

Ms. Carrasco

Chican@ Studies

The Roots of Identity and Denial

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Chicano Studies: the study of Chican@s.

But exactly WHAT IS A CHICANO?

Take a moment to ask yourself what a Chicano is. Who is a Chicana or Chicano? Can you give a definition of this? Is it someone born here of Mexican-born parents? What if one or both parents were also born here, are they no longer Chicanos? What about someone who was born in Mexico but raised here all of their lives? Is it the same thing as a Mexican American? What about Mexican-American (with a hyphen)? Is it someone who is "Of Mexican Descent"? And how do you define "Of Mexican Descent"? And even if we can all agree on how to define this, how many of you who fit that definition actually call yourselves "Chicana" or "Chicano"? Then what about the term Latino? Is a Chicano also a Latino? What does the term Latino mean? Or Hispanic is a Chicano also a Hispanic? What does Hispanic mean? Are Latino and Hispanic the same thing? Where do all of these terms come from? What is their etymology? Think about these questions. I'll wait.....

Any answers yet? I'll wait some more.....

Well, I'll let you keep thinking about this, meanwhile, let me tell you how I've come to understand it:

The last first: the term Latino refers to people from LATIN AMERICA. However, not when in their country of origin, but only here in the United States. Dominicans don't call themselves "Latino" when in the Dominican Republic, nor do Mexicans in Mexico nor Salvadorans in El Salvador..., it is only here that this term is used. And it does not refer to French or Italian or any other persons of "Latin" language extraction, regardless of what anyone says. The reason I mention this is because I personally have come across situations where people from one or another of these European countries try to claim they are "Latino" just to take advantage of resources dedicated to the "Latino" community. The term itself did not come into popular usage until the 1990's, but it originated from French Emperor Napoleon III's attempts to carve out a French empire in the Americas in the mid 19th century. Part of these efforts was the imposition of Austrian Archduke Maximilian as Emperor of Mexico which would lead to the War of the Reform in Mexico. It was Napoleon who coined the term "Latin Amerique" to refer to the area of planned expansion of France into the western hemisphere. And slowly but surely, since then all of the countries south of Tijuana came to be referred to collectively as Latin America, and the peoples of these countries came to be referred to as Latinos- sort of. The word Latin in truth refers to a language, the language of the Romans, to be specific. Rome is in Italy. And all of the languages that evolved from Latin are known as the Romance languages, or Latin-based. That is why some Europeans try to take advantage of the term for their own purposes, even though it is erroneous.

The usage of the term Hispanic to refer to these same groups originated in the United States. Back in the 1960's this term was defined as meaning "of or from Spain." Part of it comes from the efforts by organizations like the League of United Latin American Citizens as far back as the 1930's. At that time,

due to the intense anti-Mexican racism and discrimination that existed (and still exists), many organizations and individuals resisted being called Mexican. They were either Spanish surnamed, Spanish Speaking, Latin American, or just plain Spanish. Keep in mind that at that time, the overwhelming majority of “Latinos” in the United States were Mexican, there were very few Central, or South Americans, or Caribbean Americans. Yet many chose to call themselves anything but Mexican, because here in the United States the term had been given a very negative connotation. Mexicans were considered dirty, criminals, racially and culturally inferior, and many other things. One way in which some of these organizations sought to fight the negative stereotypes was to encourage Mexicans in the United States to assimilate into US culture and society. Americanization classes, US History, Constitution, government, English, etc. The implication was that we were treated bad and discriminated against because we held on to things that served no purpose in the US, language, culture, etc. These things were seen as backward. Another part of this strategy was to put pressure on the US government to create another category in the US Census to ensure that Mexicans would finally be recognized in this country. It took thirty years, but finally, and probably more because of the pressure of mass political mobilization by Chicanos in the 1960s than by the efforts of these earlier organizations, under the Nixon administration, the 1970 census was the first to include the category of “Hispanic.” But by that time, Chicanos, influencing and being influenced by all of the social movements taking place in the United States (and the world, for that matter), had begun to openly and proudly use the term Chicano to identify themselves. This term, Chicano, was not new. It had been used primarily by working class youth of Mexican descent at least as far back as the 1940’s, and there is evidence that this term was in use as far back as the early colonial period. Anyway, the Chicano youth of the 1960s decided that the classification of Hispanic was too little, too late. Especially since it lumped all “Latinos” together, regardless of their different historical, cultural and political realities and experiences. Chicanos told the government “CHALE con Hispanic!!!!” They saw it as a denial of their indigenous roots, since both Hispanic and Latino are of European roots and have Europe as their point of reference. The term Chicano, although it was of working class usage, and had also taken on negative connotations, was now taken by these youth, who took it out of the gutter where it had been, cleaned it, polished it up, slapped it on, and wore it like a badge of honor. The parents of these youth were shocked that their children were using this term to identify themselves. But the youth calmed their fears by reassuring the parents that by using the term they were not denying being Mexican, it was a reaffirmation of it. They were saying we’re Mexican, Y QUE! What are you going to do about it? They were defiantly telling US society, “we will no longer allow you to define us or tell us who we are!” Because for five hundred years we had been bending and twisting and trying to force ourselves into an image, or identity that was presented to us as what we should be in order to be accepted. And yet, no matter what we did, we were never good enough. We were still enslaved, our women were raped, our lands and property were stolen, our men killed, our culture, language and religion attacked. Here in the United States, even though Chicanos had served and fought in every war this country has had, and served with distinction, being the most highly decorated ethnic group, receiving more Congressional Medals of Honor than anyone else, our soldiers still had to come back from World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, to restaurants and other businesses that had signs in the windows that read “NO MEXICANS OR DOGS ALLOWED”.....

(Or from Iraq or Afghanistan to hear Donald trump and Ann Coulter, and Fox News proclaim us all rapists,

thieves and criminals)

So “No,” the youth said, “we are not going to let you define us anymore. We are going to tell you who we are, and we are Chicanos,” they said. “Mexicanos, Y QUE! And what are you going to do about it? NOTHING! You aren’t going to do anything about it!!” They said. “Because we are here, and we ain’t going nowhere!!! AQUI ESTAMOS, Y NO NOS VAMOS!!! So deal with it!”

And so this term was adopted by a large segment of Mexican-descended youth during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and early 70s as their identity. Which meant of Mexican descent but of mixed culture, Mexican and American, yet not fully belonging to either (most Chicanos at that time were born here, and were in fact 2nd or 3rd generation, many of their grandparents came from Mexico during the Mexican Revolution of the 1910’s, while a significant number were children of former Bracer@s). And Chicanos are in a very strange place, culturally, neither here nor there. We go to Mexico, and we are called POCHOS. Here, we are not considered “American.” Many of us grow up not speaking Spanish too well, if at all, or English, for that matter, but we speak pretty good Spanglish, and Calo.

But none of this really tells us where the word “CHICANO” comes from. For that, we must go elsewhere. A different time, a different place.

As I mentioned previously, there is evidence of this word being used as far back as the early colonial period. In fact, it may even pre-date the European Invasion of this hemisphere.

“A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away....”

Ok, so, maybe not that far back.

We can start with the Aztecs themselves. If you look at the Mexican flag, you will see that it is red, white and green, with an image in the center. That center image comes from an ancient Aztec legend. It refers to the founding of their capital city, Mexico-Tenochtitlan (the X as used by the Spaniards at that time had the SH sound- MEH-SHEE-KOH). The legend tells us that at one time the Aztecs lived in a place called Aztlan (Aztecs = from Aztlan). And Aztlan, as any good Chicana or Chicano will tell you is somewhere right here in what is now the US Southwest (so we didn’t cross the borders, the borders crossed us!!! We’re just coming home!!!) Anyway, at some time during their history, as the legend goes, one of the Aztec priests received a vision, the vision was that of an eagle, landing on a cactus, on an island in the middle of a lake, devouring a serpent. The message was that the Aztecs had to leave Aztlan and travel southward, until they saw this vision for real. When they did, that would be the sign that this would be the place they were to build their great city. So the Aztecs traveled southward, in an epic journey, and many years later, entered the Valley of Mexico. At that time, there were already several city-states in the valley, many established by refugees from the ancient city of Tollan (the Toltec capital). The Aztecs at first were not well received, were used as mercenaries in the various wars and battles between and among these city states, but eventually married into the Toltec lineages, and gathered enough military and political might to become the dominant force in the region. At one point, they were at the shore of Lake Texcoco (which was located where present day Mexico City is) when they looked across, and saw the vision they had been waiting for. So they knew then that this was where they were to build their great capital. And so they built the Great Mexico-Tenochtitlan.

ME-XI-CO=ME-Metzli, the moon; XI- in the Nahuatl (Aztec) language this comes from the word for navel (ombligo); CO-place designator, Mexico = place of the navel of the moon.

TE-NOCH-TI-TLAN=TE-tepetl, rock, NOCHTI- cactus fruit, TLAN-place of abundance. The Rock Where Cactus Fruit is in Abundance.

So Mexico-Tenochtitlan means the Place of the Navel of the Moon, the Rock where Cactus Fruit is in Abundance.

Once the city was established, the Aztecs called themselves MEXICA (MEH-SHEE-KAH).

In the Aztec tradition, the moon sometimes is referred to as the daughter of the Earth, as in the legend of the Birth of Huitzilopochtli (Winter Solstice). In other places, she is the Mother of the Earth, as in the case of the legend of Meyahuel, and with the word MEXICO. Lakes sometimes were called water mirrors- Atltezcatl. Or even more, water mirrors of the moon because of how they reflected the movements of the cosmos, and could be used in tracking them as well. This is what Chac Mools were used for, as water mirrors to track the movements of certain celestial bodies over a specific point and through time- not receptacles for the hearts of sacrificial victims.

More popularly, Mexico can also refer to the idea that this city was the navel where the umbilical cord was attached that connected the Mother Earth (TONANTZIN TLALLI- TO-our, NAN- Mother, TZIN- sacred, TLALLI- earth) to the Grandmother Moon (NANANTZIN METZLI: NANA: grandmother; METZLI- moon).

So then, if the moon is the Grandmother, and the Earth is the Mother, who are the Children (or grandchildren)?

The Mexica! Simply put, the word Mexica is a way of the people recognizing that they are Children of the Earth, Grandchildren of the Moon.

When the Spaniards arrived, they Hispanicized the term, and began calling the Aztecs Mexicanos (MEH-SHEE-KANOS: remember, in the Spanish language at that time, the X had the SH sound).

Soon thereafter the first references to XICANOS appear (SHEE-KAH-NOS)

When the Spanish language was reformed to eliminate the SH sound, the X took on the English “H” sound, and the closest thing left to the SH sound in Spanish was CH.

So then

Mexica- meh shee kah

Mexicano- meh shee kah no

Xicano- shee kah no

And

Chicano chee kah no

All refer to the same thing: the people as Children of the Earth, Grandchildren of the Moon.

Nothing derogatory or negative here. And this is an indigenous word, not from Europe.....

At that time, the Nahuatl language was (and actually still is) one of the most widely spoken native languages in the Americas. It is part of what archeologists/anthropologists refer to as the Uto-Aztekan Language Group. This language group extends from the Great Lakes Region (MICHIGAN means

something very similar to MICHOACAN- both are from Uto-Aztekan languages) all the way to Central America. In fact the words Nicaragua and Guatemala both come from the Nahuatl, as does the word Cuxcatlan (the Nahuatl word for the region now known as El Salvador), and Michoacan. There were no borders on this land then. And in fact the borders that we see now (especially US) have little more than 200 years of existence. The native peoples of this continent have been traveling up and down this hemisphere for tens of thousands of years, some estimate the earliest evidence of human habitation as far back as 100 thousand years ago (or even half a million years ago!), though the most commonly accepted figures range between 60 to 70 thousand years ago. And it doesn't matter where in "Latin America" you come from; once you cross that border the dominant society in this country sees all of you as "MEXICANS" (and not in a nice way!).

So the term Chicano can mean many things to many people, but for the purposes of this class, it is defined as persons of Mexican indigenous descent living in the present day United States.

Mexica Tiahui!

(Mexicanos Adelante!)