Of farmworkers and other exploitations: The enduring relevance of Rius's *The Chicanos*

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Abstract

In 1972, the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) published a comic by the Mexican comic artist Rius: *NACLA Presents Rius: The Chicanos*. This was an English-language version of *Los Chicanos*, which Rius had released in his Los Agachados series in 1971. In US Latino cultural and comic history *The Chicanos* is an overlooked artefact: it is the first comic book-length treatment of Chicanos and the diverse drives of the Chicano Movement. In this essay I assess *The Chicanos* as a key example of transborder information exchange about a US population with direct links to Mexico. *The Chicanos*, I suggest, survives as a cultural artefact—which comes to the discussion with inevitable historical biases and oversights—that illustrates how important historical memory is in a USA in which prevail ephemeral media soundbites and claims of "fake news."

Keywords: Eduardo del Río García; Rius; Chicanos; Chicano Movement; North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA); Los Agachados; comics; farmworkers; undocumented immigrants; COVID-19.

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Resumen

En 1972, el Congreso Norteamericano de América Latina (NACLA) publicó un cómic del dibujante mexicano Rius: *NACLA Presents Rius: The Chicanos*. Ésta era una versión en inglés de *Los Chicanos*, que Rius había lanzado en su serie Los Agachados en 1971. En la historia cultural y del cómic latino de los Estados Unidos, *The Chicanos* es un artefacto pasado por alto: es el primer tratamiento de longitud de un cómic de los chicanos y los diversos impulsos del Movimiento Chicano. En este ensayo, evalúo a *The Chicanos* como un ejemplo clave de intercambio de información transfronterizo sobre una población estadounidense con vínculos directos con México. *The Chicanos*, sugiero, sobrevive como un artefacto cultural—que llega a la discusión con inevitables sesgos y descuidos históricos—que ilustra la importancia de la memoria histórica en un EE. UU. en el que prevalecen fragmentos efímeros de los medios de comunicación de masas y afirmaciones de "noticias falsas."

Palabras clave: Eduardo del Río García; Rius; Chicanos; El movimiento chicano; Congreso Norteamericano de América Latina; Los Agachados; historietas; campesinos; inmigrantes indocumentados; COVID-19.

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In the Fall of 1972, the Berkeley-based North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) published a comic by the Mexican comic artist Eduardo del Río García, aka Rius (1934–2017), entitled *NACLA Presents Rius: The Chicanos* (henceforth *The Chicanos*; Rius 1973).[1] The comic was an English-language version of *Los Chicanos*, which Rius had released in Mexico as number 82 in his Los Agachados series in 1971. The publication event did not signal a novel relationship between NACLA and Rius. NACLA had already issued a translation of an earlier Rius comic on the Uruguayan left-wing guerrilla-group the Tupamaros. But in the evolution of US Latino cultural and comic history, *The Chicanos* remains an overlooked, if modest, milestone: it is the first comic book-length treatment of Chicanos and the diverse drives of the Chicano Movement in its heyday in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Given that importance, in this essay I provide a detailed overview of *The Chicanos* and its primary concerns, noting that the comic's narrative contains inevitable historical oversights and biases. That overview is preceded by a discussion of the relation between the comic and its publisher NACLA as an example of transborder

information exchange and awareness raising about a US population with historical, genealogical and cultural links to Mexico. I then plot how the work of Rius continues to inform US Latino comics and comic scholarship in the 21st century. Finally, I argue that *The Chicanos* and its laying bare of the chronic marginalization of Mexican Americans remains apposite half a century after its English-language appearance. That relevance has to do with longstanding exploitations of Mexican American and Mexican documented and undocumented farm- and other workers—a key focus of *The Chicanos*; and a glossed over point of tension within it—which continue in the USA in the shadow of COVID-19. My analysis relies on a transcultural theoretical reading that locates the comic's internal concerns in evolving historical contact zones. The "contact zone" is Mary Louise Pratt's concept, one that attempts "to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect" (Pratt 7). For Pratt, a contact zone reading focuses on "copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 7).

1. NACLA AND AWARENESS RAISING

The inside front cover of *The Chicanos* (Figure 1) contains the following justification for NACLA's translation and publication of *Los Chicanos*:

> This comic book has been prepared and adapted from the highly popular comic series, 'Los Agachados,' by the Mexican artist Rius […] The Spanish edition was directed at a Mexican audience and so the tone reflects not only the Mexican setting, but also the way the Mexican people feel about the U.S. government. However, it is important to remember that although the comic book may reflect a natural resentment against U.S. domination, it is directed only at the government and its imperialist policies and not at the American people.[2]

This explanation fits the brief of NACLA, a progressive organisation of US "civil rights, antiwar and labor activists" formed in 1966 with the aim of forging a coalition that could intervene in US national debates by raising awareness of transcontinental political and cultural developments and exchanges. As the NACLA website notes, NACLA

was committed above all to furthering mutual understandings between the USA and the peoples and countries of the Caribbean and Latin America:

> [NACLA], announced its organizers, would be a source of reliable information and analysis on Latin America that could be of use to activists. It would focus on systemic analyses of wealth and power in the Americas rather than on scandals or policy 'mistakes.' It would be informed by a belief that what happened in the United States was integrally related to what happened in the rest of the world. In this context, NACLA's understanding of U.S. policies and power was formed by looking at the United States from a Latin American perspective, through a Latin American lens (NACLA 2020).

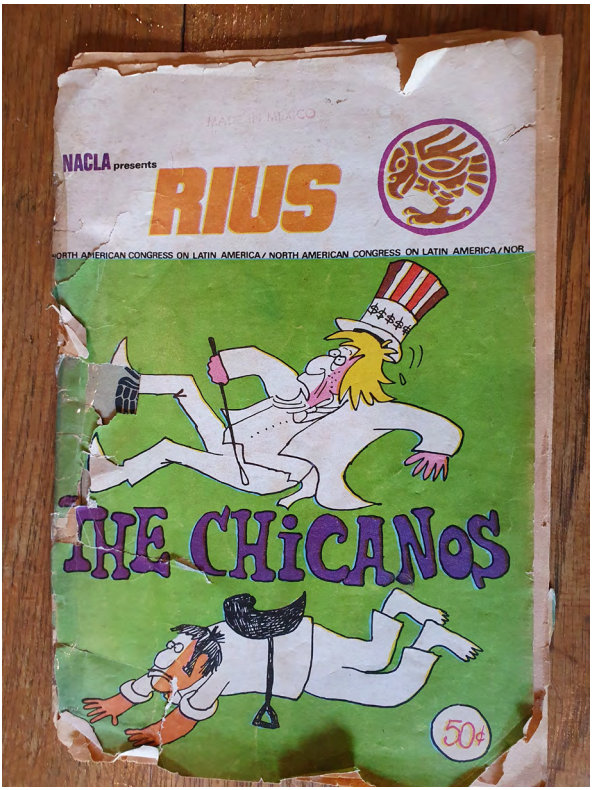

Figure 1. Cover of *The Chicanos*.
Source: *NACLA Presents Rius: The Chicanos*. NACLA, 1972. © 1973 NACLA.

The historical setting for the birth and evolution of NACLA was, of course, the Cold War, as envisaged critically within US borders, and as manifest outside them with regard to often brutal US political, economic, and military influence and interventions. The first NACLA newsletter, which became a regular mouthpiece for the organisation's operations and trans-American interests, was published in February 1967. *The Chicanos*, then, was an early edition to the newsletter's roster, which continues to be released more than five decades later. The comic was something of a cultural coup (within NACLA's small but growing readership) given that Rius was, at the time, one of the most famous political cartoonists in Mexico, and his work was attracting readers outside that country (Tatum & Hinds 5).[3] According to Howard, Los Agachados was produced bimonthly beginning in September 1968, and ran for nine years until its closure in 1977. The series had a print run of sales of some "50,000 copies its first few weeks and 150,000 issues at its height" (Howard 13). Tatum states that between 1968 and 1977 "Rius wrote and illustrated 291 issues" of the series (767). Among the few critics to recognise the gendered division of labour involved with the series, Tatum adds: "this endeavor was almost entirely a one-man production except for his wife, who functioned over the years as the person who would provide the color. More recently, their young daughter has also contributed to the production of the comic book" (Tatum 767).[4] Surveying a long history of what he termed "Mexico's combat cartoonists," Barajas notes that:

> From the beginning, cartooning was an axis around which political debate turned in Mexico. If in the nineteenth century it was an essential weapon of the combative Liberal press, by the end of the twentieth century cartooning's influence had been well established in Mexican politics by artists such as Eduardo del Rio, more popularly known as Rius, and Rogelio Naranjo.

As these analyses iterate, there is no Mexican comic history without Rius. NACLA's publication of *The Chicanos* also indicated a radical conceptual shift for the organisation's approach to Latin American political and sociocultural developments to include Mexican American minorities in the USA. That is, the comic implied, Latin America does not stop at the US-Mexico border, for around that border are borderlands that form a historically charged contact zone (Pratt).

2. *THE CHICANOS* AND ITS CONCERNS

The front cover of *The Chicanos* features a character familiar to readers of the Los Agachados series, Uncle Sam (Howard 57), who wears a hat decorated with stripes and dollar signs. He is being bucked unceremoniously from the back of a Chicano with a saddle on his back. The visual and historical message here is not subtle, but that message will be clarified with more nuance in the comic that follows: the USA exploits its Chicano populations, but those communities are now fighting back against a history of enforced discrimination dating back to the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848, after which the USA annexed Mexico's northern half. The comic book's self-conscious didactic approach—"half *historieta*, half didactic manual" (Stavans, My Debt to Rius 176)—utilizes recurring characters and icons to construct its historical narrative of gringo exploitations of Chicanos, and of Chicano resistance to such treatments. This approach is in keeping with Rius's wider aims in the Los Agachados series, whose name has been variously translated into English as the "stooped ones," the "underdogs," and the "bending ones" (Stavans, My Debt to Rius 174). Pancho in *The Chicanos* is very much legible as a stooped one. *The Chicanos*, however, differs from many of the comics published in the series for being set outside the imagined Mexico—the fictional city of San Garabato or rural Chayotitlán —that Rius utilized for many issues of the series (Tatum 770; Neria & Aspinwall 27). The comic combines hand-drawn cartoons with collage and balloon text as it lays bare the harsh daily realities of life in the USA for the Chicano minority in the 1960s and early 1970s.

The Chicanos commences with a skit, "2 Faces of el Patroncito (the Boss)," based on one by the famous agit-prop performance ensemble, El Teatro Campesino (ETC), founded in 1965 by the playwright Luis Valdez. The ETC was noted for its *rasquache* or making do aesthetic, and for its social protest ethos that saw the ensemble deliver awareness-raising performances to farmworkers in the field (Allatson, Key Terms in Latino/a Literary 222–223). The "2 Faces of el Patroncito (the Boss)" introduces to the comic's readers El Patroncito (the Boss) and Pancho (misnamed by the Patron as Pedro), as the two characters swap roles for a day. Pancho has his revenge over his master by exploiting him as the boss would normally do. Pancho remains the main character in the rest of the comic, moving through space and time as the comic's didactic intentions are iterated (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Image of "The 2 faces of El Patroncito".
Source: *NACLA Presents Rius: The Chicanos*. NACLA, 1972. © 1973 NACLA.

The comic accordingly provides an historical overview of how the US southwest derived from territorial handovers stemming from the Mexican American War (1846–1848). As per standard Chicano Movement discourse, *Los Chicanos* argues that the 1848 territorial handover produced the Mexican American minority, and with it a related history of labour exploitation, as well as undervalued involvement in the US military, most notably in World War II and the Vietnam War. The comic also attends to the first cultural signs of new Chicano identifications, Pochos and Pachucos, the latter name deriving from Mexican American Spanish slang for El Paso in southwestern Texas (Allatson, Key Terms in Latino/a Literary 186–187). However, Rius does not recognise in Pachucos a positive development in the history of Mexican American culture, as the voice balloon in one panel says: "The nickname stuck, and soon there were Pachucos all over the place. In L.A. they formed a terrible gang that even scared the cops,

but they had no political direction." This reading of Pachucos ignores such events as the infamous zoot-suit riots of 1943 in which Chicano and other zoot-suiters in Los Angeles were targeted by sailors, soldiers and the police. The event was important in politicizing Chicano youth in that city (Allatson, Key Terms in Latino/a Literary 247–248). Rius's position here is not surprising. He takes an orthodox leftist position that Pachucos were not conscious of their own class oppressions, thus evoking earlier Mexican intellectual interventions into the terrains of *chicanismo*, notably Octavio Paz's infamous 1950 dismissal of Mexican Americans as an abject, "orphaned" constituency—lost to both Mexico and the USA—in *El laberinto de la soledad* (Paz; Allatson, Key Terms in Latino/a Literary 186–187).

Condensing diverse civil rights drives, the comic continues with panels that represent longstanding US police brutality and legal discriminations, and Chicano responses to that history. One set of panels focuses on Reies López Tijerina, the founder of the Alianza Federal de Mercedes (Federal Land Grant Alliance, February 1963) in New Mexico, an organization that fought to reclaim lands taken off Mexican Americans from the early 1880s. The next set of panels introduces readers to the National Farmworkers Association (NFWA) that was formed in 1962 in California under the leadership of César Chávez. The panels extend from the Teatro Campesino skit that opened the comic by reiterating a long history of the exploitation of Mexican American farmworkers. Here, the comic also refers to government and agricultural farm owners' use of hired Mexican—not Chicano—strike breakers to work on the farms during the strike by Chicanos in 1965 for better pay and conditions in the Californian grape growing sector. This is the only moment in which the comic refers to political tensions between Mexican Americans and Mexicans. The comic thus glosses over the complex realities of migrant labour, mostly from Mexico, in the agrarian sector in the 1960s, and US farmworker—in California largely drawn from the Chicano and Filipino communities—resentment of that labour.

Nonetheless, for Rius in *The Chicanos* the NFWA (which became the United Farm Workers in 1966, and the United Farm Workers Association in 1972) was the most important and influential political organization in the Chicano Movement. He recognized in the NFWA a militant agenda that had affinities with anti-imperialist and anti-

capitalist resistance movements outside the US, a reading in line with such commentators as Mariscal:

> Years before the full-blown Movimiento burst onto the historical stage, the NFWA had become a classic version of what Raymond Williams called a 'militant particularism'—in which a group of workers in a specific geographical locale, faced with intolerable conditions, organize [sic] to change those conditions for the better. But the particularities of the farmworkers' struggle spoke to a wide range of related issues that affected virtually every Mexican American community in the United States during the Vietnam War period. […] In a dialectical and often contradictory process, the union's project fed into an emergent cultural nationalism and provided it with a repertoire of symbols and tropes even as it worked against the construction of a sectarian ethnicity-based identity by insisting on multiethnic coalition building and international solidarity with workers around the world (Mariscal 23-24).

Endorsing such transnational resonances, *The Chicanos* shows how the Chicano Movement in the early 1970s was operating on a number of fronts. First the comic emphasizes the importance of education at school level, which needed to be more inclusive of Chicanos and their history. Second the comic supports the rise of a militant Chicano identification, as typified by the formation of the La Raza Unida Party, a party that represented the Chicano Brown Berets, as well as by Chicano involvement in the Anti-Vietnam War movement. Noting how Chicano activism generated its own symbolism, the comic explains the importance of "Aztlán," a conceptualisation of the US Southwest as the location for the original homeland of the Aztecs, which in the Chicano Movement functioned as a geocultural imaginary and a place in which Chicanos were neither American nor Mexican, but a transcultural entity in between those national blocs. While Rius does not endorse the ambition of some Chicanos in the early 1970s for an independent Aztlán, *The Chicanos* does assert that there are political lessons to be learned from the Chicano Movement in Mexico and elsewhere. *The Chicanos* in effect advocates a transborder alliance between Mexican workers and intellectuals and Chicano workers and activists in the north.

As a finalising statement, the comic lists sources consulted, along with contacts for numerous Chicano Movement organisations and media outlets, and then ends with a poem from the Chicano

poet Alurista (Figure 3): "The man say we making noise." With that conclusion, *The Chicanos* confirms its inherent androcentric approach to the quotidian realities of Mexican Americans in the early 1970s. Women are peripheral to the comic's narrative. The first mention of women occurs in the opening skit about El Patroncito, in which the boss's swapping of places with Pancho leads a baton-wielding policeman to accuse El Patroncito of daring "to look at a white woman." Toward the end of the comic two images of women appear. The first depicts César Chávez embracing—patriarch-like, protectively—a woman and child. The second occurs in a panel that shows a female African American protester holding a "Free Ruchell Magee" sign.[5] The panel asserts that Chicano civil rights concerns are linked with those of "Blacks, Indians, Filipinos, and all other victims of the system." The labour and contributions of Chicana activists in the various wings of the Chicano Movement discussed in the comic lie outside its remit. As a cultural artefact from 1972, the comic embodies an historical moment before Chicana feminist critiques of Chicano nationalism, machismo and patriarchy began to appear in the mid- to late-1970s and early 1980s (Allatson, Key Terms in Latino/a Literary 64–65).

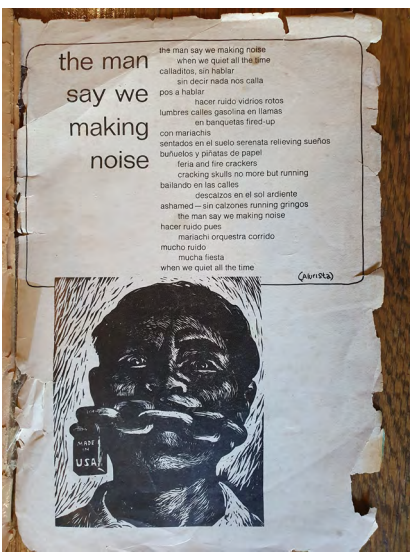

Figure 3. Illustration for a poem by the Chicano poet Alurista.
Source: *NACLA Presents Rius: The Chicanos*. NACLA, 1972. © 1973 NACLA.

3. RIUS AND HIS ENDURING INFLUENCE

Rius died in 2017, and numerous commentators have since described his legacy in terms of his impact on comics outside Mexico, especially on didactic comics (Howard 9-10). Surprisingly some of the critical literature on the US Latino comic has tended to downplay that legacy, or ignore it. It is important, then, to note a few examples of Rius's influence on US Latino comic artists and scholars in the twenty-first century. As is well known, the Los Angeles-based Chicano cartoonist Lalo Alcaraz, has cited Rius as one of his key influences (Aldama 19; Fernández L'Hoeste). Alcaraz collaborated with Ilan Stavans to provide the illustrations in two significant comic projects: *Latino USA: A Cartoon History* (2000) and *A Most Imperfect Union: A Contrarian History of the United States* (2014). As I have argued elsewhere, *The Chicanos* seems to provide a tacit point of reference for *Latino USA: A Cartoon History* (Allatson, Ilan Stavans's Latino USA 244). In a detailed assessment of Rius's importance for his own political education, Stavans notes that while he had not made a direct link between *Latino USA* and Rius, his readers did (Stavans, My Debt to Rius 177). Rius's impact on Stavans' second collaboration with Alcaraz was, however, overt: "This second title has a more sparse style that shies away from excess and strikes me as closer to Rius's. It also has a more irreverent, anti-establishmentarian approach that plays homage to him" (Stavans, My Debt to Rius 177). Noting that the two comic books—which are clearly didactic in intention as accords with the Rius tradition—feature the recurring protagonists of Author and Cartoonist, Stavans concludes: "In sum, my debt to the Mexican *historieta*, and to Rius in particular, is substantial: they taught me how to laugh while questioning the world I live in" (Stavans, My Debt to Rius 177). Traces of Rius, too, can be detected in Maceo Montoya's *Chicano Movement For Beginners* (2016), whose title references the many "For Beginners" books that Rius pioneered, and the speculative cartoon, "Los Borrados," by Oscar "The Oz" Madrigal (2003).

Rius's *The Chicanos* survives as a cultural artefact with inevitable historical biases and oversights. And yet the comic draws attention to the importance of historical memory in a USA in which, five decades later, prevail ephemeral media soundbites and claims of "fake news." Given that context, assessing the comic's enduring relevance also asks readers to focus on the enduring systemic structures of marginalization and exploitation that the comic itself laid bare.

4. CODA: *THE CHICANOS* IN THE SHADOW OF COVID-19

The plight of farmworkers in the fields of California in the early-1960s lead to the formation of the National Farm Workers Association. That organisation's strikes and activism would, after many years of struggle, improve the working conditions of Chicano farmworkers. For Rius, the NFWA was the most important of the Chicano Movement's diverse drives. Yet even Rius felt obliged to mention in *The Chicanos* a fundamental tension between Mexican American farmworkers and the non-unionized Mexican farmworkers brought into the fields during the 1965 boycott of Californian wine grape companies (Allatson, Key Terms in Latino/a Literary 237). That strike would last five years, and was supported by such cultural operatives as el Teatro Campesino, which provided the opening skit for *The Chicanos*. In 1972, the NFWA morphed into the UFWA, and its mission would then expand to fight for improving the working conditions of all farmworkers irrespective of national status. The UFWA continues to do this work at the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century.

The chronic exploitations of farmworkers discussed in *The Chicanos* remain strikingly apposite in the USA in the shadow of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021. The pandemic hit undocumented farmworkers heavily across the USA, and in ways that evoke the structural discriminations of the 1960s and 1970s discussed in *The Chicanos*. According to Dorning and Skeritt, 75 percent of farmworkers, or just under three million people, in the USA are undocumented migrants, most from Mexico and Central America (2020). Once COVID-19 took hold in the USA, that laboring community was vulnerable. Farms across the country became de facto mini-contact zones in which "conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" were commonplace (Pratt 1992: 6), and in ways that have been replicated across the globe (Morley 2020). As Godoy pointed out in April 2020: "the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic … threatens to worsen the already precarious conditions in which these workers plant, harvest, process and move fruits and vegetables in the U.S" (2020). He adds: "Exposed to illegal charges for visa, transport and accommodation costs, labour exploitation, lack of access to basic services and unhealthy housing, Mexican seasonal workers driven from their homes by poverty must also now brave the risk of contagion." Recalling the work of the late César

Chávez, whose birthday March 31 is commemorated in the USA, Godoy warns his readers to heed the exploitations of undocumented farmworkers, whom he calls essential workers during the pandemic. Bobadilla echoes this position: "immigrant farmworkers … deserve economic support, worker protections and our gratitude—and the story of the iconic leader of the farmworkers' movement decades ago may provide guidance for how to build political support for such measures" (2020). Such warnings are precisely what *The Chicanos* attempted to heed at the height of the Chicano Movement in the early 1970s. An overlooked cultural artefact in the history of US Latino comics, *The Chicanos* thus remains prescient some five decades after its translation and publication by NACLA, in an historical moment in which farmworkers across the USA have been hard hit by the COVID-19 global pandemic, and debates about farmworker rights and exploitations are again attracting media and political attention.

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NOTES

1 The comic states that the date of publication is Fall 1972, but it also contains the copyright date of 1973.

2 In this essay I focus on the English translation and not the original Spanish version because my interest lies not in assessing the translation per se, but in reading *The Chicanos* in relation to its targeting of, and commitment to "educating," an English-speaking US readership.

3 Useful overviews of Rius and his work's influence are Proctor (1972), Tatum (1991), Stavans (2016), Neria and Aspinwall (2016), Galindo (2017), Howard (2019) and Sánchez González (2019). The online record of a notable Mexican exhibition on Rius, *Rius para principiantes*, is also of interest (2014).

4 Rius reestablished the series in 1978 (Tatum 767).

5 Ruchell Cinque Magee is an African American activist who has the dubious honour of being the USA's longest serving political prisoner (Prisoner Solidarity n.d).