



LIBERATED ETHNIC STUDIES MODEL CURRICULUM COALITION

What is Chicanax/Latinx Studies?

As you enter into this chapter, this question, what is Chicanax/Latinx studies--in the context of Ethnic Studies--is a critical one to reflect on. Because of the diversity of the Chicana/o/x Latina/o/x community, and the complicated, ongoing social and political history between the U.S. and "Latin America," and the persistent myth-making about Latina/o/x peoples that persists in most U.S. academic and curricular settings, understanding this field, and who it encompasses, can be complicated, and even confusing. In this overview, we demystify this question by reflecting on the origin and history of CS/LS; the nature of identity in CS/LS; the core ideological commitments and considerations; recent trends, shifts, and perspectives in the field; and what a CS/LS pedagogy must entail.

Before embarking on this task, we will briefly comment upon terminology. The reader is likely to have heard/seen one, or several, of the following naming categories, possibly constructed or discussed as equivalent or interchangeable: Latina/o; Chicana/o; Latinx; Chicanax; Latin@; Chican@; Hispanic; La Raza; Mexicana/o; Mestiza/o; Boricua; Mexican American; Latin American. While a complete discussion of these terms is beyond our scope here, we will clarify a few key points. First, the multiple endings of these terms '-a/o/x/@' are various ways communities and activists have sought to cope with the gender-binary of the Spanish language. Second, these terms are not at all equivalent, with each carrying different political, community, and cultural histories and origins. Nor do they have universal meanings contextually, as one term may mean something different to one community, than it does to another. How an individual from these communities chooses to name and identify themselves is a personal, socio-political choice--the sort of decision engagement with Ethnic Studies can help one consider. For our purposes, we shall use the Chicanax and Latinx, for the reasons that a) these were the counter-hegemonic terms that emerged as names for many (though not all) communities engaged in resistance to colonial pressures towards the peoples of the U.S. Southwest, Central, and South America, and b) the '-x' terminology has, in the U.S. context, been widely accepted by modern activists and youth as a gender-inclusive construction of these identities. We encourage individuals to continue their exploration of how local communities and individuals choose to name themselves, exploring and informing themselves of the social, cultural, and political reasons for doing so.

The History of Chicanax and Latinx Studies

While what we might today think of as Chicanax/Latinx Studies emerges from the activism, efforts, and organizing of the civil rights movement and, particularly, the Third World Liberation Front's (TWLF) efforts in 1969, it is important to note that the antecedents of this field of scholarship, and the Chicanax/Latinx perspective, existed well before the late 1960s. Indeed,



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generations of scholars and individuals have been active in articulating, and producing vivid written and cultural commentary, on the tensions of Latinx peoples since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) created the conditions for the widespread social, cultural, and political dispossession of Latinx-origin and Spanish speaking peoples in what is now the United States. George I. Sanchez, Américo Paredes, Julian Samora, and Ernesto Galarza were among the earliest examples of scholars who brought an asset-based, Latinx perspective to the examination of the experiences of Mexican-American and Latinx peoples in the United States. These individuals' contributions were significant in that, contrary to the prevailing culturally deficit-based and often voyeuristic scholarship on Mexican-American and Latinx peoples that existed at the time, their work in multiple fields reflected the tensions and realities of inequitable, neo-colonial power relations with which Latinx communities grappled.

While significant in ensuring that models of asset-based Latinx studies could exist in academia, equally important to the origins of the field was the community-scholarship that Chicana/o activists and authors began producing during the 1950's and 1960's. Beyond the obvious significance of the social movements they led, the political and literary writings of Cesar Chavez, Corky Gonzalez, Luis Valdez, and later, Gloria Anzaldúa, Ana Castillo, and , as well as the activist authors of *El Plan Espiritual de Santa Barbara*, offered both the content, and the case, for the formation of Chicana and Latinx Studies as a unique field.

Ultimately, the successful efforts of the TWLF at San Francisco State, and corresponding activists elsewhere in California and the U.S. Southwest, led directly to the formation of Chicano studies or Mexican American Studies departments at various universities between 1968 and 1970, including SF State, San Diego State, CSU-LA, and UCLA. These early programs became the models and proof-of-concept which would allow Ethnic Studies, and Chicana/Latinx Studies particularly, to spread to universities across the United States in the intervening years, and allowed for the field Chicana/Latinx studies to grow to encompass a wide array of disciplines and areas of study under its umbrella. In short, Chicana/Latinx studies is not just a niche history or sociology field; to be engaged in CS/LS invites the possibility of exploring political science, literature, public health, criminology, education, archaeology, music and the arts, engineering, anthropology, and more. CS/LS is inclusive, and has always been, deeply interdisciplinary.

Finally, and significantly, it is critical to note that the formation of these departments, driven by activists, represented a major shift in what an academic discipline could look like. Rather than top down and Eurocentric in their methods and perceptions of knowledge, these departments were embodiments--in content, methodologies, and pedagogies--of a 'Chicana/Latinx' consciousness. Rather than a field that examines Chicana/Latinx people's as an object of study, Chicana/Latinx Studies leverages the perspectives and knowledge of these communities to take a counter-hegemonic approach. This sets Chicana/Latinx Studies distinctly apart from Latin American Studies, and other, similar 'cultural studies' fields that examine communities through extant, Eurocentric theoretical frames and perspectives. Rather,



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Chicanx/Latinx Studies aims to share an analytical perspective rooted in and shaped by Chicanx/Latinx communities and cultural productions, ensuring that in the space of the academic setting, the voices, contributions, thinking, and perspectives of Chicanx/Latinx peoples are seen as a contributing source of knowledge.

Chicanx and Latinx Identity

This important contribution of Chicanx/Latinx studies--positioning Chicanx/Latinx peoples as producers and holders of knowledge--is vital because of the unique nature of Chicanx/Latinx identity, or experience. While a complete accounting of Chicanx/Latinx identity is certainly beyond our scope (and a topic of exploration in Sample Lesson set 1), understanding our field, and how to teach it, requires some reflection on the demographic category that initiated, and drives, the continued existence of CS/LS.

The identity categories of Chicanx/Latinx are not at all monolithic. Rather, they are, in fact, some of the most complicated demographic categories that one can find. Legacies of colonization, violence, African slavery, and Indigenous oppression, interacting with politics, cultural exchange, and geography, mean that the peoples of Latin America (inclusive of the U.S. southwest, Caribbean, and Central and South America) are incredibly diverse socially, culturally, and politically, as well as in racial, ethnic and linguistic terms. How then do we arrive at the groups CS/LS attends to, given that those peoples and communities, often viewed monolithically in the U.S. as Spanish-speaking 'Latinos' or Hispanics, are in truth culturally varied, racially diverse, and exist, geographically, across a diaspora?

Essentially, the Ethnic Studies field of Chicanx/Latinx Studies is focused on communities and individuals in the United States whose origins can be traced to the complicated legacies of Spanish colonization of the U.S. southwest, Caribbean, and Central and South America. This widely diverse group of peoples, whose lives, practices, experiences, and cultural inheritance were deeply impacted and re-shaped by Spanish colonization, share a history of colonial mestizaje, and experiences of racialization, marginalization, and dispossession that have emerged in and through the imperialism of the U.S. nation state. These factors, of course, look different across different communities, but despite their variance in kind, their existence and persistence renders them unifying elements of a unique experience. In CS/LS, the communities we focus on, then, are marked by the cultural hybridity, resistance, and tension that emerges from Spanish colonization of Indigenous peoples. They are shaped by the borders, migration, and the politics of belonging that have been imposed by the U.S. nation state on Spanish-speaking communities. And they are marked by the way history, discourse, and constantly changing politics can at once position Chicanx/Latinx peoples as a multi-racial ethnic group, and simultaneously collapse these distinctions, racializing Chicanx/Latinx peoples into a singular racial category, based on culture, and often, language, regardless of phenotype



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or national-origin. Thus, a Chicax/Latinx experience is one marked by inherited legacies of colonization, and continued tension with a culture of white-supremacy, in the U.S. context; as Ruben Salazar once noted, a person of Latin American ancestry, “with a non-Anglo image of themselves.”

Once again, Chicax/Latinx identity is hardly monolithic. But as you embark on the teaching of CS/LS, it is vital to understand that the peoples and communities whose voices, perspectives, and knowledge this field seeks to explore are not simply apolitical residents of ‘Latin America’, but a transborder, transnational, diverse, complex, multiracial collection of communities with roots in Indigenous communities across the Americas, who, since the outset of the U.S. nation state and the treaty of Guadalupe-Hildago, have struggled, regardless of their place of birth, first language, or racial phenotype, with the tension expressed in the phrase: *ni de aqui, ni de alli* --of being neither truly of the Anglo U.S., nor of the Latin American political nation states their genealogy might be traced back to.

Ideological Commitments in Chicax/Latinx Studies

With all this in mind, it is worth noting that racial, ethnic, and cultural identity is not just about superficial belonging. Rather, it reflects meaningful ideological, epistemological, and ontological commitments that are far deeper than food, holidays, or even language. Put in simple terms, to be Chicax/Latinx means that one sees and experiences the world uniquely; through lenses shaped by histories different than those of normative, Anglo U.S. culture. These cultural epistemologies are as varied and diverse as Chicax/Latinx communities themselves, and we can certainly not offer an exhaustive list, but we do wish to highlight one cultural practice, common across most Chicax/Latinx communities, that directly impacts pedagogy.

Specifically, CS/LS must be approached as a communal, collective learning experience. This follows well documented evidence (both formal research data, and the experiential data of our community experiences) that the cultural practices of Chicax/Latinx communities and youth--historically, from their roots in meso-American culture, to the barrios of the present day--approach learning and development in collectivist, community-centered terms. This means that their ways of learning the world (and content in that world) are structured much differently than the cultural practices of affluent white students from whom many pedagogical strategies were devised. While there is, of course, variance across communities, ensuring that CS/LS follows the communal, collective problem-solving that is reflective of our communities, is critical to engaging in CS/LS teaching. Essentially, assigning individual desk work around CS/LS content would not *BE* CS/LS--it would fail to reflect the ideological perspective and community knowledge of the field, and of Chicax/Latinx community practices. We encourage you to engage with your students,



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Modern Shifts in the Field

Finally, it is important to note that the field of CS/LS has not remained static since its inception in the late 1960's. Like too many fields of study, early on, CS/LS was dominated by male voices and perspectives, reflecting, unfortunately, a patriarchal position, marginalizing women and queer voices, even as it sought racial justice. The struggle to disrupt this is an important and fascinating history, but teachers of CS/LS should know that today, the perspectives of Chicana Feminists, and those who have 'Queered' CS/LS, are at the heart of modern CS/LS. We advise conscious attention to including feminist and Queer voices, and not dictating curriculum solely by the 'original' CS texts.

Moreover, CS/LS has, in recent years, begun to intentionally account for its diversity. This means acknowledging the tensions and differences between the Chicana perspective, and the perspectives and experiences of non-Chicana peoples, and non-U.S. Latina/o/x peoples. For instance, *mestizo* may carry positive connotations in a U.S. context, but was used as a tool of colonial assimilation in much of central America; we have added the -x in U.S. contexts, but for most of Latin America, this move towards inclusivity is not well accepted. In short, know that the field of CS/LS is constantly evolving, and shaped by a diverse set of communities and voices. We encourage you to ensure all these perspectives and voices are heard, so that Chicana/Latina people are not constructed as monolithic, and CS/LS is understood as an exploration of a cultural perspective, not an examination of a static history.