

A California Legacy Book

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Books in the California Legacy series appear as anthologies, single author collections, reprints of important books, and original works. Taken together, these volumes bring readers a new perspective on California's cultural life, a perspective that honors diversity and finds great pleasure in the eloquence of human expression.

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UNDER THE FIFTH SUN

LATINO LITERATURE FROM CALIFORNIA

EDITED BY RICK HEIDE

FOREWORD BY JUAN VELASCO



✻ The Twenty-Ninth

Luis J. Rodríguez

1991

Luis J. Rodríguez was born in 1954 in El Paso, Texas, lived briefly in Mexico, and grew up in Watts and East Los Angeles. His experience as a pre-teen gang member influenced much of his later work, which includes award-winning journalism, photography, criticism, autobiography, poetry, and children's literature. The following excerpt is from *The Concrete River* (1991), which won a PEN West Josephine Miles Award for Literary Excellence. The piece retells the events of August 29, 1970, the day the high-profile Mexican American journalist Ruben Salazar was killed by a police deputy following a Chicano-led march protesting the Vietnam War.

AUGUST 29, 1970—I EMERGED OUT OF AN OLD, BUMPY BUS on the Atlantic Boulevard line and entered a crowd snaking through the steaming streets and by the red-dirt yards of the city's east side. I hadn't been fully aware of my own sense of outrage until, melding with other marchers, I found myself raising a fist in the air. I was a street kid then: sixteen years old, in gang attire and earring. I had no idea how significant the protest would be. Frankly, I had only come to party.

We continued past stretches of furniture stores, used-car lots, and cemeteries. Many storekeepers closed early, pulling down rusty iron enclosures. Others, small vendors of wares and food, came out to provide drink—relief on that broiling day. Around me marched young mothers with babies in strollers, factory hands, *cholos*, uniformed Brown Berets (the Mexican version of the Black Panthers) in cadence, a newlywed couple (still in tuxedo and wedding gown)—young and old alike.

We turned onto Whittier Boulevard, joined by people from the neighborhoods. Instances of battle flared up at alleys and side streets.

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Young dudes and cops clashed. But most of us kept up the stride. At Laguna Park, the multitude laid out on the grass. Children played. Beer got passed around. Voices burst out in song. Speeches, music, and street theater filled the air. I made my way to a nearby liquor store. The store had closed early. A number of us wanted to get more to drink. A shotgun, pushed against my head, caused me to jerk backward. "Move, or I'll blow your fuckin' head off," a sheriff's deputy ordered. I left, wandering through feet and bodies, coolers and blankets.

At the park edge, a brown line of deputies—armed with high-powered rifles, billy clubs, and tear gas launchers—began to swagger toward the crowd. Those who hesitated were mowed down by swinging clubs. A group of people held arms to stop the rioting police from getting to the families. I turned toward the throng of officers. One guy told me to go back, "We'll fight tomorrow." Then it hit me: there are no more tomorrows for me. I had enough at the hands of alien authority. So come then, you helmeted, marching wall of state power. Come and try to blacken this grass, this shirt of colors, this festive park filled with infants and mothers and old men, surging forth in pride. Just try and blacken it with your blazing batons, shotguns, and tear gas canisters. I'm ready.

A police officer in a feverish tone told me to move. I said, "*Chale*, this is my park." Before I knew it my face was being smeared into the dirt, a throbbing in my head. Officers pulled my arms back, handcuffing me. On the ground, drops of red slid over blades of green. By then the battle of Laguna Park had burst open. Bodies scurried in all directions. Through the tear gas mist could be seen shadows of children crying, women yelling, and people on the grass kicking and gouging as officers thrust blackjacks into ribs and spines. Several people tried to run into the yards and living rooms of nearby homes. Deputies followed in a murderous frenzy, pulling people out of backyards and porches.

A deputy pushed me into the back of a squad car. Somebody lay next to me, his hair oiled with blood. I didn't want to look for fear his brains were coming out. I managed to give him a piece of my shirt, my favorite, soon to be soaked. From the East L.A. jail, where we were crowded into a holding tank for hours, we went on long rides to the Los Angeles county jail, to juvenile hall, and county jail again. At one point, while we sat chained to one another in a county jail bus, officers sprayed Mace into the windows; it burned our skin, eyes.

There were three other young dudes with me: another sixteen-year-old, a fifteen-year-old, and his thirteen-year-old brother. They put

us in with the adults—with murder, drug, and rape suspects. But nobody bothered us. There was an uprising outside and we were part of it. One guy recalled the Watts uprising and shook our hands. At one point, deputies took the four of us to the Hall of Justice, known as the Glasshouse. They threw us into “murderers row,” where hard-core youth offenders and murder suspects were awaiting trial or serving time. I had a cell next to Charles Manson.

I was placed with a dude who had killed a teacher and another who had shot somebody in the Aliso Village housing projects. At first the dudes threatened me, pressing a stashed blade to my neck. But I knew, no matter what, never show fear. Soon we played cards, told jokes and stories. That night we heard that the “East L.A. riot” (this is what the media was calling it!) had escalated through much of Whittier Boulevard. Stores were being burned, looted. Police had killed people. Fires flared in other communities like Wilmington and Venice.

Then a radio reporter announced that Chicano journalist Rubén Salazar had been killed in a bar by sheriff’s deputies. Salazar had been a lone voice in the existing media (he was a former *Los Angeles Times* reporter and KMEX-TV news director) for the Mexican people’s struggle in the United States. Now silenced. At word of his death, the tier exploded into an uproar of outrage. Inmates gave out yells and rattled the cell bars.

For five days, I disappeared. My parents searched for me throughout the criminal justice system. They checked for my name in court records and arrest sheets. Nothing. Finally, in the middle of night, a guard awakened me, pulled me out of the cell and led me down brightly lit corridors. Through a small, thick-glassed window I saw my mother’s weary face. When they finally brought me out, with dirt and caked blood on my clothes, she smiled—a lovely smile. I remember telling her, “I ain’t no criminal, ma.” She looked at me and replied, “I know, *mijo*, I know.”

☼ Rachel

Roberto Tinoco Durán

1993

Roberto Tinoco Durán has won several awards for his poetry and in 2001 co-produced a short experimental film and accompanying spoken-word CD called “86ed Again.” Another poem by Durán, “Tattoos,” is also included in this volume.

The so-called movement
took the best years
leaving the lines of loyalty
on your dedicated face

I remember you
leader of picket lines
who dared burly six-foot
two-hundred-pounders
to cross her path

I remember you
at the top of your voice
as the safe and lucky supermarket patrons
stepped on your lungs
coming out of stores in San Jose
saluting you with middle fingers
sometimes stopping in front of your face
to eat grapes Julius Caesar-like
and you handed them flyers anyway
La Rachel de San Jose