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Enrique C. Ochoa
California State University, Los Angeles

Fernando Mejía
California State University, Los Angeles

Carlos Ortez

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Nourishing Communities and Consciousness at the Grassroots: An Interview with Carlos Ortez of *Un Solo Sol Kitchen* in Boyle Heights

ENRIQUE C. OCHOA, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, LOS ANGELES
FERNANDO MEJÍA, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, LOS ANGELES

INTRODUCTION

This interview with Carlos Ortez, owner and chef of *Un Solo Sol Kitchen* in Boyle Heights, demonstrates the innovative grassroots food struggles currently occurring in Latina/o communities which have been influenced by critical perspectives on colonialism and capitalism. Liberation theology and naturopathic approaches have blended with revolutionary perspectives to foment a healthy cuisine based on community histories and traditions, and where food is a key part of the struggle for social and economic justice. As our research on Boyle Heights (in the eastern portion of Los Angeles) has shown, such a holistic approach to the struggle for food justice runs deep in Latina/o and Latin American communities.¹

In December 2012, we sat down with Ortez, at *Un Solo Sol Kitchen*, on First Street in Boyle Heights and across from the historic Mariachi Plaza, to discuss his own approach in the food justice movement. The menu at *Un Solo Sol Kitchen* is an eclectic mix of Latin American and several Indian dishes prepared in unique ways. The menu has a number of vegetarian (and vegan) preparations and meat dishes that make use of organic, non-Genetically Modified foods, and local ingredients when possible. In the absence of local ingredients, he is working to expand the community garden movement so as to create strong

communities that control their own destinies. We concur with customers and community members that the food is delicious, healthy, and nourishing.

Upon entering *Un Solo Sol Kitchen*, it is clear that it is more than a restaurant. In this small storefront space, the work of local artists adorns the walls and a mural painted by the artist Rafael Escamilla (Fig. 1), draws guests into the history and ideology of the restaurant. As we were completing the interview, a local dance instructor born and raised in Boyle Heights arrived and began to set up for a community flamenco class. When we stopped in on other occasions, people were eating and engaged in lively discussions. On Wednesdays, *Un Solo Sol Kitchen* becomes a community diner, where neighbors and residents get a delicious meal for five dollars and share *en convivencia*. The spirit of *Un Solo Sol Kitchen* is an important example of a growing movement in Latina/o and Latin American communities throughout the Americas that is reclaiming its food, culture, and local resources.



Figure 1. Rafael Escamilla, *Un Solo Sol*, mural

Fernando Mejía (FM): To begin, could you please tell us about yourself? Where were you raised and what shapes your approach to your work?

Carlos Ortez (CO): I am originally from El Salvador. I came to the U.S. at the end of 1980, right after I had graduated from high school. Those eighteen years I lived in El Salvador are at the core of my formation. I was born in 1962 in Santa Rosa de Lima in the Department of La Unión in eastern El Salvador. My family had deep ties to the land. Some of them had more than others, but there was always a link to the crops. It wasn't the most productive land in El Salvador, but the region is known for its commerce with Honduras and Nicaragua. So, I grew up surrounded by land, crops, cattle, pigs—my hometown is known for raising pigs.

I would say that the awakening of my being happened during the time I was educated by the Jesuits in El Salvador, since I was in fifth grade. I am from a liberal Christian Democrat family. This is how I was raised. It was considered progressive-minded in those times. I mean, the questioning of things really comes from my formation with the Jesuits. Since I was sixteen, I wanted to become a Jesuit priest. I even applied to one of the seminaries in Central America. If I were to summarize in a single phrase the teachings of the Jesuits in El Salvador, for me it would be: "to change the unjust structures of the society (the World)." Another notion that I learned from the Jesuits in El Salvador was to work from the reality up. And reality means not what you think it is, or wish it to be, but what is actually happening.

Many of these Jesuits were targeted for their egalitarian ideals and killed. They were killed for a reason: they were really challenging the unjust structures of the society. Ironically, these Jesuits were the teachers of those who are now in power in El Salvador, the first progressive government in the country's history. So [their views] weren't really killed. This progressive government is in the midst of transforming society by reducing or eliminating its unjust structures.²

Enrique C. Ochoa (ECO): When you arrived in Los Angeles, did you live in the MacArthur Park-Westlake area where there was a growing Central American population?

CO: I came to the United States at the end of 1980 during the turmoil and civil war in El Salvador. As a young person, I was confused about what was going on, but little by little, through studying the words of the questioning minds of El Salvador like Archbishop Romero, and the

Jesuits, I began to understand what was going on. So since then, it's been a matter of questioning what is right and what is wrong.

No, I didn't settle in the MacArthur Park-Westlake area. I was a little north of it, by Hollywood near Beverly Boulevard and Western Boulevard. And then, I started studying English [at] Evans Community Adult School at Sunset Boulevard and North Figueroa Street. The following year, I went to Los Angeles City College (LACC) where I received an associates degree in Mathematics and Science. I then transferred to California State University, Long Beach, where I graduated in 1988 with a degree in Mechanical Engineering. Then I went back to school right after that for [a] master's degree and I studied Energy Conversion and Power Systems Engineering, which included Solar Engineering. I am also a Registered Mechanical Engineer with the State of California.

Between 1990 and 2000, I worked as an Environmental Engineer, designing systems to treat polluted groundwater and soil. I started with a company named Groundwater Technology and ended at Jacobs Engineering Group, Inc. in Pasadena. But before Jacobs Engineering, I was with Bechtel Corporation. That place opened my eyes like you wouldn't believe. In the last decade, Bechtel has been profiting big time in the occupation of Iraq. It is one of the huge corporations that operate as a family business so that no one knows how large they really are. Former [U.S.] Secretary of State, George Schultz, came out of Bechtel. In 1993, Bechtel played us a video tape narrated by Schultz about the corporate vision, "Vision 2000." After I saw the video, it was clear that many of us would soon be laid off. It was an introduction to neoliberalism. He spoke of the need for slimming down to compete in the new global framework. He said, "we can't compete having to pay engineers \$50 an hour when Filipino engineers earn \$7, and in India they earn \$9 and \$8 in Mexico." They were doing business with the USSR when we were in the Cold War, they were doing business in China when they became the "good" communists. In other words, U.S. imperial big business does business wherever and with whomever they like as long as profit is made. That's how imperialism works, [through] a holistic strategy. So the strategic response also has to be holistic.

ECO: Your work in the corporate world seems to have contrasted with your progressive Jesuit and Leftist

orientation. At the same time you were working as an engineer, you were studying naturopathic medicine. Can you please let us know how you came to Naturopathy?

CO: In 1992, I started studying naturopathic medicine, and this is when I had a new awakening. By that time, I was already a mechanical engineer and I was studying solar energy in the Master's Program. At the same time, I was studying a very ancient book from the Chilean writer, Manuel Lezaeta Acharán (1881-1959), *La medicina natural al alcance de todos*. Manuel Lezaeta [Acharán] had a lot of teachings about how to heal with thermal healing. Things that he learned from Father Tadeo Wiesent from Germany, a disciple of the founder of Naturopathy, Father Kneipp, who spent time studying popular and indigenous health in Chile among the Mapuche. And the two things were coming together: the solar energy studies, and my first real awakening that everything emerges from the sun and its transformations of the Earth's crust, and its content over the millions of years. This helped provide a holistic view of the human body, health, diet and how it connects to the universe.

In December 1990, through my mom's connections, I took my one-year-and-three-months-old daughter, Andrea, to El Salvador to see a naturopathic healer, Miguel Meléndez. Meléndez uses iridology, the reading of the irises [in the eye], to understand the health conditions of people. Andrea had been diagnosed by the U.S. medical establishment as an asthmatic baby. In the end, they were wrong in their diagnosis and cure. According to naturopathic medicine, her lungs were very congested and her condition worsened with the administration of antibiotics. For naturopathy, medicine has to be preventive and holistic down to the cell level: The cell is healthy if there is proper nutrition and proper elimination. For my daughter, it was found that she had more or less proper nutrition but elimination was impeded by the antibiotics and the antihistamines. All of those things were deterring from the natural way of cleaning ourselves. So she had excessive mucus trapped in her lungs and for Western medicine that meant she was an asthmatic baby. After two weeks of treatment with a variety of herbs, including chamomile, fenugreek, star anise, peppermint, and aloe vera juice, her eyes were already bright like a baby's healthy eyes. In a matter of three months, the asthma was gone. I was very impressed with her recovery. Meléndez also checked my irises and warned me that my liver was very

weak. He gave me some natural healing and nutritional (vegetarian) recommendations. I did listen, but I did not do anything. In July 1992, I went back to El Salvador for vacation and visited Meléndez for the second time. Once again, he said that my liver was very weak and if I get into a health crisis it may easily turn into a cirrhosis condition and who knows what could be the final outcome. Since then, I became very interested in naturopathic medicine and became a vegetarian overnight on July 28, 1992.

As I studied Naturopathy and used it to heal myself, I learned the importance of the consumption of healthy foods and how this is connected to healthy communities and a healthy universe. At the same time, I had my progressive left wing orientation. And throughout the years, I blended them so that these ideas, as well as Liberation Theology, have helped form the principles that led to my work in Boyle Heights and with Un Solo Sol.

ECO: That is fascinating how you blended these ideas in a way that is culturally connected and grassroots oriented.

FM: So, can you discuss how Un Solo Sol works with the community? How does the ideology behind the restaurant fit into the work that is being done?

CO: The story of Un Solo Sol is long. Due to my passion with natural healing, I eventually created Un Solo Sol in 2000 as a naturopathic consultant practice: 90% of the consulting was to family and friends. In 2003, I started a restaurant with my ex-wife, Patricia Zarate, El Sarape, which we leased in Boyle Heights. During that period, we started serving healthy and eclectic hot meals to our kids' private school, Our Mother of Good Counsel (OMGC) School, in the Los Feliz area, by leasing their industrial kitchen. After a year in El Sarape, we moved here by purchasing Plaza Café in 2004. After Patricia and I broke up a year later in 2005, I created Un Solo Sol Food Services on July 1, 2005 outside of Plaza Café since our family business had turned into Homegirl Café under Homeboy Industries. I surprised everyone in getting my first contract with OMGC since everyone thought I couldn't cook. However, Patricia assisted initially training my own cooks. I continued serving healthy and eclectic hot meals to OMGC School until the school year 2006/2007. I didn't have a contract during the year 2007/2008. I left my involvement with the community of Boyle Heights from May 2005 to June 2008. In 2008, Patricia asked me

to use the previously owned family business and make it successful for our children. By this time, Homegirl Café had been relocated to Homeboy Industries' headquarters in Chinatown. During the 2008/2009 school year, Un Solo Sol Food Services catered healthy and eclectic meals from this location to Synergy Kinetics Academy, a charter public school composed of children from poor neighborhoods of Los Angeles. In the year 2009/2010, we catered to Community Harvest Charter School in Sherman Oaks, composed of students from the Crenshaw area. I was happy to hear teachers, parents, and students say that our food is healthy. Unfortunately, the schools did not have proper funding and I would always have to serve something that was not as healthy as I would have liked. In October 2010, the catering to charter schools came to an end with Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's cutbacks to education.

During much of this time, I was involved in other community projects that also helped shape our approach. Since 2003, I have been linked (on and off) to Proyecto Jardín.³ It is one of the more advanced organic food generation and teaching projects in this neighborhood. It is a community garden created by a young intern at White Memorial, Dr. Robert Krochmal, in conjunction with community activists. It is an important community garden and it could be used as a basis for a larger movement. From the beginning, I said that the land is too small, but we have all of these gardens in the front and back of houses that could be used for food generation and self-sustainability in the *barrio* [Boyle Heights]. I repeated and pounded that idea with the new organizers. I have cooperated with Proyecto Jardín teaching naturopathic medicine on occasions. I have promoted Un Solo Sol as a business that is associated with all the healthy habits that are promoted in multiple theoretical and practical courses at Proyecto Jardín. I have participated in multiple community events that included serving as judge during a salsa contest based on authentic community flavors from inside the kitchens of the mothers and grandmothers of Boyle Heights.

In October 2010, I started Un Solo Sol Kitchen to serve healthy and eclectic food for an impoverished and vibrant community in Los Angeles, Boyle Heights. I used my knowledge in naturopathic medicine, my interest in art, and the vital consulting of a great cook and the warm heart of Sandra Gómez, my beautiful girlfriend, to develop Un Solo Sol Kitchen. Initially, we also had the

generous support of Susan Álvarez, a retired chef of former Cardinal Mahoney. Susan, whose family has resided in Boyle Heights for several generations, became fascinated with the vision of our project and wanted to lend a helping hand during the extremely difficult beginnings. While it is a restaurant, we envision it to be much more. Un Solo Sol Kitchen has three lines of action:

1. To promote the unity of the community. Strengthening communities at the grassroots level will safeguard them against the abuses of the power establishment.
2. To promote the art and culture of the community.
3. To provide to the community a healthy and eclectic food alternative, having a full respect for the traditions of the community.

This is what Un Solo Sol would be if it went to South Central or to Chinatown. We would work with the community and their food and cultural traditions.

FM: Can you explain why the community is so important for you?

CO: The hope that I have for our world is at the grassroots community level and [through] the coordination of social movements worldwide.

At the level of the community there is strength. Eventually, it is the community members who will ask for better food quality. They will be the ones who will transform society. Through their study and understanding of history, community members gain consciousness of what went on hundreds and thousands of years ago and where we are heading. They will also be capable of transforming society and providing other communities with a sense of solidarity. We were small communities in the beginning, living in harmony with nature. The problem was that some communities attacked other communities to become empires. Throughout world history, empires rose, destroyed land and resources, and eventually collapsed and they never created a sense of solidarity. That is part of the consciousness that has to be gained for

betterment worldwide leading to the transformation of society through the creation of social movements (not party movements) to safeguard the holistic part of their own liberation, including food justice.

One of the big messages of the Un Solo Sol mural exhibit (permanently in the restaurant) that resulted from nine months of conversation with my friend Rafael Escamilla, is the role of community. It is the community drawn on the left-hand side of the mural. It emphasizes how communities have fit into the transformation of the planet's history within the harmony of an expanding universe. The mural focuses on the need for revitalizing both the soil and humanity (to include body, mind, and soul), and points the way toward the utopia we must consider [to move] toward the sustainability of life on Earth.

FM: You have taken the lead in promoting the creation of a weekly community event along East 1st Street in Boyle Heights. Can you speak about your idea of *Noches de Serenata* in Mariachi Plaza?

CO: *Noches de Serenata* is a self-sustainable community development project. It is a project to bring funds from outside, based on the means of production of the community. What are the true means of production of Boyle Heights that we control? Is it the land? No, we don't control that. It is the community itself and the numerous artists and service workers who are the main components of Boyle Heights. *Noches de Serenata* in Mariachi Plaza would allow the community to use the resources it has—music, art, culture, and the existing cohesiveness of the community. These are the means of production Boyle Heights would control. Our own means of production could be used to attract outside resources and create financial plasma for the community that would circulate through local businesses. Attracting outside resources is bringing funds that in essence were historically taken from us, in one way or another. The ultimate challenge for Boyle Heights would be to remain united. It seems very simple, but it is not, when you start thinking of the levels of alienation that exist, how many power strings there are from outside the community, but it is not impossible either.

Think of the city and its role in political power. Politics and politicians will always be an instrument of power. If power is popular so will be politics and politicians. If power is not popular and led by those in West L.A., so too will be political power. That is clear. There are zillions of strings

in Boyle Heights that are being pulled by the powerful in the West—through social programs and non-profits. Those aid programs only give the community enough to keep them going, by raising each other's particular banner (or cause), but not enough to create a movement that will turn things upside down for the benefit of the populace.

Slavery, since memorable times to the present, has a single way of operating and that is holistic in approach. I don't see liberation as being different in the approach. It must also be holistic. That is why I always criticize the non-profit sector, even though I do love the courage, commitment, and good hearts of my friends working in various agencies, but I do tell them that their little banner must be fused into a unifying flag of everyone, so that it could be a holistic approach toward a true liberation that would change the unjust structures.

The core of the matter for us, for me, is the empowerment of the community through regaining our consciousness. The *Noches de Serenata* could be a start for the community to take control of its means of production and its very own resources. The development and success of *Noches de Serenata* would be a fair trade in these times of gentrification which threatens to destroy and displace the beautiful, vibrant, and cohesive community of Boyle Heights.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Enrique C. Ochoa. "Democratizing Food Policies: Community Activists and Reclaiming Mexicana/o Food Cultures and Health in Boyle Heights," A Report to the Pat Brown Institute (July 2013). <<http://www.patbrowninstitute.org/publications/documents/BoyleHeightsEnriqueOchoa.pdf>>.
- 2 The Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) was the guerrilla force that battled U.S.-backed military and civilian governments from 1980-1992. After the peace accords, the FMLN transformed itself into a political party and won the presidential elections in 2009 with the Jesuit-educated journalist Mario Funes (2009-2014) becoming president. In 2014, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, FMLN candidate and former guerrilla commander and Vice President under Funes, was elected president.
- 3 For more information on Proyecto Jardín, see <<http://www.proyectojardin.org>> and Ochoa, "Democratizing Food Policies."

* * *

UN SOLO SOL MURAL

*Composed by Rafael Escamilla,
with narrative by Carlos Ortez*

Everything began in a vast open space where a huge explosion, what some call “The Big Bang,” created a gigantic planetary spiral composed of an infinite number of suns. For our planet, however, there is a single sun [un solo sol]. Water formed on our planet and when combined with Earth’s other elements, formed living beings: plants, microorganisms, animals, and humans. People lived in overall balance with the rest of nature surrounding us. We were and are still part of the same nature, Mother Earth or “Pachamama.” The humans were primitive groups, gathering fruits, vegetables, roots, and insects, as well as hunting larger animals. All these activities occurred within that same natural, evolutionary, and harmonic balance that once gave us birth.

As food became scarce, humans migrated to other lands until they were forced to produce their own food: harvesting grains, vegetables and fruits, as well as raising domestic animals for their own consumption, such as chicken and cattle. Little by little, primitive groups formed the earliest civilizations in different parts of the planet and the accumulation of wealth from Mother Earth began. The first nations and their borders were established, which turned into the first empires where science, mathematics, philosophy, art, and culture developed. Feudalism formed, through the centuries, across empires, with the accumulation of large tracts of land and everything that existed upon it. Capitalism arose through the modern financial systems within the Industrial Revolution, which transformed into imperialism, the large economic and financial consortia, as well as the global-structured domination of our times. What became of our “Pachamama”? Our Earth, from which we were born, was left outside our consciousness. Through the centuries, we have distanced ourselves from her and we have stopped being like the butterflies: free, fragile, colorful, beautiful, and sensitive. For that reason, the grains, fruits and vegetables that we produce are now products of chemicals or biogenetic processes. The animals are born and raised incarcerated, while fed unnaturally. We no longer see our own natural food as our medicine or our own way of life and thinking as being a part of nature. We do not conceive our nutrition within the wholeness: mind, body, and soul. Legal and illegal drugs, including alcohol, are now

part of our daily nutrition. Our food is the end result of mechanical processes, of canned products loaded with chemicals and preservatives before arriving at our homes. The nutritional products are neither fresh nor seasonal. On a daily basis, we are bombarded by the mass media with false information about what real nutrition is.

The chemical and mechanical processes also degrade our environment, adding to the extreme devastation of nature and the destruction of everything that could sustain our life on the planet. This way of life squashes the spirits of the planet (the jailed white doves). It is evident that, in our modern era, we are more interested in producing money than in creating conditions for the sustainability of life on the planet.

There is an urgent need to eliminate selfishness or acting as an individual inside a cocoon. It is time to become more creative, to get out of our own individuality and see ourselves collectively. We must create a debate that prompts awareness for reforestation so we may reattach ourselves to Earth and cross the narrow path. Like the earthworm, we can revitalize the earth, cultivating fertile fruits and vegetables made from germinating seeds. Likewise, the cicada from the insides of earth will sing to the new dawn, where the spirits of animals, plants and minerals are once again free in harmonious balance with Mother Earth. “Pachamama” gave us life once and, if we do not change, could create life again from total devastation, this time without us.

The hope is in our commitment to transform the society (the green plow to the left of the spiral), our community, creating worldwide social movements (the human family represented by the butterflies), learning to swim against the current (like the salmon, against the current towards the place of birth, the beginnings) with the dream of a better tomorrow (the mystery of the utopia), which will serve as a guide for the journey, sometimes stormy, but convinced, as the Cuban poet, José Martí, said, “the basic truths fit in the wing of a hummingbird.”