 (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015).

For Wilson to explain to the nearly all-white city administration and Model Cities officials why young Latinos needed a place of their own with a full-time administrator to operate it, he had to stress the differences between African Americans and Latinos. Wilson, with his experience working in Model Cities programs in Lansing, Michigan, before coming to Grand Rapids, anticipated the critique MCP administrators would lob at his proposed youth program: they could label it a duplication of services given the other youth programs available at the Franklin-Hall and Sheldon Complexes. Similar to Martín Morales, gregarious activist and future LAC director who fought with Model Cities over funding, Wilson decided to employ difference as a political strategy. He argued that Latino youth required a separate recreation center from the one that served African Americans. Engaging with the politics of recognition came with risks, as Morales had discovered. Elevating the visibility of Latinos needs by distancing the entire group from African Americans had the potential to damage relationships with African Americans and erase AfroLatinos. He couched his proposal to the city in not wanting to overtax already existing programs but also urged them to give Latino youth a space he felt they deserved. He found a strategy, even if a problematic one. Underscoring the differences between Latino youth and "other cultural groups"—as he referred to them—Wilson explained, "The key element here is the unique ability of the Latin American Council to facilitate the satisfaction of those special bilingual and bicultural interpersonal needs which Latin American youth have." He then reassured Model Cities administrators, "it would seem that full-blown youth program for Latin American youth… would not duplicate any existing youth programs either in the Model Neighborhood or elsewhere in Grand Rapids."[33]

These arguments were successful, yielding them one youth coordinator. With a

[33] Wilson to Breymann.

permanent paid coordinator, the Council officially hosted Latin American Youth in Action (LAYIA), a social group for area Latino teenagers, and furnished them with a space in the basement of the LAC building. Under the direction of the youth coordinator Rachel Campos, a Mexican American woman who was a part of the first generation of Latinos raised in the area, the LAC created a drop-in center where teens could come and hang out at their leisure. No longer forced to congregate in their homes or on the streets, young people now enjoyed a safe, dedicated place of their own where they could play pool, listen to music, or simply enjoy supervised gatherings, much to their parents' approval. They also enjoyed LAYIA-sponsored events, participating in excursions and workshops, where they discussed issues of identity, social movements, and other topics of interest to teenagers like dating.

LAYIA became a welcoming place for Latino youth of varying identities and attracted devotees for various reasons. For example, Victor Baéz, a MexiRican teenager, served on LAYIA's executive board and did not live near the Council, revealing the draw the youth organization had for Latinos across the city. During the 1970s, Rafael Hernández, who is also MexiRican, attended LAYIA as a teenager.[34] Though he lived in the Burton Heights, which was about ten minutes by car and much longer by foot, he visited the Council when he spent time with his cousins on Grandville Avenue. In fact, about half of the young people who came to LAYIA did not live near the LAC.[35] However, those that lived on the Southwest Side near the Council found the centrally located drop-in center to be an accessible meeting place for their Latino and non-Latino friends. Though Wilson employed the politics of recognition to garner funding for Latino youth experiences, that strategy did not affect Black youth's choices for

[34] *Qué Pasa*, vol. 1, no. 2, May 1972,; *Qué Pasa*, vol. 2, no. 3, September 1972, Special Issue,1; *Qué Pasa*, vol. 2, no. 2 November 1972, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.
[35] Haviland and Morales, "Unmet Economic and Social Needs of the Latin American Community in Grand Rapids."

leisure and entertainment. African American teenagers Billy Tappin and Malcolm Montgomery, who lived near the Council, regularly frequented the drop-in center. Though Tappin could have gone to the Franklin-Hall or Sheldon Complexes for youth programming, the LAC was close to his house and "[his] friends went there."[36] Tappin felt so welcome that he joined the executive board as LAYIA's sergeant at arms one year.[37] Youth programs like LAYIA made a difference for Black and Latino young people living in a majority white city and region.

LAYIA members requested multiple types of programming, and women in the community used their expertise and time to craft Latino-centered cultural events and celebrations that were not regularly available in formal settings anywhere else. With over 60 registered members and, on average, 20 to 30 students attending weekly meetings, their interests ranged.[38] Some wanted to bring speakers to Grand Rapids to talk about the Chicano movement while others wanted cooking classes and hair care classes. Rachel Campos relied on community members to provide enriching experiences for the teenagers. For example, a Planned Parenthood representative, Alice Garza, came to LAYIA's space in the basement of the LAC to host "kickbacks," or small gatherings, and give informational presentations. At the request of the students, Garza returned once a week for a one-hour drop-in session, where students felt comfortable raising all types of concerns, including issues related to reproductive health and sex. Serving as the coordinator, Campos also invited women from the community to lead Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban cooking lessons. Carmen Fitte, a licensed cosmetologist and a Puerto Rican transplant form New York, taught students how to do new hairstyles. Other women led additional workshops such as silk screening. Dance rehearsals, however, offered some of the

[36] Billy Tappin, interview with the author, Lansing, Michigan, April 2015.
[37] Billy Tappin interview.
[38] Monthly Narrative Report, Latin American Council, November 1971, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.

most fun. Led by Rachel Campos and Sara Ramírez, a Puerto Rican LAC staff member, LAYIA youth learned traditional Mexican and Puerto Rican dances, which they performed at not only the Mexican Independence Day festival, but also Grand Rapids' Festival of the Arts—a popular annual festival that began in 1970.[39] These events, which depended greatly on women volunteers, posed little extra budgetary burden and were yet another example of the unpaid labor women did for their communities. Their time and energy with the youth was extremely valued, however. After years of forced assimilation in school, LAYIA events granted students a chance to explore their identities and connect with varying elements of their cultures.

The LAC's facilities provided many opportunities for Latino adults to learn more about their histories and current issues just as the youth did. LAC administrators understood the importance of organizing cultural events for their constituents, considering how few occasions to do so existed in Grand Rapids. Previously, cultural traditions usually occurred in church basements, private homes, or in select entertainment venues. With their building located in the Grandville Avenue neighborhood, the Council could provide culturally relevant entertainment options that were both geographically and financially accessible. For example, the LAC boasted about their regularly scheduled events, including a free film series. Selected films included the canonical *Salt of the Earth* and others that chronicled the Puerto Rican Young Lords Organization's activities, Cuba's campaign to eradicate illiteracy, and the guerrilla resistance in Guatemala.[40] A local college student group, La Lucha, selected films that portrayed a bit more of the radical leanings among young people as opposed to the more moderate stance that the LAC usually embraced. The Council walls formed a haven for Latinos to learn about the more

[39] Monthly Narrative Report, Latin American Council, May 1972, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC. "Festival History," Festival of the Arts, accessed April 12, 2018, https://festivalgr.org/history.
[40] Monthly Narrative Report, Latin American Council, January 1972, MC, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.

revolutionary elements of their culture and history, as well as that of other Latino ethnic groups in a way that was often unattainable elsewhere in Grand Rapids. The later addition of a Latino library with culturally relevant literature and resources in 1973 expanded the enrichment possibilities accessible to the community. Augmented by LAYIA-centered events and services, the LAC financed occasions for Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latinos to continue learning about their individual histories and one another's cultures, strengthening their pan-Latino solidarity.

La Raza and Qué Pasa*: Pan-Latino Solidarity and Nationalism in a Community Paper*

During the early 1970s, the LAC expanded their services for the growing Latino community to include a bilingual newspaper. *Qué Pasa,* a federally funded, community-run newspaper for the Latino community, added an avenue for cultural identity development during a period of heightened nationalism for Midwest Latinos. As the first newspaper in Grand Rapids that directly served the Latino community, *Qué Pasa* serves as a lens into the formation of interethnic solidarity against Grand Rapids's conservative background. The newspaper, which ran from 1971 to 1974 was published and funded by the MCP. As part of the MCP's commitment to resident involvement in local politics, the newspaper fulfilled a requirement for MCP organizations like the LAC and kept the community informed.[41] Residents living in the Model Neighborhood received copies and anyone who frequented the LAC also had access to the paper. This free publication functioned similarly to the community census, given that the articles also expressed the most pressing concerns for Latinos in a majority-white area: language loss,

[41] For example, Lansing, Michigan Latinos produced, *El Renacimiento* and *El Sol de Aztlán,* even if only briefly. Detroit had *La Voz de la Comunidad Hispanoamericana.* Latinos in Chicago and Northwest Indiana read *The Latin Times.* Some of those, like *Qué Pasa,* were only possible with federal funding, while others came from community capital and organizing.

forced assimilation, and a shortage of cultural and financial resources. More importantly, the paper's editorials, columns, and advertisements reveal how Mexicans and Puerto Ricans wrestled with how to fashion their pan-Latino solidarity while considering the Chicano and Puerto Rican cultural nationalism emerging in the Southwest and New York, respectively, that at times, stressed pride in one's national culture above all else. This process occurred differently in the Midwest than in other places—especially in Grand Rapids where Latinos were a numerical minority in a conservative city. Even with all the challenges *Qué Pasa* faced, the newspaper, like the LAC, was a sign of placemaking and belonging to the Latino community.

The introduction of a bilingual newspaper in 1971 illustrates the significance of federal funding to the development of Latino political organizing in Grand Rapids. Compared to the emergence of Spanish-language news publications in the Southwest, New York City, and Florida—whose publications dated back to the turn of the 20th century—Grand Rapids' Spanish language paper arrived late.[42] Even Midwest locales such as Indiana Harbor, Indiana, published *El Amigo Del Hogar* as early as the 1920s. However, prior to the 1970s, Latinos likely lacked access to the necessary capital to launch such a project in Grand Rapids. During their early settlement in Grand Rapids, Latinos functioned as a tight-knit community so they may not have seen the need for a largescale publication. Church bulletins and early club newsletters likely served as the most immediate means of disseminating information. With funding from the Model Cities Program in the 1970s, the community could begin to circulate *Qué Pasa*. In an editorial

[42] *El Fronterizo* was published in Tuscon, Arizona as early as 1878. *El Paso Morning Times* was published in English and Spanish in the early 1900s. *Cuba Libre* ran in New York City in the 1890s as well as *Novedades,* which was published in English and Spanish. *Sol de Aztlán* and El *Renacimiento* were out of Lansing while *Nosotros: La Voz de La Comunidad Hispanoamericana* was from Detroit. *The Latin Times* was published out of Chicago. "Historic Mexican & Mexican American Press,." Historic Mexican & Mexican American Press: A Digital Collection of the UA Libraries. University of Arizona Libraries. Accessed April 12, 2018. See Emiliano Aguilar Jr., "The Pursuit of Representation in East Chicago, Indiana," *Latinx Placemaking in the Midwest: Building Sustainable Worlds* eds. Theresa Delgadillo, et.al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021).

for *Qué Pasa*, Paul Mitchell, a Chicano college student, suggested that "newspaper[s] [provided] a forum for ideas, a base for Chicano culture and the tool by which the seeds of unity can be planted."[43] The paper spread community news while centering Latino culture after decades of marginalization and exclusion.

As eager as Latino Grand Rapidians were to promote *Qué Pasa*, ideological differences and budget constraints threatened the paper's launch in 1971, revealing the precarity of the paper's existence. Per the MCP's requirements, the LAC's funding was contingent upon the publication of a newspaper, but it did not allocate the Council a separate budget line for this endeavor. Council administrators thus staffed the paper with volunteers so they could direct their budget to other underfunded LAC programs. Irma Aguilar (neé García), a Mexican American woman who grew up in Grand Rapids, served as the volunteer editor of the paper when it started. Recognizing the constraints of running a paper with no money, she planned to produce the paper in English to give non-Spanish speaking people in Grand Rapids information about the community, all in the hopes of garnering financial support from non-Latino readers. Utilizing the capital of other people and organizations was a tried-and-true survival strategy that Latinos had practiced in Grand Rapids for years. On the other hand, Lea Tobar, a newly hired Puerto Rican assistant assigned to work with the LAC by the MCP, argued that the first Latino newspaper in Grand Rapids should be printed in Spanish to reach people who were often isolated due to their inability to speak English.[44] Tobar intended to prioritize monolingual Spanish readers and speakers, a far cry from their treatment in previous years. Moreover, the MCP, which funded the LAC, stated that the Council had a "contractual obligation" to print a Spanish-language

[43] Pablo Mitchel, Editor's Column*, Qué Pasa,* vol. 2, no. 3, September 1972, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.
[44] Leonard Ortega to Al Wilson, Publication of a Monthly Newsletter in Spanish by the Latin American Council, March 20, 1972, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.

newsletter.[45] Not surprisingly, Tobar and Aguilar settled on a bilingual paper, which fulfilled the MCP's requirement and appealed to a broader circulation.[46] Moreover, the articles in English likely reached the second-generation Mexicans and Puerto Ricans who spoke and understood Spanish, but could only read in English due to a lack of bilingual education in Michigan.[47] Some articles were in both Spanish and English, and others appeared in only one language. Having a bilingual paper allowed *Qu*é *Pasa* staff to fundraise and engage Latino readers with their thoughts on the nationalist movements occurring across the country.

Many of *Qu*é *Pasa's* articles and editorials related to the larger Chicano and Puerto Rican nationalist movements. Inspired by the Black Power Movement, Puerto Ricans and Chicanos sought self-determination and cultural pride in the late 1960s and 1970s after centuries of racism and colonization. The Black Power Movement, which proclaimed "Black is beautiful," gave members of the African diaspora a sense of intellectual, political, and cultural belonging. Chicanos and Puerto Ricans joined African Americans in protesting discrimination in jobs, housing, education, and healthcare. The formation of self-defense and advocacy groups like the Chicano Brown Berets and the Puerto Rican Young Lords, modeled after the Black Panthers, helped these groups celebrate their identities and fight for greater civil and human rights. *Qu*é *Pasa* and the LAC recognized these nationwide movements and tried to connect those issues to their community. The paper ran news stories about Chicano Movement conferences and sent its

[45] Ora W. Spady to MNCC Executive Director, "Attention Armond M. Robinson, Inter-Departmental Letter: Latin American Council" March 20, 1972, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.
[46] Irma Aguilar, interview with the author, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2015.
[47] For more on bilingual education, see Carlos Kevin Blanton, *Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas, 1836-1981,* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004) and James Crawford, *Bilingual Education: History, Politics, Theory, and Practice*. (Los Angeles, CA: Bilingual Educational Services, 1999). See also, Ana Celia Zentella, *Growing up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997) for the experiences of Puerto Ricans growing up bilingual in the 1980s and 1990s. Zentella's subjects also had difficulty reading and writing in Spanish though they spoke both English and Spanish.

staff to them when possible. Other articles informed readers of the United Farm Worker boycotts and tried to persuade readers to help. For example, Richard Campos' essay in a November 1972 *Qué Pasa* called on Grand Rapids Latinos to boycott non-union lettuce so that farmworkers could have a "decent life and a fair wage."[48] While he was referring to farmworkers who lived in California, this article and others connected residents to nationwide events that affected all Latinos. The LAC also tried to educate local Latinos with film screenings. For example, one issue of *Qué Pasa* included a notice of a film and presentation on the Young Lords in New York. These actions helped Chicanos and Puerto Ricans in Grand Rapids associate their political circumstances to the larger nationalist movements happening elsewhere.

The concerns of the wider Chicano and Puerto Rican movements around language loss already resonated with some local Latinos, who expressed their concerns in *Qué Pasa* editorials and columns. Retaining Spanish as a connection to culture was a cornerstone of both social movements nationwide. The Young Lords in New York organized alongside parents to ensure Puerto Rican students had access to bilingual education as did Chicanos in East Los Angeles. While language retention was a concern for most Latinos, organizers in Grand Rapids felt particularly worried given the demographics of the area. Walter Acevedo, an admissions counselor at Grand Valley State College and a *Qué Pasa* contributor, penned an article entitled, "Reflections on Our Language" in the November 1972 issue of the paper. Due to the stigma of speaking Spanish in public in Grand Rapids, Acevedo stated his concern that Latinos in Michigan would lose their ability to speak the language at all. Originating from outside of the Midwest, Acevedo was shocked he could go "whole days [without] convers[sing] with an

[48] Richard Campos, "Farmworkers" *Que Pasa* Vol 2 No 2, November 1972, MC, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.;

hermano in Spanish."[49] However, it was not the isolation that bothered him as much as the shunning of the language itself. "Language is a living, breathing, and vital part of my existence," Acevedo insisted, and without speaking Spanish regularly, he wondered if one could "murder a language." Acevedo's preoccupation with maintaining Spanish suited the Midwest setting, wherein Latinos were a minority and the opportunities to speak Spanish were limited. Indeed, many Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Grand Rapids had been shamed into dropping the use of Spanish. *Qué Pasa*'s staff and community members lamented the loss of Spanish because it meant detaching from a part of their identity; one they previously had been made to feel ashamed of but were currently celebrating with nationalist zeal.

Qué Pasa writers also underscored how Spanish was the foundation for the community's shared identity—the ability to speak the language is what had brought Mexicans and Puerto Ricans together in Grand Rapids and across the country. This unifying characteristic held extra significance in the context of nationalist movements. Though the Chicano and Puerto Rican movements had overlapping aspects, they primarily energized and unified their respective ethnic groups. The Chicano movement rhetoric motivated Chicanos, and it was the same for Puerto Ricans involved in the Puerto Rican nationalist movement. At times, the rhetoric used did not promote a pan-Latino identity. Thus, *Qué Pasa* writers had to consider a dilemma: how to engender the same level of unity that the Chicano Movement and Puerto Rican nationalist movements inspired in their separate communities to a city like Grand Rapids where Mexicans and Puerto Ricans organized together?

Mexicans and Puerto Rican Grand Rapidians overcame this impasse by rallying around their use of Spanish and their concept of race to bolster unity. To them, speaking Spanish and

[49] Walter Acevedo, "Reflections on our Language," *Qué Pasa*, vol. 2, no. 2, November 1972, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.

being Latino amounted to membership in "la raza," which can mean in "the race" or "the people." While many Chicanos used this term to refer to Chicanos exclusively, "raza" in the Midwest became synonymous with "Latino" and referred to people who spoke Spanish.[50] The LAC and *Qué Pasa*'s staff, to partake in the 1960s and 1970s cultural nationalist movements, used raza to unite the Latino community under one category in a highly racially bifurcated Grand Rapids that only recognized white or Black identities. For example, Puerto Rican *Qué Pasa* columnist Sara Ramírez attended the "Primer Congreso Nacional de Tierra y Cultura," a Chicano nationalist conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1972, and her time with Chicanos and Puerto Ricans at the conference invigorated her. She brought back a message for *Qué Pasa* readers, writing in her column, "Nuestra lengua es la razón de ser[,] el español es la raza, y el día que muera el español ese día muera la raza" ("Our language is the reason for being[,] Spanish is race and on the day that Spanish dies the race dies with it").[51] *Que Pasa*'s subscribers received a clear lesson: raza and the Spanish language were intimately tied to one's identity. This framing pressured Mexicans and Puerto Ricans to maintain their use of Spanish to bolster their unity and strengthen their raza. During a time when racial identity dictated how other non-white groups such as African Americans were organizing, using a "racial" identity via raza and the Spanish language as an identifier further united Grand Rapids's Mexican and Puerto Rican communities in this nationalist moment. It also put them in conversation with other race-based movements.

Conceptualizing Latinos as a racial group predicated on the use of Spanish was

[50] See Leticia Wiggins, "'Women Need to Find Their Voice:' Latinas Speak Out in the Midwest, 1972" in *Chicana Movidas: New Narratives of Activism and Feminism in the movement Era*, Dionne Espinoza, María Eugenia Cotera, and Maylei Blackwell, eds. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018). Latinos even used "Spanish" itself as a unifying moniker for both groups, dating back to the 1950s when, for example, the joint baseball league made up of teams of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans called themselves the "Spanish league," among other examples Cruzita and Pedro Gómez, interview with the author, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2011.

[51] Sara Ramírez, "La Columna de Sara," *Qué Pasa*, vol. 2, no. 2, November 1972, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.

problematic and filled with the potential to exclude. This configuration of pan-Latino identity had the ability to homogenize Mexicans and Puerto Ricans along with their unique histories and lives. It also excluded non-Spanish speaking Latinos, shunning monolingual, English-speaking Latinos whose parents chose to spare them the stigma associated with Spanish in Grand Rapids. Moreover, referring to Latinos as a distinct race had the potential to further erase Blackness from Latino identities because this framework made being racially Black and racially Latino mutually exclusive. This version of Latino identity left no room for AfroLatinos. Against the backdrop of the nationalist movement and the racial dynamics in Grand Rapids, Latino leaders willingly disregarded the linguistic and racially complex identities of Latinos to carve out a space for a pan-Latino alliance amidst the Black-white dichotomy in Grand Rapids.

While Chicanos across the country stressed their indigeneity and language, Acevedo's 1972 *Qué Pasa* article revealed that some leaders worried Chicanos in Grand Rapids would adopt whiteness to gain acceptance in a white-majority city. His column argued that many Latinos who possessed lighter skin regarded speaking Spanish as the one aspect of their identity that prevented their assimilation into whiteness. He declared: "Hermanos, Spanish is the mainblood[sic] of our cultural survival as a definable article that will not melt easily into the 'American Melting Pot.' This aspect of our language is a vital part of our identity… The Chicano can be assimilated too easily into the white, dominant society." Acevedo warned that it might be tempting for Chicanos to lose their language in "order to make it as a being in our society."[52] His fears may have been founded on the decades prior when Mexican American did claim whiteness as a strategy against discrimination.[53] That Acevedo could see whiteness as a possibility for

[52] Walter Acevedo, "Reflections on our Language."
[53] Scholars of Mexican Americans and race have thoroughly examined how Mexican Americans have attempted to use their racial ambiguity to claim whiteness through a variety of social and legal avenues. For a very detailed overview of this process in New Mexico immediately following the Mexican-American War, see Laurie Gómez,

Chicanos perhaps reveals how Chicanos in Michigan differed from those elsewhere. Though full assimilation into whiteness was not possible for all Chicanos, he was still concerned that people would try it there. While part of Acevedo's editorial aimed at invoking solidarity among Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, the selected quotes demonstrate that he used *Qu*é *Pasa* to address specific issues among Chicanos. This message to resist assimilation was not directed at the Latinos in Grand Rapids, both Mexican and Puerto Rican, who could never assimilate into whiteness because of the color of their skin, regardless of their skill with English or Spanish. It was for lighter-skinned Chicanos who considered assimilation. The presence of this editorial highlights the pressures that Chicanos in Grand Rapids endured to stop using Spanish and to abandon other cultural markers during a national movement that celebrated the ethnic identity.

Through their choices in advertisements and announcements, concerns about the precarity of funding, like the threat of language loss, was also ever present in *Qu*é *Pasa*'s content. The cash-strapped LAC ran advertisements from organizations could have been considered controversial in the Latino community during the 1970s. For example, recruiters for the army and navy advertised positions and opportunities in *Qu*é *Pasa.* One small announcement in the September 1972 issue of *Que Pasa* read, "Captain Jose R. Ramos from Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio Texas would like to speak to all the young people over 15 years old about opportunities for both men and women to enroll in an officers school academy. He has a lot of information for the young people on how to continue their education through benefits from the Army Corps."[54] This announcement was representative of how the military enticed Latinos to

Manifest Destinies: The Making of the Mexican American Race (New York University Press, 2007). For other examinations see: Neil Foley, *Quest for Equality: The Failed Promise of Black-Brown Solidarity* (Harvard University Press, 2010); -----*The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[54] "Opportunity"*, Qué Pasa,* vol. 2, no. 3, September 1972, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.

enlist. This advertisement also shows the line that Latinos in Grand Rapids walked: trying to provide opportunities for young Latinos while also engaging with nationalist movements that rejected military involvement, especially during the War in Vietnam.[55] On a national level, Chicano antiwar activists pointed to the evidence that showed Latinos died in the war at a disproportionate amount compared to their percentage of the total population—a fact that emerged as a defining issue of the Chicano Movement.[56] Puerto Ricans also worried aloud that their service in Vietnam would further serve to "protect the economic, military, and political interests of the colonizer," as Oscar López-Rivera, one of the most prolific modern Puerto Rican independence activists, warned.[57] While the anti-war narrative is well-known, scholars have also shown the Mexican American community's turn to protesting the war comes on the heels of decades of patriotism and participation in World War II.[58] Thus, examining Latino engagement with the military while also engaging with nationalist rhetoric in Grand Rapids shows us the tensions between patriotism and protest that existed for this community. With diminishing revenues from the MCP, LAC and the *Qué Pasa* editors may have thought that they had no other choice but to accept financial support from all manner of sources. Given the limited opportunities for Latino advancement in Grand Rapids, the editors might have also viewed this advertisement as a way to pass along critical information for Latinos seeking educational

[55] Historically, Latinos had a historically complex relationship with the U.S. military, although many proudly served during World War II and the Korean War. While some returning soldiers enjoyed warm receptions after the war, others struggled to find equality post-deployments.
[56] For a summary of the politics of Mexican American participation in World War II and Vietnam see, Elizabeth Rachel Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Home Front* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Lorena Oropeza, *¡Raza Sí!¡Guerra No! Chicano Protest and Patriotism during the Viet Nam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
[57] Oscar López-Rivera and Bernard Headley, "Who Is the Terrorist? The Making of a Puerto Rican Freedom Fighter," *Social Justice*, vol. 16, no. 4 (38), 1989, 172, JSTOR. See also, Carmen T. Whalen "Radical Contexts: Puerto Rican Politics in the 1960s and 1970s and the Center for Puerto Rican Studies," *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2009, 221.
[58] Lorena Oropeza, *Raza Sí!, Guerra No! Chicano Protest and Patriotism during the Viet Nam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

opportunities.

Meanwhile, government agencies possessed their own motives in forming a relationship with *Qué Pasa,* especially the local police department, which also ran advertisements for open positions in the paper. In the early 1970s, the Latino and African American communities were in the process of trying to transform the Grand Rapids Police Department (GRPD) through the enforcement of new federal affirmative action hiring policies that attempted to remedy discrimination through creating more opportunities for jobs for marginalized peoples. This often resulted in racist backlash. In 1971, the 371-person police department's staff remained almost all white, except for 13 Black officers. There were no Latino officers whatsoever.[59] Whether or not the LAC solicited the police ads is unclear, but in May 1972, Officer Don Creswell, a part of the Community Affairs Unit, submitted an advertisement to *Qué Pasa* containing the department's listed job requirements for officers with information about how to apply. Like discussions about the military, the topic of policing usually invoked strong opinions within the Latino community, likely a result of the tense relationships between Latinos and law enforcement. Although much of the public focus on police brutality has centered on the relationship between predominantly white police departments and Black citizens, Latinos regularly encounter instances of police brutality, specifically in places where they have higher populations like in Chicago, New York, or Los Angeles. These historically fraught relationships with the police rendered the thought of aspiring to be a police officer as distasteful to some in the community.[60] Complaints of police brutality toward Latinos did occur in Grand Rapids. Yet, rather than frowning upon the

[59] "Ethnic Survey," May 8, 1969, Series 13-14, Folder: Miscellaneous May 1969-Ca. September 1969, Box 2, Series 13-14, HRCR, EOD, GRCARC.
[60] See Fernández, *The Young Lords*; Lilia Fernández, *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Post War Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Ian Haney-López, *Racism on Trial : The Chicano Fight for Justice* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003).

possibility of joining forces with the profession that brutalized them, Latino leaders imagined that more Latino police officers could help address their community concerns, including complaints about abuses of power.

The police and military advertisements show the diverse ideologies that guided Latino pursuits of upward mobility and the newspaper's ability to try to reach various cross sections of the community. Though to some more radical members of the community, the LAC could have been accused of "selling out" to these institutions, the presence of other job ads and articles describing disproportionate Latino unemployment suggests that the advertisements for the military and the local police could have also been the LAC trying to assist the unemployed at all costs. The inclusion of these ads, the discourse around loss of language, and the cultural nationalism all illustrate how organizations like the LAC and individual Latinos negotiated their varying identities in Grand Rapids with limited financial and cultural resources.

Serving the Community

The LAC filled a cultural and social service void among Latinos in Grand Rapids by sponsoring LAYIA and offering *Qué Pasa*. However, amid an expanding Latino population, the LAC discovered that it had to increase its level of advocacy to ensure that the basic needs of its constituents were fulfilled. This need escalated due to the level of neglect they experienced from federal and local agencies, the latter of which did not have any Spanish-speaking employees. As a result, Latinos who did not speak English often were completely shut out of partaking in the country's social welfare system, receiving any of their benefits as US citizens, or any assistance for meeting their basic needs unless they had a family or friend who could translate for them. LAC directors Al Wilson (1971-1973) and Martin Morales (1973-1978) consistently lobbied the

City of Grand Rapids and local agencies to convince them to hire more Latinos. Rank-and-file employees at the LAC used every available resource and formed relationships with other organizations to provide healthcare, general welfare, and unemployment services to anywhere between 200 and 400 Latinos a month.[61] The LAC thus emerged as a viable force in expanding Latino's access and control over social services. Though there remained a scarcity of resources in the LAC, the efforts of the Council's employees made it possible for Latinos to stay and live in Grand Rapids.

Outreach workers at the Council performed an important function when they accompanied clients to a range of appointments ranging from medical to governmental and translated, turning what was once unpaid labor into a paid position that was acknowledged and valued. When the community was smaller in the 1950s and 1960s, people like Cruzita Gómez and Daniel Vargas escorted people to many of these appointments. During the mid-1960s, Vargas worried, "In most agencies, Spanish speaking employees who could serve as interpreters are not available… Many Latin-Americans have been unfairly treated and on numerous occasions…[I have had to] personally serve as an interpreter without renumeration."[62] Consequently, he had demanded that the city hire Latinos in those agencies, holding multiple meetings with the Kent County Welfare Department and the Michigan Employment Securities Commission to discuss this very issue.[63] They also coordinated with other local advocacy organizations, especially regarding migrant workers, including Michigan Migrant Opportunities and the Michigan Committee to Aid Farmworkers.[64] However, almost ten years later, the city's

[61] Monthly narrative, Latin American Council, March 1972, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.
[62] Meeting Minutes, HRC, April 22, 1965, Series 13-14, Box 1-3, HRCR, EOD, GRCARC.
[63] Meeting Minutes, HRC, April 22, 1965.
[64] Migrants HRC folder, page 10, Charles Johnson, "Aid for Migrants: Interested Groups form Council for Kent Area" *GRP,* May 19, 2965. The history of activism by migrant farm workers and on behalf of them in Michigan in the 1960s and 1970s has been well-documented. For more on migrant workers from the 1950s to the 1970s in

record on Latino employment remained dismal. Instead, it was LAC staff members who spent most of their work hours holding intake meetings with new clients, assessing their needs, making appointments for them, driving people to appointments, and translating for them when they arrived. Without bilingual people at the most basic social service agencies, the LAC's community outreach center made the difference in people getting what they needed and showed a glaringly lack of concern for Latinos on the part of city agencies.

Severely underdeveloped public resources for Spanish-speaking poor people led the Council staff to help residents take the first steps in accessing entitlement benefits. Many of their clients were in the most desperate conditions. In a report on LAC activities, the director reflected on the challenges the Council faced in helping those people "with unemployment increasing, and with migrants beginning to trickle into Grand Rapids… the most frequent problem our staff is dealing with are concerns and assistance in establishing eligibility for welfare and related social service benefits, establishing eligibility for unemployment compensation, and job screening."[65] These entitlement benefits could carry people over until they found jobs, which the council could also help them to find. One complication for the LAC was that applicants required valid identification to sign up for benefits. For former farm working clients without IDs, the outreach worker had to contact the client's home state to request copies of the appropriate documents. From there, they could try to secure welfare, Medicare, and food stamps. Staff estimated that they spent at least eight hours with each individual that signed up. The process was cumbersome,

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Michigan see Sidney Fine, *Expanding the Frontier of Civil Rights: Michigan,* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000); *1948-1968,* Findlay, *We Are Left Without a Father Here;* Juan Mora, Latino Encounters: Mexicans, *Tejanos*, and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Michigan, 1942-1970," (PhD diss: University of Illinois, 2020), Nora Salas, Anti-Colonialism in the Michigan Chicano Movement; Nora Salas, "'Pablo's Problem': Michigan Chicano Movement Anticolonialism and the Farm Bureau's Peasant Menace, 1962–1972." *Michigan Historical Review* 45, no. 2 (October 1, 2019): 1–38; Valdes, *Al Norte.*

[65] LAC, Monitor Report, April 1, 1973-April 30, 1973, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.

but it often made the difference between Latinos having to leave Grand Rapids or being able to live and thrive there with the benefits they were entitled to as citizens.

From 1971 to 1973, the LAC employed several different outreach workers, each possessing the blend of necessary skills to operate as social service advocates and community activists. Three outreach workers at the LAC in the early 1970s exemplified this skillset. Richard Campos, who was Mexican American and the brother of youth coordinator Rachel Campos, traveled to Chicano conferences and was involved in the United Farm Workers Movement.[66] David Rodríguez, another Mexican American man, worked for the MCP, was the first Latino to be hired in the local employment recruitment office, and eventually was elected as one of the few Latino school board members.[67] Carmen Fitte, a Puerto Rican woman who relocated to Michigan from New York, was a trained cosmetologist but soon lent her vision and skills to the outreach work of the Council, subsequently emerging as one of the fiercest advocates for Latino education in Grand Rapids. Along with many others, these three workers managed many dockets, including educational concerns, commissioner meetings, and community-wide trainings. On top of those responsibilities, they also identified reputable lawyers for people experiencing legal trouble and located dentists, obstetricians, and family physicians for LAC clients.[68] Since Grand Rapids lacked an expansive public transportation system, LAC activists determined that a lack of transportation was a major obstacle to finding a job; thus, employees also taught people to drive. LAC employee Sara Ramírez, who was also a contributor for *Qué Pasa*, transported "needy persons" to other agencies and translated written drivers' exams for clients according to one

[66] Richard Campos, "Farmworkers." Richard Campos, Southwest Program Development Corporation Certificate, November 3, 1972, Possession of Richard Campos).
[67] "Manpower aid fill Latin-American Post (David Rodríguez)," *GRP,* June 20, 1972; Doug Guthrie, "Hispanic Center Rejects Issue of Racism, Defends Firing Dow" *GRP*, March 1, 1983, 1A; "The WLAV Race," Model Neighborhood News, Volume 5, Issue 3, July-August, 1972.
[68] Carmen Fitte's Activities for October 15-31; David Rodríguez's Activities for October 15-31; Richard Campos's Activities for October 15-31, 1973, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.

LAC activity report. She spent hours with clients, chauffeuring them to drivers training, registering vehicles, purchasing insurance for newly acquired cars, and even practicing with aspiring drivers.[69] Providing these community-controlled social services filled the flagrant gaps in accessible municipal services for Latinos.

The Council decided to redirect their energy beyond accompanying people to appointments and started offering social services at the Council's building. For example, in 1970, with about a third of the Latino youth in Grand Rapids under five years old, there was a high demand for pediatric providers and care, especially in Spanish.[70] The Council director at the time, Al Wilson, convinced the Kent County Health Department and the Neighborhood Youth Corps to send nurse aides-in-training to the LAC to facilitate a monthly "well-baby" drop-in clinic where infants and toddlers would receive their regular checkups and immunizations. Utilizing the director's mid-sized office for appointments, they stretched the resources of the LAC facility by repurposing his round conference table into an exam table. In one year alone, over 500 babies received their checkup at the Council. Outside of clinic hours, the Center hosted small group English classes and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, which were led in Spanish and supported by the Kent County Health Division.[71] Extending its efficacy beyond the LAC facility, the Council also offered free tickets to the circus and other local enterprises to cash-strapped parents looking for affordable family fun.[72] Taken together, these piecemeal services weaved a social safety net, and Latinos in Grand Rapids came to count on the Council for many of their unmet needs.

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[69] Leonard Ortega to Gus Breymann, Latin American Council Weekly Report, March 12, 1973-March 16, 1973, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.
[70] Haviland and Morales, "Unmet Economic and Social Needs of the Latin American Community in Grand Rapids."
[71] Monthly Narrative Report, Latin American Council, January 1972,.
[72] Sara Ramírez, "Circus Tickets," Undated, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.

Perhaps the most pressing challenge facing Latinos at the time was how and where to secure employment; rather than depend on the slow pace of municipal services, the Council opted to remedy the unemployment problem in-house. Like many cities during the postwar period, Grand Rapids underwent a wave of deindustrialization, leaving many in a serious quandary because they lacked the necessary skills to keep pace in the evolving economy. By 1970, unemployment for Latinos in Kent County was at 13.7% while it was at 12.6% and 5.4% for African Americans and whites, respectively.[73] Grand Rapids lost some industries to the southern and western parts of the country.[74] White residents may have struggled to a degree, but African American and Latino residents faced an uphill battle when attempting to locate employment as manufacturing jobs dried up. For monolingual Spanish-speakers, the local economy was unforgiving. An LAC survey in 1973 found that about 20% of people needed help finding jobs. Latinos who migrated to Grand Rapids prior to the 1960s had expected their children to fare much better than they had under the difficult circumstances of settling into the city. Due to the lack of jobs in the long postwar period, parents and grandparents discovered that their children struggled harder to locate work than the first Latino residents. On top of that frustration, years of pleading on behalf of the LAC still had not resulted in one Spanish-speaking employee in the municipal unemployment office. Latinos sought work, but simply could not locate jobs nor was there an infrastructure to support their search. And, notwithstanding the financial importance of finding and sustaining a job, the LAC's "Unmet Economic and Social Needs" report determined that employment also represented the surest conduit toward acceptance and belonging for Latinos. The report asserted, "[E]mployment is a necessity for a

[73] U.S. Bureau of the Census, Unemployment Rate for Spanish Population, Unemployment Rate for Black Population, Unemployment Rate for White Population, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1970.
[74] April Donaker and Gordon L. Olson, *Grand Rapids and It's People* (Grand Rapids: The Grand Rapids Historical Commission, 2003), 74.

person to take his or her place in the community."[75]

Stepping in to fill the gap left by municipal services, the LAC morphed into its own employment agency, so to speak. Prior to 1972, the LAC assigned outreach workers to assess a client's eligibility for jobs sponsored by the unemployment office, where they often served as translators for job seekers. Increasingly, as community members came to rely upon this support, the LAC realized that offering this service within its facility would help clients bypass the bureaucracy of the city agency and their seeming disregard for the unique needs of Latino community members. Consequently, in 1972, the LAC opened its own Employment Services division in their building on Grandville Avenue, a neighborhood wherein most of the city's Latinos lived. Eager to avail themselves of the opportunity to locate work—while also being treated with dignity and respect—between 150 and 200 people sought these services annually. Upon arriving at the LAC, clients participated in a screening, which helped to reveal their level of English communication skills as well as their financial needs and goals. Clients also disclosed the length of time they had resided in the city, details about their work records, and whether they had access to transportation. The employment officer subsequently attempted to place the individual in a position that aligned with their varying needs. From 1972-1973, the sole staff member working on unemployment had 167 inquiries from people needing a job, set up 111 interviews, and helped 60 secure jobs. While this under resourced program was unable to assist everyone, the combined income of LAC's placements totaled $396,500 a year, according to organizational reports.[76] Emphasizing that they performed much needed work, with little support from the local unemployment office, the LAC reasoned that they had saved the city of Grand

[75] Haviland and Morales "Unmet Economic and Social Needs of the Latin American Community in Grand Rapids," 43.
[76] Haviland and Morales, "Unmet Economic and Social Needs of the Latin American Community in Grand Rapids," 44.

Rapids a substantial amount money; local Latinos relied more heavily upon LAC services than the relatively few options originating from the City.

This community-controlled employment program depended on strong relationships between LAC staff and local employers. In 1972, Rudy Pérez, an employment officer, visited some of the remaining industrial employers, introduced himself, and informed them about Latinos looking for jobs. When clients came in, he called those employers to inquire about openings and to pitch his clients.[77] For blue collar, monolingual workers, LAC employment officers located positions at Rapistan, a supply chain company. They also guided them towards jobs at K and R Construction, Lear Siegler (an automotive parts manufacturer), Interstate Trucking, and Baker Furniture.[78] For the many bilingual job seekers who relied upon LAC's employment services, officers directed them toward jobs within the Board of Education, the Community Action Program, and the Michigan Employment Security Commission. Recognizing where their clients' strengths lay and utilizing networks as effectively as possible allowed the LAC to grow into an improvised, comprehensive social service agency. If the municipal unemployment office continued to refuse the LAC's demands for a Latino hire, LAC's service work ensured that their constituents would not be forgotten or abandoned as an integral part of the Grand Rapids community. The LAC had again reinforced its position as a central entity in Latino life while paving the necessary groundwork for engaging with local politics.

"Raza Candidates" and Electoral Politics

Given the City of Grand Rapids' resistance to funding the LAC, some Latinos looked to

[77] Monthly Narrative Report, Latin American Council, May 1972, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.
[78] "Persons Hired and Place of Employment Report," August 1972; "Persons Hired and Place of Employment Report," October 1972, LAC, MC, PN-20, LAC, BOX 202, 4/12/4/1, GRCARC.

running for office to make substantive changes. The MCP provided many Latinos with their first experiences running for office. In the early 1970s, a few Mexicans and Puerto Ricans ran for the Model Neighborhood Citizens Committee (MNCC)—the decision-making body of the MCP—with hopes of garnering more funds for the LAC. They also used these elections to highlight their pan-Latino solidarity. Expanding their vision beyond the MNCC, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans began to seek public office. Many community members expected that, with more Latino representatives, the community would receive more attention and funding. Though operating at a numerical disadvantage, the Latino community organized behind candidates who displayed a keen interest in issues that affected their community. Meanwhile, the Council served as a home base for many campaigns and as a conduit for candidates to reach their constituents. Through their participation in politics, Latino leaders sought to safeguard a place in the present and in the future for Latinos in a mostly white city.

The MNCC election furnished Latinos with experience in running for office and helped them to secure a voice in the MCP, which became the funding agency for the LAC. Up until 1969, African American and white candidates dominated the MNCC, as I chronicle in Chapter Four. The influence and community work of the Council convinced more and more Latinos to invest in the MCP. Many residents hoped that if Latinos secured positions on the MNCC, they could direct more funding to the LAC. In 1972, seven Latinos ran for positions on the MNCC—more candidates than many of the previous years. Demonstrating the growing sense of solidarity and "race pride" in predominantly white Grand Rapids, *Qué Pasa* showcased each of the "raza candidates" in a one-page announcement.[79] The roster of candidates included three Mexican Americans: Jose Pérez, Margarita Morales, and Felix Ybarra; it also included two well-regarded

[79] *Qué Pasa*, vol. 2, no. 3.

Puerto Ricans: Pedro "Pete" Gómez and Orlando Carríon. Pedro's daughter, Laura Gómez, representing the upcoming generation of MexiRicans, and Josefina González, represented not only Mexicans, but also the city's youth, both ran for "teenager-at-large." The teenage candidates aspired to a newly created position that was designed to increase political engagement among young people. In the context of an election where white and Black candidates dominated, *Qué Pasa'*s use of the term "raza" called attention to the Latino identity of the candidates, a factor that they hoped would compel Mexicans and Puerto Ricans to vote as a bloc, signifying the pan-Latino solidarity that the LAC and the larger Latino community espoused.

While elections for the antipoverty program offered Latinos the opportunity to exercise solidarity, municipal elections revealed just how excluded Latinos were from the body politic. Unlike the Model Cities elections, Grand Rapids's municipal contests were not confined to the low-income neighborhoods in which Latinos lived. As a numerical minority, Latinos found it incredibly challenging to have their voices heard in the local government. Since the 1910s, Grand Rapids adhered to a council-manager system structure that prevented most residents from directly influencing decisions. Under this system, residents voted for a mayor and councilmembers, which were also called commissioners. Elected commissioners subsequently chose a city manager who was tasked with more of the administrative decisions. Despite being elected democratically, mayors were more of a figurehead when compared to the unelected city manager. For all intents and purposes, the commissioners wielded more executive power than the mayor because they selected the city manager. In this way, city officials were insulated from the direct input of residents, further marginalizing Latino voices.

Residents of Grand Rapids held the most sway in the election of commissioners, but the boundaries of the city's wards and Latinos' small population limited Latinos' chances at ever

electing a "raza candidate" as a commissioner. Each of city's three wards selected two commissioners. From 1967 to 1973, the first ward covered the northwest side of Grand Rapids, where Polish and other Eastern Europeans immigrants and their descendants lived. The second ward encompassed the northeast side of Grand Rapids. Segregation patterns kept the second ward mostly white. The third ward covered the Southside of Grand Rapids where most of the African Americans and Latinos lived. In 1973, the Grandville Avenue area became part of the first ward, splitting large swaths of African Americans and Latinos into two separate wards.[80] The ward configuration both before and after the 1973 shift has yielded only a few minority commissioners except for the few Black commissioners out of the third ward. For example, the first African American commissioner, Lyman Parks, emerged out of the third ward in 1975. Since then, there have been seven other Black commissioners, and they all stemmed from the same ward as Parks.[81] As dismal as the numbers are for African Americans, commissioner elections have resulted in even worse results for Latinos, who have only won one seat in Grand Rapids's history. It was only as recently as 2019 that the second ward elected Mexican American Milinda Ysasi, the great-granddaughter of the Simon and Juana Aguilar who migrated to the area during the 1940s.[82] With such a small Latino population compared to the larger white population, there was a very limited chance that Latinos could elect a representative out of their ward. Instead, the community focused on finding candidates that were sympathetic to their causes and canvassed for them, hoping they would reward their efforts by prioritizing Latino interests after the election.

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[80] Brian Malone, "City Reapportions, Expands 1st Ward, *GRP*, March 27, 1973, 1.
[81] Matt Vande Bunte, For First Time This Century, Black Candidates on Grand Rapids Mayoral Ballot, *GRP,* April 3, 2019.
[82] City Commissioners, 1945-1971," Grand Rapids Historical Commission,, " *History Grand Rapids*, http://www.historygrandrapids.org/article/2231/city-commissioners-19451971 Accessed, February 12, 2013. "City Commissioners Terms of Office" *All City Officials Past and Present Terms*, 6, The City of Grand Rapids.

Despite the challenges inherent to seeking electoral representation, Latinos dedicated themselves to municipal elections as a way of advocating for their interests. The LAC became a hub of voter registration and the neighborhood's engagement with local politics. Almost a third of people the LAC surveyed in 1973 about their unmet needs requested assistance from the Council with voter registration, signaling a deep commitment to voting among Latinos. In the 1950s, Daniel Vásquez, one of the pioneering Mexican men in the city, heard from local commissioners that if Latinos wanted change, they needed to vote. As Vásquez recalled, they told him, "You got to vote to count."[83] He devoted himself toward that issue well into the 1960s. By the 1970s, Pete and Cruzita Gómez, who were regular LAC volunteers and general advocates for the community, held many meetings with city commissioners on how to increase Latino influence in City Hall. Cruzita recalled that the commissioners implored them to vote. She and her husband took the call seriously and started registering people as a part of their activism. They also met with commission candidates to learn their positions on issues. The Gómezes told their neighbors that it was even more important for those who could vote to do so to act for those who lacked the franchise, recognizing that there were members of the Latino community who could not. She remarked, hypothetically, "You could say there are 40,000 [Latinos], but if only 15,000 vote then the city looks at the 15,000… Maybe those other 25,000 can't vote if they're not here legally," she said. For this reason, the Gómezes expanded their voter registration drives beyond the LAC facility and engaged in door-to-door canvassing in the community. To achieve any semblance of community-control, voter outreach became an essential part of the LAC's advocacy. The willingness exhibited by Latinos participating in Grand Rapids's electoral politics illustrates their placemaking work to transform their city into one that met their needs.

[83] Daniel Vásquez, interview with Gordon Olson, Grand Rapids, Michigan, No Date, Box 4, 321, GRHSC, GRPL.

Even with the numerical and systemic disadvantages to running for office, some Latinos committed to overcoming the hurdle of their "outsider status" in politics. Frustrated with their limited political power, Grand Rapids residents of all races called for a review of the Grand Rapids City Charter in 1971, which mandated the council-manager style of governance. Then Mayor C.H. Sonneveldt wanted to expand the powers of the mayor to balance out the city manager's power. This proposed change required a revision to the city's charter. Grand Rapidians then elected nine people to sit on the Charter Revision Commission, which was tasked with reviewing the charter and offering a recommendation for legislation to change it.[84] My maternal grandfather, Porfirio Murillo, who worked for the American Seating Company, and Miguel Navarro, the owner of the local El Matador Tortilla Company, were among the 98 candidates who ran for the seats. Both Murillo and Navarro worked as farmworkers before settling in Grand Rapids. Having any working-class, non-white representation on the commission would have revolutionized the composition of city government. Navarro and Murillo lost their election bids, however. Murillo garnered 1,836 votes, or about 2% of the total, and Navarro earned 5,170 votes, or 5% of the total. Neither approached the 9,000 votes that former city manager Donald Oakes won, or the 12,000 votes that the former deputy city attorney Thomas Shear tallied. The other positions were filled by white men: ex-city commissioners, a police chief, an engineer, and a teacher.[85] The 1971 bid to change the charter failed, and Grand Rapids continued with the council-manager form of local government and three wards represented on the commission. Despite these setbacks, Latinos refused to crumble under the

[84] Eric S. Zemmering, "Grand Rapids: A Lack of Enthusiasm for Change in the Council-Manager Form," in James H. Svara, Douglas J. Watson, eds., *More than Mayor or Manager: Campaigns to Change Form of Government in America's Large Cities* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 163-181

[85] School Elections, City of Grand Rapids, Kent County, Michigan, Monday, June 11, 1973. Cumulative Report: Wards 1-3. City Clerk, Series 2-32, Election Documentation File, 1970-1975. Acc. 13 Box 3; City of Grand Rapids, Kent County, Michigan, April 6, 1970, City Clerk, Series 2-32, Election Documentation File, 1970-1975, GRPD General Election, KISD General Election, GRCARC.

white power structure that disenfranchised so many and robbed them of a voice. Licking their wounds, they instead found alternative strategies to claim space in Grand Rapids and improve their material conditions.

The Relentless Fight for La Raza

While acknowledging the difficulties the LAC encountered, it is indisputable that the organization dramatically improved the quality of life for Latinos in Grand Rapids. It filled a necessary role and became the organization that adamantly represented Latinos in the early 1970s. Indeed, Latinos affirmed this in a survey of the Council's efforts. When asked which social service organization could best represent Latinos, "The Latin American Council was selected by a majority of the people."[86] To families like the Gómezes, the Council not only represented their values as a civically engaged Mexican and Puerto Rican household, it also channeled their energy and passion into formally helping the community they cared for so deeply. The LAC was also the pinnacle of organizing in Grand Rapids that called for the integration of Latinos into the city's social fabric. They fought to deliver to Latinos the services they deserved as residents of the city and stressed that Latinos should be hired and paid to respond to the unique needs of their community. Through the Council's relentless fights for funding, outreach workers and administrators succeeded in working to help Latinos, causing both the local and federal governments to acknowledge their inefficacies. The people who so desperately needed this assistance could take solace that there was a dedicated and creative staff that would find the means to help. From teenagers who had a safe and welcoming place to celebrate their identities, to a former migrant worker looking for a job in a new city, to a mother

[86] "First Year Evaluation: Latin American Council."

needing a check-up for their child, the LAC was a center for Latino placemaking in a city that had operated within a Black-versus-white binary for decades.

Continuing to nurture pan-Latino solidarity and celebrate Latino identities motivated the LAC administrators and staff members alike. As a director from 1971 to 1973, Al Wilson stressed the importance of a burgeoning pan-Latino identity among Mexican and Puerto Rican youth. Young Latinos required a place of their own to learn community-building skills. Thoughtfully curated youth and adult programming celebrated both Mexican and Puerto Rican culture while also incorporating elements of other Latino ethnic groups. Just four years prior in 1969, the Council suffered an internal struggle so severe it appeared in the *Grand Rapids Press*, who blamed it on the inability of Puerto Ricans and Mexicans to unite in a common cause. Yet, the city witnessed numerous examples of cooperation and productivity within the LAC during the 1970s, proving those outside observers wrong. The LAC's use of raza and the Spanish language as a cultural touchstone, while problematic and exclusionary in some ways, functioned as a uniting concept, which helped the community to refocus on increasing their pan-solidarity. Retaining Spanish turned into a means to resist the temptation of assimilating for upward mobility. These issues, openly discussed in *Qué Pasa*, revealed how Latinos negotiated their position in Grand Rapids. The LAC granted many Latinos the ability to reclaim some sense of culture—a sentiment that many thought they had lost while living in majority-white city. The Council literally created a space for Latinos in a place where their needs were often ignored and neglected.

While the relationship with the City was fraught with tension over funding and control, Latinos defined their own interests and identities with the help of committed community members and other resources. The War on Poverty also legitimized the work that Latinos did,

especially Latinas such as Cruzita Gómez, Rachel Campos, and Sara Ramírez, signaling to women and to future generations the value and necessity in aiding one another. While the official War on Poverty ended with Nixon, paid community workers as a concept has stayed with our society until the present, even if programs are underfunded. With money and collaboration attached to these long-practiced acts of survival, anti-poverty programs like the MCP and the LAC helped to cement the idea that guaranteeing people's basic needs was work in which the government should invest. Through these programs and their own innovation, Latinos created their own social safety net in Grand Rapids.

Without the avenues for radical political resistance or electoral success to alleviate Latino living conditions, advocacy became a form of activism in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The movement looked different in every geographical and social context around the country but examining the work of people outside of Southwest and the Northeast shows how everyday people found ways to subvert local hierarchies. It also reveals how Latinos in Grand Rapids treated the meeting of people's basic needs as the core of activism. The LAC could not have accomplished many of its goals without the sometimes-reluctant cooperation from city agencies, corporations, local businesses, and foundations. To take their activism further, Latinos in Grand Rapids further developed their institutional activism as they took aim at some of the largest structural barriers that oppressed them: discrimination in police hiring and an education system that failed them. Like other Midwest activists that merged their interests with institutions, Latinos attempted to further the work of structural change from within the system.