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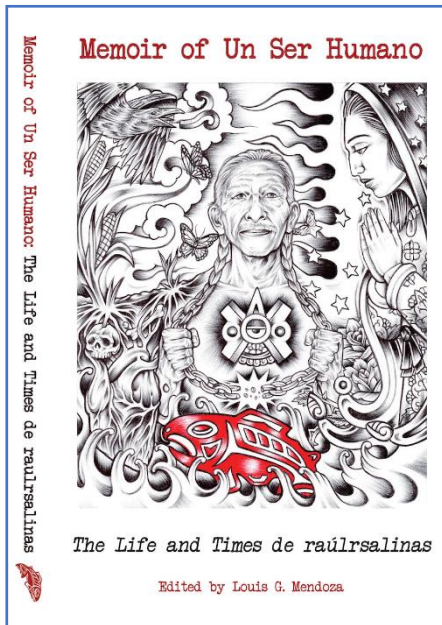
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Memoir of Un Ser Humano: The Life and Times of raulrsalinas¹

Louis Mendoza, Arizona State University

In this paper I discuss a recently published collection of new writing by the renowned tejano, cucharacho, pinto, pachuco, Xicanindio, anti-prison, pro-youth activist poet raúlrsalinas—a work whose publication coincides with the 10th anniversary of his death. While salinas is best known for his poetry, his 2005 book *raulrsalinas and the Jail*



Machine provided us with a glimpse of his acerbic, witty, insightful and nuanced prose style in his personal letters, newspaper and journal selections written from prison, this posthumous memoir extends our understanding of Salinas’ poetry and prose style by making available his efforts to write his own life story, previously unpublished letters, essays, and poetry. Before delving more deeply into the memoir, I want to provide some background for those who may not know who Salinas was.

Salinas was born in San Antonio, Texas in 1934 but mostly grew up in the East Austin neighborhood of La Loma, the barrio that was central to his signature poem written in Leavenworth prison in 1967, “A Trip Through the Mind Jail.” In many

respects, the life of this pachuco turned pinto turned poet-activist exemplifies the contentious, vexed, and often over-determined relationship that Latinos have with the criminal justice system in the United States. Raised by a single mom, Salinas attended Catholic elementary school and public high school until he was given a “choice” by a juvenile court judge to go to jail, join the military or leave town. Faced with the prospect

¹ Portions of this essay borrow from previous biographies of Salinas I wrote for other publications including, *raulrsalinas and the Jail Machine: Selected Writings by Raúl Salinas* (UT Press, 2006).

of institutionalization, he opted to enter the migrant stream, a decision that took him to the fields of northern California at the age of 17.

As a youth, Salinas was often in conflict with mainstream institutional and cultural mores; thus he was, in many respects, both representative and exceptional. During his childhood, the city of Austin's segregationist policies were being codified to ensure that East Austin was comprised exclusively of ethnic minorities. It was within the barrios of this deliberately marginalized community, comprised of several African American and Mexican neighborhoods, that Salinas first learned his "place" in society. As an adolescent, he experienced continuous harassment by police and school officials for any aspect of his behavior or appearance that signaled difference from a narrowly defined cultural norm, be it his style of dress, hair, tattoos, or language usage, all of which had their specific manifestation in a defiant *pachuchismo* that he eagerly embraced. His alignment with this counter-culture visibly marked him as a troublemaker even as he excelled in school. Labeled as a "delinquent," local police developed a dossier on Salinas at a young age, an action that made him easy prey for police, which resulted in short stints in local and state juvenile detention centers. He often stated that he was pushed-out of school despite being a smart student.



Photo 1: Salinas at age 14.
Courtesy of Red Salmon Archives.

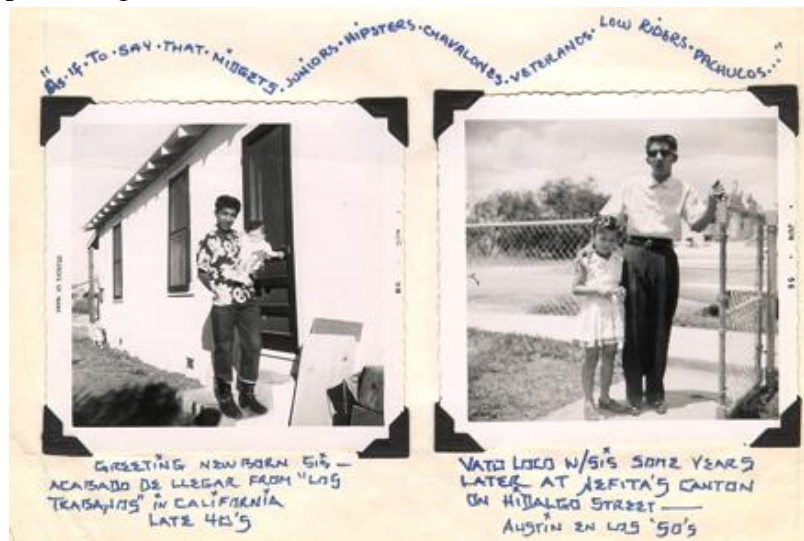


Photo 2: Salinas in Austin circa late '40s and early '50s.

Salinas' rebelliousness and interest in jazz and the nightlife, led him to embrace a pachuco identity in his teens. Pachucos were a counterculture within the Mexican American community who developed a idiosyncratic argot and dress style that exemplified their

interest in celebrating their distinctiveness from mainstream culture and values.² A *pachuco* hipster with an affinity for jazz and blues music, Salinas "came of age" in 1952, the same year that *The New York Times* heralded the emergence of the countercultural beat literary movement.³ Salinas identified with the rejection of cultural and social conventions promoted by these young artists. California offered him a respite from the oppressive conventions and expectations of society and family in the post-war boom period. As a streetwise young man, his lifestyle soon included the consumption and selling of drugs. In 1957, Salinas was convicted in Los Angeles of "violating the health and safety code for sale and possession of marihuana" and was sent to Soledad State Penitentiary, aka the "Gladiator School." Not counting his experience in juvenile detention centers, Soledad would be his first home behind bars. It was here that he began to write poetry for the first time until he was released on parole in 1959.

In November of 1961, he was busted on possession of marijuana in Austin and sent to Huntsville State Prison where he stayed until May 1965. There, he joined the production team of the monthly prison newspaper, *The Echo*, and wrote "Quartered Notes," a jazz column. These early writings were penned under his childhood name of Roy Salinas; not until he was in Leavenworth did Salinas reclaim his birth name of Raúl, and later, inspired by e. e. cummings, he began using the lowercased, raúlsalinas.

When he was sent to Leavenworth on a felony drug charge in 1967, Salinas' outlaw perspective was turned inside out by Ramón Chacón, a convict from South Texas who introduced him to the writings of Ernesto "Ché" Guevara and Frantz Fanon. He was also befriended by Standing Deer (alias Robert Wilson) and Rafael Cancel Miranda, a Puerto Rican *independentista* in prison for his participation in a 1954 armed protest in congressional chambers. Through his interaction with these men, Salinas began to see how race and class functioned in prison and the outside world to keep people from discovering constructive solutions to individual and group disempowerment.

Just as there was a clear relationship between his pre-prison experience of social marginalization and his eventual incarceration, there was also a direct link between his prison experience and his development as an intellectual-activist. The transformation he underwent led him to engage fellow convicts, prison authorities, friends, and political activists in the outside world. It is within the context of a highly politicized and racist prison culture, that Salinas came to terms with his Mexicano-Chicano-Indigenous identity; and it

² An excellent overview of Pachucos can be found in this online article: "Pachucos: Not Just Mexican-American Males or Juvenile Delinquents."

³ All photos come from Salinas' personal archives, many of which are maintained at Resistencia Bookstore/Casa de Red Salmon Press. My thanks to Lilia Rosas for sharing them with me. An extensive collection of Salinas's visual archive is also in the Stanford University Library special collections archives labeled as *Raúl Salinas papers, 1957-2008*.

is through a Xicanindio identity that he acquired political insight, found individual and collective fulfillment, and initiated a life-long struggle to advance human liberation. Originally a prisoner of social crimes (drug possession and distribution), Salinas' experience exemplifies the ways in which a convict is transformed by and transforms the prison system. His 1972 relocation from Leavenworth to the Marion control unit clearly marked prison authorities' recognition of his metamorphosis from a social prisoner to a political prisoner as he was marked for "behavior modification" due to his prolific activity on behalf of fellow convicts.

Salinas' transformation was a process that was both solitary and communal. The emotional, spiritual, and political substance of this transformation is mapped out in his writings and makes his life one worthy of study, one that provides insight on society and the human capacity to persevere, adapt, and rebuild oneself. Salinas' writing and activism can be seen as interventions in the ahistorical and dehumanizing popular discourse on prisoners and crime that often preempts any critical discussion of the faults, limitations, and corrupt nature of the justice system. As part of a prisoner rights movement, he and his cohorts forged a radical cultural praxis that linked issues of identity and power with notions of history and justice.

By 1970 Salinas had undergone a major ideological shift due to his contact with political prisoners, his extensive reading, as well as the educational and organizational experiences obtained through his membership in Chicanos Organizados Rebeldes de Aztlán (CORA), a political action group in Leavenworth. His editorial and literary

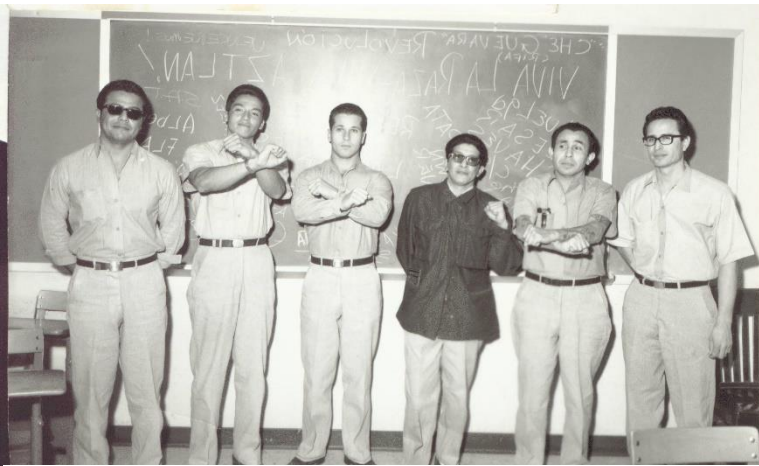


Photo 3: Members of Chicano Organizados de Rebeldes de Aztlán (CORA) in the Cultural History of the Southwest class in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary, 1971. Courtesy of Salinas Special Collection, Stanford Libraries.

contributions to the important prison publications, *Aztlán de Leavenworth*, *New Era*, *Entrelíneas*, and *Signet*,⁴ document the evolution of his political consciousness. Having developed his skills and reputation under austere circumstances, Salinas' writing and activism eventually earned him international recognition as a spokesperson for causes ranging from prisoner rights

and national liberation struggles to gang intervention and youth arts advocacy. He first

⁴ Select writings from these publications are published in *raúlrsalinas and the Jail Machine*. See Section I on Salinas' Journalism.

received recognition as a writer in 1969 when what was to become his signature poem, "A Trip Through the Mind Jail," was published to wide critical acclaim. Since then, Salinas published three collections of poetry, a collection of prison writings, and three spoken word CDs. A consistent motif in Salinas' writing is that of the journey. His exceptional journey from individual alienation to rage to resistance was linked to social movements occurring within and outside of prison. While prison served as a catalyst for his political consciousness, what was extraordinary about Salinas was his decision upon leaving prison to devote his life to the pursuit of social, political, and economic justice.

Salinas gained his final release from prison in 1972 with the help of faculty and graduate students at the University of Washington. Unable to return to Texas or California due to parole restrictions, Salinas chose to be exiled in Seattle. Immediately following his arrival, he joined a multiracial, Latino-led coalition of community groups that had seized control of an abandoned school building. Successful in their effort, they formed El Centro de La Raza. His reputation as a poet and activist blossomed as he entered full-force into the national Chicano literary scene.

In the Northwest, he joined the Native American fishing rights struggle in the Seattle-Tacoma region, working with the Nisqually/Puyallup peoples. It was through El Centro de La Raza that his international vision and his ideas regarding Indian-Chicano unity were cultivated. In 1975 he traveled to Cuba for the first time. Later that year, he met and worked with American Indian Movement (AIM)⁵ member Leonard Peltier. In 1976 he co-coordinated the Trail of Self-Determination, a seven-month cross-country caravan led by the Survival of American Indians Association that arrived in D.C. on July 4th to present an indigenous perspective on the bicentennial. In 1977, Salinas co-founded the National Leonard Peltier Defense Committee. Four years later he would be selected as part of an International Indian Treaty Council delegation sent to represent Peltier at a human rights symposium in Geneva.

In 1981, after completing the terms of his parole with the Texas Department of Corrections, Salinas returned to Austin where he began teaching critical media studies at the University of Texas and joined the League of United Chicano Artists (LUChA). Almost immediately he established Resistencia Bookstore/Casa de Red Salmon Press; it remains open to this day. In 1985, Salinas moved to St. Louis for a year to head the national office of the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee. As part of his ongoing work with the

⁵ The American Indian Movement (AIM) is an American Indian advocacy group founded in 1968 in Minneapolis, Minnesota to address issues related to sovereignty, leadership, and treaties. More about AIM can be found online at <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-american-indian-movement-1968-1978>.

International Indian Treaty Council, Salinas traveled to Nicaragua, Libya, Cuba, Panama, Chiapas, Mexico, as well as Vieques, Puerto Rico.

From 1989 to 1992 Salinas worked as a counselor with South Austin Youth Services. This work led him to become a specialist in gang intervention and conflict resolution, skills he utilized locally and nationally. A popular poet and speaker on social justice issues at universities and political and cultural venues, Salinas' dedication to literacy and empowerment earned him a reputation as a steadfast cultural and political force in Austin. Resistencia Bookstore became a haven for emerging writers and young activists, serving as home base for local chapters of AIM, the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee, the Comité en Solidaridad con Chiapas y Mexico, SOY (Save Our Youth) arts program, a read-in of *Live from Death Row* (part of the Free Mumia Campaign), as well as numerous other political committees addressing local, state, national, or international causes.

Salinas' contributions as a cultural worker were extensive. In addition to conducting youth writing workshops and maintaining a busy schedule on the reading circuit, he taught courses at St. Edward's University. An activist and writer of the prison rebellion movement, Salinas' work helped heighten social consciousness about the unjust and disproportionate imprisonment of people of color in the United States. Salinas is a representative figure inasmuch as his pre-prison life and his incarceration are all too typical of the prison population; his experiences of social disenfranchisement, under-education, participation in the lumpen economy, migrancy and other forms of displacement are indicators of experience and social location that are shared between him and many other prisoners.

Salinas' literary legacy is eclectic and masterful in its creative bilingual engagement with multiple literary and music traditions. The continued existence of Red Salmon Arts and Resistencia Bookstore in Austin, Texas stand as testimony to his influence as a teacher and inspirational cultural worker for many generations of writers, thinkers, and advocates for social justice. Salinas never forgot his prison past and the ongoing injustices perpetuated by the criminal justice system. He took every opportunity available to visit prisoners to provide discussions, free readings, and workshops.

Un Memoir of un Ser Humano was a project Salinas and I began working on at the same time as *My Weapon is My Pen* about 15 years ago. In Salinas' archives, there were many fragmented and incomplete attempts by him to "write his life." One of these serves as the preface to the book:

Preface of Sorts

12/08/81, 6:00 a.m.

Sitting here in my secluded south Austin cottage, with the leaking roof and busted commode, I contemplate in early morning hours, a possible return trip to Cuba (my

third since 1975), it occurs to me that there is still much unsaid, so much left to say.

Back home (my 1st in 15 years), there is a burning need to jot down (by way of explaining to mi pueblo just where it is I've been and what it is I've learned), record for posterity the experiences that have shaped and molded my life; the people that have made me the person of today.

Some will no doubt find this acontecimiento del vivir of no special consequence. For others, a bit of truth, a contradiction here or there. For some, a lesson to be learned, for others something to condemn or reject.

For me, it is merely the poetic/political of a road well travelled; a humble, creative and retrospective recording to share with the world. (Memoir, 8)

Following the publication of *My Weapon is My Pen* in 2006, Raúl and I developed a plan to compile his scattered and fragmented autobiographical writings. With his permission, I transcribed and retyped these fragments and, more importantly, I converted many of them from the third person to the first person. He made clear to me that he found it easier to write about himself in the third person because much of the material felt too close, too raw, and he was highly self-conscious about writing in the first person. Today this approach is called creative non-fiction; he saw it as a useful strategy for distancing himself because it made him feel less vulnerable.

When I first saw these efforts by Raúl to document his life, I felt strongly that this was a story that needed to be shared. As with so much of his work, Raúl's story is not only his individual story but that of his community. While I never imagined one book could ever completely capture the arc of Raúl's entire life, I believed these fragments offered special insight into parts of his life's journey that few know about. As I completed this transcription, we discussed a strategy for fleshing it out and connecting the fragments. While I encouraged him to sit down and complete individual pieces and the collection as a whole, after some time passed I realized that sitting down and writing his story out in some linear fashion simply wasn't going to happen. That kind of intense and solitary endeavor focused solely on himself just wasn't a commitment he could make. He was too engaged in the daily business of life, running Resistencia and his youth development program, Save Our Youth, speaking, teaching, sponsoring events, and conducting writing workshops, among other things, to sit down and reflect on his life in a sustained way. While I think a part of him knew how important a project this was, I believe another part of him thought it didn't rise to the level of importance of interrupting all the other urgent work that needed to get done.

Once we agreed that we needed an alternate plan, we decided a way around this was for us to have a series of one-on-one pláticas in which he would recall, ruminate, reflect on his life as a way to complete this project. On October 22, 2000 we spent an

afternoon talking through the various stages of his life. Unfortunately, the devastating illness he was soon to face and the geographical distance between us, and the challenges of setting aside the time we would need to do justice to this project, all conspired to thwart the full realization of this plan. I've included this sketch of Raúl's life based on that conversation at the end of Part I of the book. I believe it provides insight into periods of his life that he didn't write about in detail.

Because I had the chance to organize two sets of Raúl's archives, I knew there were numerous incomplete and unpublished projects of both poetry and prose. When we were preparing to ship a second set of Raúl's archives to Stanford shortly after his death, Ben Olguín and I took a Sunday afternoon to wade through them and spent numerous hours at a Kinko's copy shop in Austin duplicating manuscripts and fragments of writing. These copies would complement the many other pieces of writing that Raúl and I had identified as the foundation for this book. This book is a compilation of Raúl's numerous efforts to tell his story—sometimes stilted, fragmented, incomplete—and at other times remarkably developed and sustained. But this collection also includes more than that—unpublished letters from before and after his years in prison, jailyard journalism, published and unpublished poems that complement his prose, essays from his time as a student, press releases from his time with the League of United Chicano Artists (LUChA) in Austin, and excerpts from *Notas de Resistencia*, among others. I include these because they add value to anyone who wants to understand his many voices, the range and nuance of his writings and his work. And yet, all this constitutes only a portion of his unpublished work.

Memoir of un Ser Humano was one of the many titles Raúl gave his “autobiographical” writings, and the one he favored for this project. The collection captures snapshots of Raúl few know about. The few poems included here provide condensed and powerful emotional insight into his life, in ways that his incomplete and fragmented prose is often unable to do.

The parts of the book that are direct recollections of his life comprise only about a third of this volume. But as I noted in the Introduction to *The Jail Machine*, looking at the many genres of Raúl's writing collected over time tell us a story—of what interested him, what he was invested in, what he cared about.

Memoir of un Ser Humano is divided into five sections. Section I, *In-Formation*, contains the bulk of what might be called typical autobiographical materials (15-60). These include brief profiles of family elders based on memories and conversations shared with him, and his most extensive prose efforts to write about his family, his youth, and people who populated his life. In here, we learn about his relationships, his coming of age experiences and cultural influences. Those familiar with Raúl's poetry collections, especially *A Trip through the Mind Jail y Tras Excursions* and *East of the Freeway*, understand that many of his poems were autobiographical snapshots about his youth, his

strong sense of place, people in his life, and formative experiences that helped shape his identity and worldview. We find in this collection, stories that provide us broader and deeper narratives about his formation, his motivations and desires.

The material comprising Section II, *Transformation*, complements Raúl's known prison writings (61-110). They come from the materials that we could not include in *The Jail Machine*. Here are poems, essays on jazz, profiles of fellow prisoners, and correspondence with people in the free world. Throughout the book, I've included poems that either complement or are referred to in the narrative. Some of these have been published in other collections, but I've also included a few choice unpublished poems as appropriate.

Section III, *Transition* focuses on his hiatus, his exile, from Texas immediately following his release from Marion in 1972 (111-46). These were important times of transition and growth for Raúl, as he adapted to life in the free world as a very different person than the one who entered Leavenworth; his stints in Leavenworth and Marion utterly and profoundly changed not just his worldview but his entire way of being in the world. It is in Seattle that he evolves further to become an activist, to truly grapple and grasp what it means to be Xicanindio, to become an authentic internationalist.

Section IV, *East of the Freeway*, picks up on his return to Texas following the expiration of his parole in 1983 (147-76). Here he continues his activism, joins a local Chicano arts organization, starts Resistencia Bookstore/Casa De Red Salmon Press, and begins making a niche through as a political and counter-cultural force. Section V (177-84) is a short sheaf of erotica written by Raúl. Salinas was proud of this work but also anxious about how it might be received. He was genuinely concerned that it would be received as sexist, as objectifying women, but he was also adamant that this was not his intent. As someone who was an avid libertine when it came to sexual mores, attitudes, and practices, Raúl was a fan of erotic fiction and the bawdy poetry of Charles Bukowski.

The final section of the book (185-212) includes a series of homages written to Raúl by individuals who were important friends and collaborators. Each in their own way, recall his importance to them. Raúl's son, Lawrence Salinas provides us with three pieces that reveal his conflicted, complex, and ever evolving relationship with his father. Finally there are three appendices that include essays Raúl wrote as a student at the University of Washington, one article about his court case in Marion, and a court decision on a case in which Raúl was a plaintiff.

Raúl left an amazing legacy, one that is not easily quantified. This legacy is not just a literary one—but one about the needed commitment to social justice, to doing away with a corrupt and unjust criminal justice system and our country's addiction to mass incarceration. Raúl knew, better than most, that the pipeline from the schoolhouse to the jailhouse need not be. He knew that too often young people fail to see their potential and

fail to be seen at all by their teachers. He knew that writing was a powerful form of self-affirmation and self-love—and that writing could chart a path to discovery and empowerment. I recall numerous times Raúl was brought to tears by the spontaneous verbal and written expressions of people of all ages during writing workshops, in brief exchanges after he gave a reading or a workshop, when people found words to express their anger, their love, their sorrow, and their aspirations. It was this knowledge of the power of language that fueled his commitment to keeping Resistencia Bookstore open despite it being a financial burden on him.

Raul was a centrifugal force that attracted people from near and far. He could be a difficult, brash, and unyielding person who came on too strong for many people. When he was well, his level of energy was well beyond his years and wore out people many years younger than him. Raúl's sphere of influence is hard to measure, but it is not mere hyperbole to say he continues to live on through fans, friends, followers, and fellow warriors. He was our mentor, friend, guide, inspiration, provocateur, devil's advocate, and above, all, as others have noted, he was someone who struggled to transform, to become better, to adopt and understand new ways of thinking and being in the world. He was imperfect, but so are we, and in this way he showed us how important the struggle to be free, to be human, was essential.

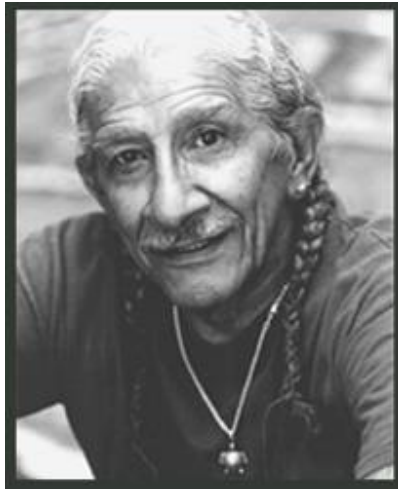


Photo 4: Photo by Alan Pogue, circa 2005. Courtesy of Red Salmon Archives.

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