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A Love Letter to Chicax Studies

ABSTRACT The authors share their joint “love letter” to the field of Chicax Studies, originally presented during the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS) conference on April 14, 2021. This collection reflects on the successes, promise, and still deferred promise of a fully realized Chicax Studies. They focus on the value of a graduate program and training in Chicax Studies, the need for their work to be engaged in community struggle, the potentials of increased numbers of Chicax Studies trained scholars, and their personal connections and challenges as graduate students of this field. **KEYWORDS** academic disciplines, Chicax Studies, Ethnic Studies, personal narrative

RETHINKING THE “HOW” OF CHICANX STUDIES

Kristian E. Vasquez

When we examine the brief history of Chicax Studies in the dominant Anglo-American university, the force of an autonomous and distinct study of the sociopolitical, cultural, and historical presence of “Chicax” people within the national territorial boundaries of the United States presented a unique composite of epistemology, methodology, and intellectual genealogy. The self-determining power of *El Plan de Santa Bárbara* of 1969 constituted the desire to institute Chicax Studies in places of higher education to invoke the community aspirations of “Chicax” people. Not only was the institution of centers, programs, and departments a vibrant struggle in the Anglo-American university, so too was the labor of “Mexican-descent” faculty obtaining doctoral degrees in traditional disciplines to build from scratch a new project. Many of the original questions of the new project were aimed at understanding who exactly were the “Chicanos.” Yet, since Chicax Studies’ inception, the question has surpassed that of class struggle or ethnoracial conceptualizations of nation-building, displacing Marxist and cultural determinations of history and identity. Rather, the intellectual struggles over being, characterized as the politics of being, have introduced vibrant philosophical, theoretical, and material debates within and outside Chicax Studies. Chicax Studies came to a crossroads as emergent radical social theories of society, political economy, and that of revisionist history challenged early traditional attempts of historiography, social science data, and humanistic analysis.

Chicax Studies in its transdisciplinarity, or its character as interdisciplinary, has challenged the theory, method, and positivist strictures of the traditional humanistic social sciences as well as the Eurocentric humanities. Its threat to the Anglo-American

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university premised on capitalist, colonial, and disciplining knowledge set out to propose a community-based project toward “Chicano” liberation. Chicana Studies, for me, are understood as interrupting or shedding light on the governing conceptions of entangled colonial logics, bordered epistemologies, and the material social relations of subjugated people to offer substantial theory, method, and analysis of counterhegemonic knowledge, being, and subjectivities. Rather than a project of description, Chicana Studies builds and offers pathways toward community struggle.

In this brief portrait, we can draw out three conceptual questions on the substance of Chicana Studies: (1) What is Chicana Studies? (2) Why Chicana Studies? (3) How will Chicana Studies inquire, investigate, and offer potential solutions for or analysis of a situation, event, or structure? For me, the “how” of Chicana Studies is the most important question. In my undergraduate research training with Dr. Reynaldo Flore Macías in Chicana Studies I was taught three big questions: (1) Who are we? (2) What is our condition in the world? (3) What are we to do about it? Rephrased as a process of existential inquiry, materialist conceptions of conditions, and building an actional philosophy of social engagement.

With the advent of Chicana feminist epistemologies, Marxist and post-structuralist Chicana Studies scholars, Chicana humanistic social sciences, directions in Chicana cultural studies, the vibrant interventions of Jotería studies, and new waves of historians in Chicana history, the project of Chicana Studies in the Anglo-American university is substantially growing and including a range of intellectual, scientific, and artistic trajectories that has shaped generations of scholars. Fifty years in existence, Chicana Studies has generated theories of race, class, gender/sexuality, and nation/planetary civil society specific to the conditions and status characterized by “Mexican-descent” people. Though this is a historical and geopolitical limitation based on the origins and emergence of “Mexican” identified populations, Chicana Studies itself is not limited to a borderlands-esque framework. As we have seen in the course of our intellectual history, Chicana Studies does not solely function as a descriptor of Chicana people and their various social identifications. It is rooted in more than just an idea of Mexicanness, thus limited to geography and generation. Rather, it has shown us the thought-in-process to demonstrate how the conditions of Chicana people index a categorical structure-in-formation that anchors a distinct apparatus, or assemblages of technologies, that subjugate populations linked to the US-Mexico border and conscripts populations of an empirical Mexicanized reality.

As we have encountered numerous types of scholarship, methodologies, and innovative inquiries from diverse epistemic standpoints, Chicana Studies opens its optics to an imperative that requires its own theory of struggle—not as a solely sociopolitical struggle, but an intellectual struggle.

Action items:

1. A reconceptualization of the US scripts of the Mexican that are overdetermined by labor, migration, and dislocation—tethered to a body that no longer exists as a clear racialization.

2. A place-based intellectual home, an interconnected dialogue of hubs that work from the knowledge, communities, methodologies unique and generative to Chicana/x Studies.
3. A rigorous reexamination of the “how” of Chicana/x Studies that takes into account a theory of struggle that prioritizes an imperative broader than immediate policy change but is accountable to the communities at stake for the project.

LOVE? LETTER

Juan de Dios Pacheco Marcial

This is a letter of joy, pain, laughter, love, and confusion toward the Chicana/o/x field of study. A place in which I have been able to find comfort, and at my best, discomfort. The beginning of my Chicana/x Studies journey was psychedelic—the hallucinations envisioned a utopia, and a rising consciousness was created that allowed me to become a more tender, caring, and loving person. It was perfection, the safe haven . . . protection. However, as time passed by, these protective feelings were enveloped in failure and frustration. The continual decolonial process remains to be a painful one. It is full of regret directed at my past along with optimism for the future. It’s a tough battle fighting for the unknown.

As a pioneer first-year graduate student in the Chicana/x Studies program during COVID, I am bombarded with questions. Mainly from myself thinking where my love for this program stemmed from:

Why did I choose this program? This field of study? Why did I stubbornly choose the Chicana/x minor during my undergrad? I could’ve chosen human communication or sociology or anything else, but why Chicana/x? What is so special about it?

As much as I think about these questions, I cannot help but be teleported to the many times in my life when Chicana/x Studies or some sort of Ethnic Studies aided in the reconciliation with myself. These times of cherishable knowledge.

As for why I am in this respective discipline, I’ve shared before that the easy answer to why I am here is because I got accepted. On my journey through applying to graduate school, I had an extensive list of places where I wanted to study. Unfortunately, however, the hindering nuisance of capitalism prevented me from applying to wherever I wanted. In the end, I had narrowed down the graduate programs that I was applying to. My list consisted of two PhD programs and one master’s program with University of California Santa Barbara’s (UCSB’s) Chicana/o Studies program being my top choice. However, the not-so-easy answers have to do with what I can do with a PhD in Chicana/x Studies. I am in this respective discipline because of the intellectual freedom it allows me to pursue.

Now, as a COVID pioneer, I am left wondering about my research and the route I envision taking. Coming from a mainstream field of study, Psychology, I was limited in my decision where I wanted my research and scholarship to be. During class discussions, we could not talk about our mental health issues, our wins or losses. There is no way to talk about how to cope with addictions. The “I” in psychology’s academic writing is deducted, punished, and not valued. It’s not until my sixth year in my undergraduate journey that I began to take Ethnic Studies courses and found a place where my

scholarship and intellectual curiosity belonged. Where I saw myself relate to a story in a textbook or my life and upbringing in a class discussion. Now, as a Chicax Studies learner, I hope to pursue research that is pivotal to the field of study.

My intellectual curiosity interweaved with my own personal experiences in activism and organizing lead me to greater questions of social movements. I like to think of Chicax Studies as an ongoing social movement. The field is always organizing, much like we're doing today, through dialogue, collectively, to break through the barriers of systemic oppression the field of study has undesirably battled against. As a social movements learner and future scholar, I hope to shed light on the power and strength people collectively attain and deliver. Unfortunately, the lack of literature or work from Chicax Studies scholars who have theorized and written about this field of study as a social movement is limited. The work, however, has been done, theorized, and written about mainly through the lens of the white man. This creates a whole different perspective. One that lacks the understanding and personal experience of the Chicax Studies ongoing social movement. The work must be done to aid the field in its broad understanding of its purpose and desire. The question then becomes how do we uplift and preserve the Chicax Studies past, present, and future memory while retaining its values and evolving with the new ones?

ON A PATH TOWARD SELF-SUSTAINMENT AND EVOLUTION IN CHICAX STUDIES

Karla Larrañaga

I was first introduced to and trained in Chicax Studies as an undergraduate student while attending Loyola Marymount University, where I double-majored in Chicax Studies and Women and Gender Studies. When I was nearing the end of my undergraduate career, I knew I wanted to continue my education and attend graduate school, but I felt a lot of anxiety around what kind of program to apply to. I wasn't sure what the best path forward for me was because I had this initial training in nontraditional disciplines; while I loved being a student of Chicax Studies, I feared I would not be seen as "well-rounded" if I pursued this alone, so I chose to pursue a Master's degree in English instead. I even went as far as specializing in Cultural Studies so that I could prove to the academy that I was a dimensional scholar trained in both traditional and nontraditional schools of thought.

Now, as a graduate student who is more confident in my place in the academy, I often think back to these decisions and reflect on why I felt as though I needed to seek training outside of Chicax Studies. Especially considering that I am happier doing work in this field than I was in others. I believe I was afraid that I would not be employable by the academy unless I was also "traditionally" trained; even within Chicax Studies, the scholars who have the most visibility are those who are trained in traditional fields. This is not to point out that these scholars are not important or foundational to Chicax Studies or that their contributions are not meaningful. This is simply to acknowledge that there needs to be more representation of Chicax-trained scholars. These reflections lead me to a vision of self-sustainment for Chicax Studies; how can we become a field that prioritizes the students it trains? How can we make Chicax-trained scholars the most visible in our field?

SELF-SUSTAINMENT

Chicanx Studies is composed of scholars from many different academic backgrounds and disciplines. In fact, a majority of the scholars in Chicanx Studies come from traditional disciplines. This has helped to play an important role in shaping our field as these scholars take their traditional training and utilize it within Chicanx Studies. The tools taken from these traditional disciplines is decolonized and restructured in order to fit our model of learning.

It is important to acknowledge this tradition and the tools that Chicanx Studies is composed of today. However, in order for Chicanx Studies to evolve, we must begin to privilege the scholars who are trained in this field and move toward a path of self-sustainment. In the past, this is something that could not be done easily because there were little to no students trained in Chicanx Studies entering into the academy as graduate students looking to earn their doctorate in this field. This reality has changed; as more universities offer Chicanx Studies as a major for undergraduate students and as a doctorate for graduate students, those who have been trained in the field should be able to openly help cultivate our intellectual home.

We must begin to privilege Chicanx-trained scholars within Chicanx Studies because if our own field does not accredit us then who will? I have been told that with my training I could be employed in various different fields: Feminist studies, Religious studies, perhaps even English. But what if I said that I want to be employed in my own discipline, Chicanx Studies? If more Chicanx-trained scholars were visible in the field, students would have less anxiety about their place within the academia. There would be less insecurity attached to being a Chicanx scholar. Chicanx Studies should move toward becoming a discipline where trained Chicanx scholars take up a majority of the space. This kind of practice is not questioned in traditional disciplines; it is not seen as inhibiting or limiting. Therefore, Chicanx Studies should be able to also implement this.

This is not a call to do away with Chicanx-identified, traditionally trained scholars, their contributions, or the foundations of this field. Scholars who train within traditional disciplines and then move into Chicanx Studies are valuable members of this intellectual community. The schools of thought they bring with them to Chicanx Studies have provided a meaningful basis and the decolonization of their traditions have made profound contributions. However, because we are trained by those who come from different fields, it does leave us to wonder: What is Chicanx Studies? What is our school of thought? What is Chicanx literature? What are our research methods and intellectual inquiries? And, perhaps most importantly, how do they build upon those traditional foundations in fruitful ways that could not have otherwise been accessed?

We have been given many useful tools that help us understand our lived experiences. But we have our own tools to offer that are directly influenced by being members trained in this field. So, while we should remain an inclusive space where colleagues from traditional fields join our community, there should be a focus on deep reflexivity from these colleagues as well. We have often heard that those from traditional disciplines enter into Chicanx Studies because it is a radical space of possibility. This is a beautiful reality; however, if we continue with this trajectory, then the space becomes limited for those trained in Chicanx Studies. And thus, we are pushed to other spaces in order to survive in

the university. This is why reflexivity is important; while scholars from other disciplines can enter into Chicana Studies, they should also help to empower Chicana-trained scholars by not taking up all of the space.

By grounding our field with Chicana-trained scholars, we do not lose the multiplicity of our discipline. The contact that Chicana Studies has made with traditional disciplines will always remain present in the work that we do moving forward. In reflecting on my training and the mentorship that I have received thus far, I consider myself to be a part of an intellectual family tree. This family tree encompasses all those scholars who have inspired me to do the work that I do in Chicana Studies. My intellectual family tree is composed of mentors whom I have worked with and their mentors; it is also composed of the mentors whom I have only met on paper through their scholarship. In this way, tradition can never be lost. However, it would be beneficial to begin explicitly articulating our intellectual research, inquiries, and methods as Chicana in order to solidify our school of thought. Centering Chicana Studies-trained scholars will evolve the field and will solidify us as members of the intellectual family tree.

Here are the questions I consider when thinking about self-sustainment in Chicana Studies:

1. How can we prioritize Chicana-trained scholars in the field and in the academy?
2. Is it reasonable to advocate for Chicana-trained faculty within our departments? Intellectual spaces that are exclusive to Chicana Studies and scholarship?
3. What are Chicana intellectual inquiries, research methods, and ethics? How can we begin to formulate and name these?
4. How can we push for accountability and self-reflexivity from scholars trained in traditional fields?

WRITING FROM WITHIN THE HEART: TOWARD AN INTEGRATION OF THE SOMATIC

Verónica Mandujano

I write my love letter to Chicana/o studies as a student of the field since my undergraduate training at the University of California at Santa Barbara, where I also continue to pursue my doctorate. I acknowledge the philosophical space and material environment of the classroom and what it has provided to my intellectual development as a Xicana from East Oakland, California. Although the university environment is not the place that I look to in search of who Xicana/os are, I struggle alongside my cohort members who, together with me are a part of the early generation of Chicana/o Studies-trained scholars who have had the ability to receive both undergraduate and graduate degrees in the field. I believe my cohort members would agree that we are collectively in search of defining for ourselves what it means to pursue a doctorate in the field, and how that might assist us in our larger commitments outside of the classroom.

To engage in the embodied process of writing a love letter, I first choose to intentionally slow my heart beat down. I have been taught to do this by a Temazcalero by the

name of Don Yaxkin, who taught me to focus on the heart as a consciousness center before engaging in a process of creating. I invite the reader to join should they wish; by extending our exhales and shortening our inhalations, the diaphragm moves down and allows the heart more room, more space to pump, and more space to expand, thus slowing the heart rate down.

Who are the Xican@ people in the context of our diverse knowledge systems and somatic practices? More importantly, how do we know ourselves from a vantage point that is our own? While these questions frame my research within the academy, I am aware that they emanate from lineages and traditions whose knowledges are not intended to reside within the university, they are intended to exist as embodied ways of being and knowing. I believe that the knowledge system of the Xican@ people has many forms and equally many names; I locate my work in what I conceive of as the daily and ritualized practice of Mexican Traditional Medicine (MTM), a knowledge system involving plant medicine and ritual from Mexico that is practiced by many Chicana/o/x people. MTM is a complex living, breathing, and embodied knowledge system that not only assisted my healing journey from a degenerative muscular disease, known as an auto-immune disease in the West, but prevails in the birth practice of my late *abuela* (grandmother) Herlinda Hernandez Mandujano; *nuestra* (our) Mama Linda.

While I engage in the complex and emotionally challenging work of recirculating my late *abuela*'s birth knowledge, I also am faced with navigating the distinct context within which I find my own material and spiritual condition. My *abuela* lived in Guanajuato, Mexico, and is from a small pueblo in the Southern region of the state near Michoacan. She gave birth sixteen times at home, each time the *ombbligo* (the belly button) of her newborn baby was buried in the *tierra* (earth) behind the doorway to the home. The doorway at the time sat upon dirt floors. My *abuela* gave birth many times alone, she did not ask for her older children to support in birthing labor, and her husband, my *abuelo* (grandfather), often was not home due to his work as a farmer. Mama Linda retreated to deliver her babies alone. However, she had local support from community *parteras*, or birth workers, who taught her how to develop her own postpartum medicine and treatment.

I share just enough of her story to reflect on how I, someone who has never had children, who is the first generation of my family born in a hospital in a US context, and is pursuing a PhD within the neoliberal Western university, can engage in the intergenerational practice of recirculating a birth practice that while it is only one generation removed, is quickly disappearing.

My research concerning birthing will translate to a material outcome including research findings, or some kind of significant contribution to the field to be doctoral-candidate worthy. While I am engaged in this process and I seek to contribute to challenging what research can look like within the university, my research is rooted within a diverse birthing *practice*—at times known as *parterismo* in Mexico. Engaging *parterismo* has taken me down a path that requires a deep level of somatic engagement that cannot always be translated to neat and linear processes or descriptions that are valued in research development programs in the Western university.

While I recognize that my research questions might actually be best situated outside of the university, such as by engaging birth work primarily as a practitioner in training, I remain pursuant of my degree because of the origins of Chicana/o studies. The field was born from a demand to sustain community engagement and to support the larger Chicana/o community outside of the university, as described in the original Plan de Santa Bárbara (1971). The field also came into being due to the Black student organizers who demanded a department at UCSB within the larger context of the demands for Third World Studies, which was first institutionalized at San Francisco State University in 1968. Third World Studies positioned itself as the study of the United States in its entirety and its place in the world, including the particularly salient component of engaging the subjectivities through which oppression is exercised, namely described as “power or agency and its articulations exhibited in the formations of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation” (Okiihiro 2016: 2). The separation of Third World Studies into Ethnic Studies formations known as Asian American, African American, American Indian and Chicana/o Studies constitutes a splitting of Third World liberatory thought into distinctive disciplines with distinctive literatures, professional journals, and budgets. The separation from Third World Liberatory philosophy and practice to Ethnic Studies has contributed to complex and challenging dynamics present within each discipline that has contributed to a stifling production of identity politics or multi-culturalist identity segregation. I am a product of this phenomenon; I have and continue to oscillate between evaluating the purpose and radical potential that I believe Chicana/o Studies has, and ruminating over whether it is a weakened position within the university that is separate from Xicana/o world-making in the larger sociopolitical global context.

Despite this tension, the philosophical space of Chicana/o Studies is a part of a consciousness that engages in self-naming, self-reclamation, and what Celia Herrera Rodriguez describes in reference to the X in Xicana/o as a “representation of recovered knowledge, wisdom, compassion and a fighting spirit” (Luna 1996: 133). An “offshoot” of the Chicana/o movement, Xicana/o’s adopted the X to represent a new evolution of consciousness that I believe emanates more from spiritual practice than a desire for cultural nationalism. Jennie Luna describes the Xicana as “a spirit that ultimately cannot be quantified or reduced to language or words” (1996: 12). The origin of Chicana/o Studies, and the evolution of Xicana/o consciousness over recent decades sustains the foundation on which I believe my work, and the practice of other “alternative practitioners” or practitioners who engage non-Euro–Western knowledge systems can contribute to a third space of exchange and engagement with the nonphysical or intangible world. This third space is yet unavailable to traditional Western science that seems to be stifled by industry-related ties, such as to the pharmaceutical industry.

My letter is not intended to create yet another divide between science and the humanities. In fact, it is quite the opposite. I don’t believe there to be a divide at all, except the one erected by the disciplines of institutions. I believe both Euro-Western practitioners of science and “nontraditional” or “alternative” practitioners, in this case existing within the field of Chicana/o Studies, to have the capacity to do the same; which is to observe phenomena beyond our immediate comprehension or lived experience.

Observing life under a telescope, engaging data that documents soundwave frequencies, or conceptualizing genetic information—scholars both within traditional scientific fields and the field of Chicana/o Studies have the capacity to perform such tasks, it is not a question of strict methods or technological application. Of importance here is a question of ontological commitments, values and cosmologies that I believe the field of Chicana/o Studies and the various Ethnic Studies categories are poised to offer scientific inquiry that is radically different from the influences of the European Enlightenment from which normal science has derived much of its unspoken rules and paradigmatic structure (Kuhn, 2021).

Chicana/o Studies' distinct methodological and epistemological contributions offer a space where the findings and even the tools of science can be appropriated. One example of this is the call made by Adaljiza Sosa Riddell in the *Bioethics of Reproductive Technologies: Impacts and Implications for Latinas* (1993). Riddell calls on Chicanas/Latinas to critically consider the impact of scientific research and experimentation on the reproductive rights and capacities of Chicanas/Latinas. She urges us of the necessity of constructing a paradigm for understanding reproductive technologies and their impacts on women of color. This call is as relevant today as it was when she wrote it, only now the writings of Third World Feminisms have lost their influence in many of our major introductory courses, and our students are faced with choosing between a STEM degree or Chicana/o Studies. We are more than poised to construct a pathway within our field in which science can be mobilized toward confronting its colonial history, while also developing the tools and strategies to leverage scientific discourse and methods. This leverage would push us toward being active participants in scientific debates without giving up the values and original commitments on which our field was founded.

My love letter to the field is actually a *llanto*, an aching plea to Xicana/o/x world-makers, alternative practitioners, and visionaries. I am asking that we not relinquish what cannot be easily documented or recreated for the sake of empiricism; if and when we engage with the university for the sake of fitting neatly within its confines. Make it a point to engage in creating a third space, whether that be in small collectives, or longer extended projects that orient us towards who we are and where we come from, while remaining engaged with how science perceives us and how its industries affect us. Most importantly, to trust this knowing despite centuries of colonial terror that have caused a rupture between how we see ourselves and the many diverse and complex traditions that we emanate from. ■

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