

**The Sacramento Movimiento Chicano and Mexican American Education**  
**Oral History Project**

Name of Interviewee: Senon Monreal Valadez

Name of Interviewer: Ana Maciel

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1. BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION
2. [00:00:00]
3. Ana: Hello, can you please state your full name please?
4. Senon: Senon Monreal Valadez
5. Ana: Can you provide your date of birth?
6. Senon: I was born in September 19, 1940
7. Ana: What about your marital status?
8. Senon: I am married. I have four kids (laughs). Two from my first marriage and two from my
9. second.
10. Ana: Okay. Did your study of culture anthropology influence your involvement in
11. participation in the movimiento [movement] Chicano?
12. Senon: I think anthropology had a dual effect with me. My involvement with
13. the community came from my experience as a farmworker, as a child of a farm

14. working family. Somehow that experience stayed with me. I believe that I was marked by  
15. the experience of working in the fields. So that when I got into this Mexican  
16. American Project I had a level of, kind of a need to know that what had been said about  
17. me or our family or about our culture was not true. I needed to know what the foundation of  
18. that kind of thinking was about. So my taking of anthropology classes and being in  
19. anthropology fieldwork classes and things like that allowed me to be able to see that actually  
20. the foundation of the anthropological perspective says that we all have culture, that we all  
21. come with an understanding and a basic foundation  
22. [00:02:01]  
23. Senon: laid out by our own culture that teaches us who we are, how to be, how to behave,  
24. how to do, what to think, what to believe in, how to congregate, how to...everything we  
25. know how to do has been passed down to us from those who have surrounded us who are  
26. like we were. So, actually my way of learning and my way of being and thinking about  
27. myself had a foundation and that foundation was an authentic foundation contrary to what I  
28. have been told in schools and in my earlier academic experience, that somehow this society  
29. was defining my role and my way of thinking. So, my search for meaning for myself led  
30. me to go to the communities, to get involved with the community agencies and to become a  
31. doer. I learned early on that I am not an intellectual learner that I am a person that needs  
32. to touch and feel and hold [pause, inaudible background noise] and become involved in  
33. all things that I want to learn. I need to experience them so that I can learn from them. So,  
34. anthropology gave me actually the wherewithal or the reason for getting more involved in  
35. everything I did thereafter I had a reason why I needed to be involved. And that reason would  
36. give me the greatest foundation because I met people that were very conscientious about

37. what they were doing and I have to say that the majority of the people that I learned from

38. [00:04:00]

39. Senon: in the community were women they were the organizers, they were the agency,

40. managers, they were the people who knew the families, they knew the children in the

41. neighborhoods so it was through them that I learned how to approach that family

42. in a way detached but in a way with the heart that I have always had for the people that I care

43. about and so they were my teachers. They didn't have a PhD, but they had the wisdom and

44. the knowledge and the way of being that was equivalent to what any professor with a PhD

45. should've had. So to me, they were my guides. The people that I have always have had

46. around me, even though many of them have passed away, I have carried their memories and

47. their memories continue to motivate me to do the things that I do and believe in the things

48. that I believe.

49. Ana: What are your earliest memories of events that attracted you to the movimiento

50. Chicano?

51. Senon: I think the earliest of the events had to do with the efforts being made in San Jose to

52. raise money for the support of the workers that were on strike in Delano the in San Joaquin

53. Valley with Cesar Chávez. The strikes were already going on and this was about '65, '66,

54. '67 in that time frame. And I wasn't hearing Chicano, I was hearing *huelga* [strike] I was

55. hearing the farm worker movement, I was hearing the organization of the farm workers, I

56. was hearing about a Teatro Campesino

57. [00:06:00]

58. Senon: with Danny Váldez, [corrects himself] Luis Váldez. And that this organization that

59. was going on these were Chicanos so in '68, 1968 I finished my fourth-year teaching

60. elementary and then I was accepted into a fellowship a fellowship was the Mexican  
61. American Education Program and in that fellowship I ended up one of five young people of  
62. Mexican descent. We were calling ourselves Mexican American then and we were sitting in  
63. those classrooms where people were talking about our culture and our education and why  
64. failed and about all the negative reasons that they found that were part of the social sciences  
65. up to the 1950's, 1960's the preponderance of research was deficit based on theory so my  
66. concern was when we would sit around we would say, "This is all wrong! What are we  
67. gonna do? I mean we can't just simply spend a year here to get a master's degree and go out  
68. of here *rebuznando* [to bray]." You know, like to just regurgitating the same thing that's not  
69. gonna happen so I think it's just the idea that we started to talk to each other in a way that it  
70. was a different feeling, it was like we were brothers that the movement that something that  
71. was going on that had brought us to this point had made us brothers. From different families,  
72. from different walks of life one of the Diego Vigil came from Norwalk in LA or Irvine,  
73. [00:08:00]  
74. Senon: the area in Southern California. Steve Arvizu was at that point working in  
75. Davis in Dixon with farm workers but he was working with teachers and he was very  
76. professional in this manner. Manuel Alonzo, another of the five, had come in from Orange  
77. County he had been the community organizer working with the community. I was the only  
78. one that represented the migrant community and I had that experience to draw from. Another  
79. one was Francisco Bautista and he was an elementary school teacher at that point and he was  
80. a child adopted into an Anglo-Saxon family, a white family, raised in the manner of a white  
81. family but with a need to know, a wanting to know about his own roots. So when we came  
82. together and we started to talk we saw that we represented a little bit of diversity within the

83. mexicano community and that we were finally recognizing that we were not mexicanos born  
84. in Mexico nor were we white in any manner. We were of a people that growing up in this  
85. society with no name because we were given Mexican-American with a dash in between and  
86. somehow, we were supposed to be that dash because we were not one, not the other but  
87. in-between. So in my mind we accepted the word Chicano knowing that for Mexicans from  
88. Mexico, Chicano was a derogatory term. It meant *los de abajo* [lower etchings of society],  
89. the ones, *los pelados* [derogatory term to refer to working class folks] the people that you  
90. know are like street people. But we reflected

91. [00:10:00]

92. Senon: on the idea that at our very worst, living with los de abajo as migrant people we, at  
93. least for myself my understanding of Chicano and how I experienced it, was that I never  
94. cried [paused, got emotional] in the manner that I did with people who were the intellectuals.  
95. When I was working in the fields I hurt and we ached and we cried of anger sometimes but  
96. we didn't cry in the same bitterness as we cried when we were mixing it up with the white  
97. folks. And for us it was like the most intellectual people are the cruelest in the manner that  
98. they deal with those that they don't understand and have no connection to. So if being of *de*  
99. *abajo, de los de abajo* as Chicanos was bad for somebody else it wasn't for me. I felt good  
100. being with people who were like myself, who came from that experience and yet who  
dared

101. to live and love life the way we were learning to do you know we were living it in a  
different

102. way, as Chicanos.

103. Ana: Have you heard of the Civil Rights movement at that time?

104. Senon: Yeah, I went to school at Oakland City College and so at Oakland City College  
105. towards the tail end of 1964 the Black Panther Movement was already taking place in  
106. Oakland. And so in '68 I got involved with a movement of women, white women that  
were

107. called Women for Peace

108. [00:12:00]

109. Senon: and at that time the notion was that atomic bombs were being built, nuclear  
110. bombs were being built, considered and developed. And that the big push was for us to  
111. develop bomb shelters in our homes and the big message in the media was everybody  
112. should have a in their backyards should have a bomb shelter, underground tunnel where  
113. we could live for a month after the next nuclear attack. The fear of war and a nuclear  
114. attack and atomic bombs and all of that, that was the fervor. And one of the teachers that  
115. I had a Mrs. Green, Dr. Green, a woman was organizing other intellectually inclined  
116. white women to pass out literature in the streets of Oakland advocating for people to  
117. write to their congressman to refute the idea that we should go underground because if  
118. we in fact permitted an atomic war to take place we would be annihilated we would not  
119. have any kind of quality of life. At that same time in the black neighborhoods, the Black  
120. Panther Parties were already mobilizing and you know I got to meet Angela Davis, Huey  
121. Newton, and a lot of the other people that were the early, Bobby Seal, that were very,  
122. very strong black activists in the Black Panther Movement. They were advocating a  
123. strong defense and they were armed when they had their rallies, they had their people up  
124. there with their armed weapons in defense of the black neighborhoods. The Civil Rights  
125. Movement was going on in 1968

126. [00:14:01]

127. Senon: you have the assassination of the Kennedy's the second Kennedy and it was like  
128. Malcom X was advocating the separation of the races and that blacks should all move to  
129. a given state and take it over and develop their own way of life and the Black Panther  
130. Party was moving in their direction and AIM the American Indian movement was also  
131. being spearheaded by very strong advocates for correction of treaties that were going on  
132. and Leonard Peltier had already been arrested Eldridge Cleaver was in jail and there was  
133. a book called On Ice on Eldridge Cleaver. Anyway, all of that stuff was going on the  
134. peace movement, the Beatnik era movement, the Flower Children, the Antiwar  
135. Movement, all of those things were all going on and we were finding ourselves listening  
136. to the Beatles and listening to the music that soldiers were going to Vietnam and dying.  
137. We were listening to the music of Jimmy Hendricks and you know Creedence Clearwater  
138. and a lot of the popular groups that were doing their music about the Flower Children and  
139. the Peace Movement and so it was very, very exciting times. It was a time of change  
140. that's why my idea of staying culturally myopic *soy mexicano y no quiero saber nada*  
141. *más* [I am Mexican and I don't want to know anything else] didn't make any sense to me  
142. we were not, we didn't have the option to stay in the little place and believe that somehow  
143. the world was gonna respect us we had to, we had the right and we had the need to fight  
144. for those things that were going to raise us up in our own minds to that we could see how  
145. beautiful we are as people

146. [00:16:02]

147. Senon: and at the same time that we could you know make other people understand that  
148. we have the right to be here. We weren't born anywhere else this is our country and we

149. are more Americans than other people that pretend to be Americans and yet let the  
150. country go any ole' way. That we needed to speak up about the right of every single  
151. individual in a very strong way. So, yeah I mean, I think that those were good times,  
152. civil rights laid the foundation and we it was our moment to create something that  
153. would be uniquely ours, our Chicano culture.

154. Ana: So you kind of already mentioned your involvement in the Chicano  
155. movement but can you elaborate more on how it affected you personally?

156. Senon: Because it changed me it gave me, it put me out in space to say it that way. It  
157. separated me from being able to feel comfortable with people who had not changed.  
158. When I left high school I swore I would never go back, when I left the fields I swore I  
159. would never do that work again, EVER! I would do whatever I needed to do but I would  
160. NEVER go back to working in the fields. I was crossing boundaries and burning the  
161. bridges so that I knew that I would not want to go back. So, to me it was like I was  
162. creating a different identity for myself and it was very lonely. It was very difficult. The  
163. support system that I needed wasn't going to be in my home or with people who were  
164. unchanged. It had to be from the people like myself but we were changing and some of us  
165. [00:18:00]

166. Senon: were very vocal and very much inclined to put ourselves in the front and say, you  
167. know, "I know the way and I am the leader and I am this and I am that." I never was that  
168. I was a worker, I refused to follow. If I learned anything from the past is that I didn't want  
169. anybody dictating to me what I was going to do. I had the right to dictate for myself what  
170. I was going to do and to what extent. So, to me it was like I needed to identify for myself  
171. the leadership that I was going to create so my support system was gone. And when I

172. met you know like I was saying in the earlier interview, when I met somebody that was  
173. my first love and the mother got in trouble because of her conservative political views  
174. with the board to which I was the chair, the move to oust her meant that that's the mom  
175. of the girl that I am interested in. So, therefore that mom says to the girl, "You  
176. shall not meet with him! You won't go with him anymore! He will never be accepted  
177. here!" That's very difficult to deal with because what do you do? You throw it  
178. all away and say okay I come back with like the little dog with my tail between my legs  
179. saying okay, "I'm sorry?" No way! I could not do that anymore so because of the hard  
180. stand that I had to take my whole life was going in a different direction. I lost. I lost in a  
181. very painful way that like I said earlier I will regret to the end of my days

182. [00:20:00]

183. Senon: but the fact is that the world was different now for me and that I was a part of the  
184. Creator or the Creators of that new culture and I went on. It was difficult but that was the  
185. way that it had to go, it couldn't go any other way.

186. Ana: What did you personally initiate or help initiate in this *movimiento* [movement]  
187. Chicano?

188. Senon: When I got here in '68 I went the Washington Neighborhood Council and I met  
189. Rosemary and Vivian and Jenny Baca, Marta Pineda, Manuela Serna was a student, an  
190. undergraduate student when I was here at the master's level but she was familiar with  
191. Rosemary Rasul so through her I met the people in that center. And with her I found my  
192. mentor, my other, *mi otro yo*, my other me, she didn't have the PhD, or she didn't have  
193. the masters yet she had a level of wisdom that I needed in order for me to make my way  
194. in the new life. So, with her I became a youth organizer at the end of that time period. I

195. did it because this was something that would place me in direct contact with youth. The  
196. Brown Beret folks, five Brown Berets came from LA and they met at the Council and  
197. then I took them to Marta Pineda's house and we met there to have our first sort of  
198. orientation about the orientation that they could provide the youth. And so the Brown  
199. Berets  
200. [00:22:00]  
201. Senon: were initiated in part through my involvement, my initiative but it was much more  
202. than myself, it was Manuel Alonzo was there like Marta Pineda other people that were  
203. interested in that early beginnings were there and from there Brown Berets developed and  
204. so did the Junior Brown Berets. In 1969 after I had graduated from the master's program  
205. I was hired by the anthropology department, I had met enough of the faculty there for me  
206. to be hired, but that department was like maybe 12 people in that department or more.  
207. Half of that department liked me wanted to be there and half of that department did not.  
208. So those that did not gave me hell all the rest of the time I taught there, 34 years, but the  
209. ones that did were my first support outside of the Chicano community. So, when I first  
210. started to teach, I created new classes, I created a class called "Culture Poverty and  
211. Education" and that course had a lower division and upper division class. All the students  
212. that came in there became the student help to create the "Breakfast for Niños (kids)  
213. Program". So, with Rosemary we wrote a proposal and got funded for developing a  
214. breakfast program. I developed another course called "Culture and Personality of the  
215. Chicano Child" and through that course I developed a focus of looking at the growing up  
216. experience of Chicano children, the children of Mexican parents, and how that growing  
217. up experience was uniquely different based on a different cultural

218. [00:24:00]

219. Senon: set of values, orientation, philosophies, everything and how that culture needed to  
220. be recognized and authenticated by dominant society because up until that point the  
221. thought was these kids are coming with no culture. They are culturally deprived, that's  
222. the way it was coined or culturally disadvantaged. We were not deprived and we were not  
223. disadvantaged if we had poverty, it was because the farmers refused to pay us more than  
224. the 79 cents an hour that we were getting paid at that time. So those are two classes  
225. and then I developed one for adolescents so "Culture and Personality of the Chicano  
226. Youth." Then I developed another class that was already on the books that dealt with  
227. peoples of Mexico. That culture looked at the various Indian groups in Mexico so I  
228. worked that one through so that I could touch on the transition of those groups when they  
229. start to migrate into the Southwest to work. And then there was another course that was  
230. called "Culture and Society in Mexico" that was looking at the contemporary scene in  
231. Mexico. Mexico is not a stereotypic thing without the culture that doesn't change. Mexico  
232. was changing, its youth was changing the mobility of people moving north into the  
233. United States and into California required the teachers have an understanding that this  
234. isn't the old Mexico, this is a very new Mexico with values that people are bringing when  
235. they start to migrate into this country. So that course allowed me to be able to expand in  
236. many different ways. I also started the first Spanish course because I became  
237. involved in the Spanish program.

238. [00:26:00]

239. Senon: Spanish courses for Spanish speakers. Then along with that there were a lot of  
240. students that were not able to complete the foreign language requirement and so I created

241. a course for a special course for students with learning disabilities. Many Chicanos  
242. have learning disabilities and don't know it and they think that it's simply because of  
243. culture or because of whatever but we actually do have learning disabilities, different  
244. things that have taken place in our growing up experience physically sometimes there's  
245. psychological, whatever. But they pre-set us to learn in ways that our public system does  
246. not use to channel teaching. So here teaching is a very auditory you know like we need to  
247. do things, we need to get involved. So, my push was to have my classes be accepted  
248. as almost like requirements for anyone going into the teaching field. That's my hiring  
249. papers in through the anthropology department actually says that I am to develop courses  
250. that are connected to, you know, the education system. So that my courses would provide  
251. glimpses into that process. Yeah, I have stayed active all the way through, I can do one  
252. thing and only one.

253. Ana: Did the *movimiento* [movement] Chicano raise your consciousness along  
254. social, cultural and/or political lines? And then if so please describe.

255. Senon: I think that the Chicano movement allowed me to be able to see myself as  
256. uniquely different. As part of the people that are between two gigantic cultures and  
257. therefore an individual

258. [00:28:00]

259. Senon: that needed to become involved with anything that was artist world because the  
260. artists were now going to be graphically representing our new experience that's the  
261. RCAF. I was also conscious of the fact that educationally we had to change the  
262. format of education. So bilingual education became our standard, our argument, that  
263. schools needed to be able to have personnel that could be able to speak the language of

264. children. The language of children was going to be very important and we needed to get  
265. that understood. If you look at the that *danza* [dancing] formations, danza, dance, social  
266. dance is part of the way that our culture functions and moves. So, we needed to develop  
267. that we needed to develop *teatro* [theater] so the consciousness about the importance of  
268. drama, the dramatics in theater is a way to represent what is going on to our what is  
269. happening to us to the common people. Politically the importance of being aware of what  
270. is going on and looking for places and times when we can be the most effective  
271. politically to be able to speak to those issues. So yes, in all ways it changed me.

272. Ana: Looking back at your experience in the Chicano movement. Are there any  
273. issues that were left unsolved?

274. Senon: I think we have accomplished a great deal and I am not a Pollyanna that says,  
275. you know, that everything is fine with the world. But I believe that those of us who are  
276. activists got involved in changing the culture of the society that we lived in. And  
277. obviously because we live in a very dominant society that is dominant because it controls  
278. [00:30:00]

279. Senon: all of the avenues that we need in order to live in a comfortable way. That we  
280. have to be always aware that whatever we do it has to be on our terms. That whatever we  
281. whatever we create it has to be for our benefit, it has to be to benefit everybody. And  
282. everything we did in the Chicano movement was not only of benefit to us as a people  
283. separate from others in our consciousness but it was also good for everybody. Everything  
284. we did, children were learning how to speak Spanish that were not Spanish speakers and  
285. they could say words and they could talk and they could express themselves to some  
286. degree. In schools where the bilingual program was going in a good way incredibly

287. beautiful things happened. But the problem is that too many people in this society,  
288. Anglo-Saxon, in this society never understood that concept and took it upon themselves  
289. to sort of do the work but do it in a bad way so that even our Mexican parents didn't want  
290. their children involved in a bilingual program because they were learning it from teachers  
291. that didn't know how to speak Spanish. They were speaking it in the worst possible way  
292. and somehow making the children learn, you know, words that were nonsensical Spanish,  
293. Spanish. Spanish from Spain rather than Spanish that we speak in the state or in the  
294. Southwest. Yeah, so there's a lot of things that need to be done. Life goes on, creates new  
295. problems, creates new issues and we have to be always conscious that it's up to us to act  
296. when we feel that this is our time to say something. We cannot be quiet because  
297. [00:32:00]  
298. Senon: So long as we try to be just nice people and quiet people and polite people we are  
299. never going to change any of the things that go wrong. That when something goes wrong  
300. it is up to us as a people with a Chicano consciousness to learn to speak up. And to not  
301. just to offend or not just to be angry but to educate, to show people where they are wrong  
302. and sometimes to do that, you know, you have to get emotional sometimes you have to  
303. do what you have to do. But you always have to checkmate it, you always have to go  
304. home and ask yourself was this the best way to get it done because new immigrants are  
305. coming in. The children of people who came to this country who didn't have their papers  
306. all correctly done are going to be identified and are being repatriated, being sent back to  
307. Mexico and that's a violation of civil rights. Pure and simple. They don't know any other  
308. country than here. They have the right. We have to open up our eyes and our heart to  
309. understand that. We need to understand that the things that are going on today didn't

310. happen just over night. They've been growing and gradually going on and the minute that  
311. we think there's no more discrimination that's the minute then when everything will go  
312. wrong because discrimination has always been a part of this whole works. We  
313. discriminate, Mexicans discriminate against other people as well, we all discriminate but  
314. we have to learn how to be conscious of how what we say and do how it affects us and  
315. how it affects other people. So, a consciousness a higher-level consciousness of who we  
316. are as human beings is almost an off crop as who we are as Chicanos. We are an  
317. enlightened people, we are living in the sixth sun, not the quinto sol [fifth sun] anymore  
318. [00:34:00]  
319. Senon: We're in the sixth one and this is the age of reason, the age of justice, the age of  
320. when we fight for those things that are the most just for all of us as human beings  
321. members of a human race.  
322. Ana: Thank you, thank you so much!  
323. Senon: [laughs] Thank you!  
324. Ana: That was beautiful!  
325. [00:34:22] END OF TRANSCRIPT