Group #1 Research Essay

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Chicano Identity and Experience

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Chicano/a identity is a concept that is not easily defined. There are many terms associated with Chicano/a identity, including Americano, Mexican-American, vato, cholo, Hispanic, Latino, gangsta, lowrider, zoot suiter, pachuco, homie, to name a few. Each of these terms can also take on different meanings depending on the context in which they are used. According to Vigil, the ethnic label Chicano has many definitions, and the word itself may be a shortened version of the word Mexicano. The word gained popularity in the U.S. during the 1960’s as part of a socio-political movement. This essay will explore both the concept and development of Chicano/a identity and the Chicano/a experience as a cultural movement by asking questions such as what it means to be or identify as a Chicano, how the Chicano movement and experience developed and progressed, and finally, whether or not the Chicano movement still exists today and where it may be headed. The examination of the aforementioned topics will include summaries of interviews conducted with individuals who we, as members of Group #1, externally identified as Chicanos, or at least having origins or roots in that geographic region of “Aztlan”, who Spires states “is a spatial referent without clear boundaries; a no-man’s land fragmented by colliding cultures”.

One of the primary dilemmas in exploring Chicano identity comes from attempting to define it objectively within some easily identifiable and recognizable parameters. For example, are we only Chicano if we were born in Mexico and migrated to the United States (U.S.), or is the personal and political so intertwined that to identify as Chicano is to affirm participation in a socio-political movement? We must also consider whether the border area where two cultures meet and mix is home

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1 Rios, Francisco. From Chicano/a to Xicano/a. Multicultural Education, June 1, 2008, p 2.
base or ground zero for Chicano identity and experience, historically and/or today. Belgrad describes
the space where two cultures contact each other, merge, and become something else as “a polyglot
global culture, where cultural differences become the basis for creative syntheses, a ‘border zone’
where identities mix and enrich each other”. That argument would suppose that the best from each
culture will combine to create a third cultural entity enriched by the two original cultures. However, the
argument doesn’t take into account class structures, economic and social inequities, racism, and other
factors, such as the U.S. capitalist economy, which functions on the basis of some “haves” and some
“have-nots”.

Spires takes a much more pessimistic view of the two cultures colliding, when he argues that the
reality along the Mexican border today is not a celebration of la raza (Chicano), but rather, their
continued oppression in an industrialized dystopia. Spires states that Chicanos abandon their cultural
identity at the border out of economic necessity, and become “tethered to the machine”, or literally, the
maquiladora. Spires states because they lack economic power or control over technology, they
become marginalized as a direct consequence of globalization. This is similar to Vigil’s descriptions of
energy capture and the subjugation/subordination of the Indians to the hacendados, criollos, mestizos,
and ultimately, the policies and actions of the U.S. government.

A third view of Chicano identity postulates that it arose out of the recognition of the difference
within, a result of transformational processes, both external and internal. This perspective views
differential consciousness as “a mestizo consciousness, one which understands its difference in relation

5 Spires, A. op. cit., p. 122.
6 Ibid., p. 125.
7 Ibid., p. 131.
8 Perez-Torres, Rafael. Chicano Culture Reclaiming our America: Coyotes at the Border. American
to others, and simultaneously recognizes itself in others”.

Belgrad takes the differential consciousness a step further, when he states that the conflicting impulses of inclusion and otherness results in a dynamic interaction between the two. He defines it as “calling attention to the act of turning away”, the result of which may well constitute the essence of Chicano identity.

From interviews with two women, Elsa Martinez and Cindy Gonzales, who we could imagine may potentially identify as Chicano, we learned that neither identify as Chicano. Elsa Martinez is a 58-year old woman living in Tucson, AZ, where she was born. Elsa’s parents were also born in the U.S.; mother in New Mexico, father in Los Angeles. Her maternal grandparents were born in Jalapa, Veracruz, and Culiacan, Sinaloa. Her paternal grandparents also came from Mexico. Elsa defines herself as Mexican-American. Through DNA analysis, she knows that she has 70% European ethnicity and genetics, including a mix of Iberian, Italian, Sardinian, Scandinavian, Ashkenazi, British and Irish, and 24% Native American, plus a small percentage of African. In Arizona, to be considered or qualify as Native American, Elsa said you have to be able to prove 25% through documentation. Elsa said she looks more like her dad’s family with her light skin and eyes, and he may have had more Spanish genes than Native American, but her mother’s family looks much more indigenous and has darker skin and brown eyes. Elsa said she doesn’t identify as a Chicano/a, and was not involved or familiar with the Chicano movement, nor were any of her family members or relatives. Elsa spent her career as a police officer in Tucson, AZ, and is currently retired.

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9 Ibid., p. 822.
10 Belgrad, D. op. cit., p. 251.
11 Ibid., p. 254.
Cindy Gonzales is a 48-year old woman living in Tucson, AZ. She was born in Yuma, AZ, where her mother’s extended family still lives. Her father’s family is in New Mexico. Cindy’s maternal grandma is half Pima Indian; Valenzuela is her Pima last name. Her great grandma was full-blooded Pima Indian, before they split up into the Tohono O’odham nation and others, from the Salt River and from the Opata Indians out of Sonora, Mexico, and Chumash Indians from California.

Her maternal grandfather’s roots are French and German, with the last name of Fass. In the 1800’s, they were some of the original homesteaders on ranch land up near Prescott, AZ. She still has cousins living on that original land. Cindy said the Bureau of Land Management took over some of the land that her great-grandfather built, and is going to make it a national historic place: The Pomerita Ranch. Cindy has been asked if she wants to move up there to live on the land and continue her family’s history there through guided tours. Cindy’s maternal grandma had family in Yuma, AZ, but they traveled all along the Colorado River. They lived on the land near rivers.

Cindy said this (the southwestern region of the U.S.) was first native land, then the land of Mexico, then the French came, and finally, the U.S. The natives were moved to reservations, but many natives live off the reservation or moved off the native land. They were engaged in agricultural endeavors and grew produce for the mining personnel. They ultimately settled in Signal and Prescott, and started the first rodeo. Here are some photographs of Cindy’s relatives on her mother’s side near in Signal/Prescott, AZ (Fass/Valenzuela family tree):
Cindy’s paternal family last name was Griego. Cindy’s dad’s family settled in New Mexico around 1525. They came through Louisiana and Texas into northern New Mexico, where they settled in San Jose, New Mexico. Cindy said they have lived there since the 1600’s. The Santa Fe Trail ran right through their house. The houses were built like a fort, shaped like a U, with a big gate to close off at night. Cindy said oral stories carried down through family generations said the Indians would try to come and steal their children. Cindy’s paternal grandparents owned the store and fed the travelers passing through. Cindy said New Mexico land grants took thousands of acres of her father’s ancestors’ land away from them because they didn’t speak English.

Through three separate DNA tests and through research, Cindy learned her maternal side ancestry goes from 1000-100,000 years ago, because they have a D4H3 variant that comprises
Haplogroup that makes up 0.1% of the population. According to Cindy her ancestors were in the Americas 18,000-250,000 years ago, and are one of the least common. They came from African origins, traveled through Central Asia and over the Bering Strait from Siberia over 50,000 years ago. Cindy said her mom has some German and Spanish blood, and her own make-up is 63% European, 26% of which is Iberian; 20.8% Native American; 9% Middle Eastern/North African; 3% sub-Saharan Africa. Cindy said that Pima/Tohono O'odham or AZ Indians have to be ¼ Native American to qualify as an “Indian”. Cindy feels tied to her native roots through the artifacts she grew up with, the cooking/family recipes, sewing, and oral storytelling traditions. One of the primary family stories that has been passed down orally through generations in her family is that the city of gold is in the Grand Canyon, AZ.

Cindy said the term Chicano for her dates back to the late 1960’s and 1970’s. Her eldest sister was in the Chicano movement, and her old neighbor, Mr. Lujan (originally from L.A.), was an original zoot suiter. Cindy said the zoot suiters were from the 1930’s to 1950’s, and their clothes were creased, with ironed khaki pants, a tie, a vest with a chain hanging off the vest, and shiny pointy shoes. Cindy said after WWII, the Mexicans were trying to be their own thing, and the zoot suiters were trying to identify as Mexican-Americans. They were the first generation, and felt they had to stick together, stand together. There was a lot of discrimination – signs that read “we don’t serve Mexicans here”, or “Mexicans sit outside”. She characterizes the zoot suiters as the first group who were trying to carve out the unique identity of their group (sameness) through their dress.

Cindy said if you didn’t look white, if you looked dark, then you were lower class/third class citizen. Her sister married a pachuco. Cindy said pachucos were from the 1950’s and 60’s. They wore white t-shirts, denim pants, bandanas, had a certain look. Again, this group was trying to carve
out their own identity, which was in large part, represented by the way they dressed. Cindy said the pachucos eventually became cholas/cholos – la raza. Cindy said her oldest nephew Frankie is a cholo (looks like a gangbanger but is not); and her nephew George looks like a white Mexican. Cindy said cholitas and cholos wear certain makeup and clothes and there is a slang required, which ultimately means you are a “true Mexican”. If not, you are considered white. Cindy believes all of these groups would probably be considered as representing Chicano identity.

Cindy met Cesar Chavez – her friends are cousins to him – he is their great uncle. Chavez’ family in Yuma, and he grew up with the farm workers, protests, and community forums. Cindy associates Chavez with the Chicano political movement. Cindy said she believes with regard to the Chicano movement, what it means to be Chicano is to fight for acceptance in a white man’s land – separate but equal. Cindy said Mexicans are the 21st century slaves. Cindy sees a division today between those who don’t speak Spanish or show pride in their Mexican-ness. Cindy does not identify as Chicano, but humorously, calls herself “Chiconky”.

The key to understanding the Chicano experience is to realize the heritage of the people of Mexican ancestry in the United States; it stretches back hundreds of years to include both European and Native American roots. Since the conquest of the New World, persons of Mexican descent have suffered political, social, and economic oppression. It can be said that the Chicano movement has been fermenting since the end of the US-Mexican war in 1848, which resulted in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, according to Rodolfo Acuna. As provisions of the treaty, Mexico was forced to hand over the territory that now constitutes the Southwest United States, the Texas-Mexico border would be moved from Nueces River to the Rio Grande, and thousands of Mexicans became US citizens overnight and
had their property seized. Since that time, Mexicans in the US have confronted discrimination, racism, and exploitation. [Voices of the U.S. Latino Experience.]

Prior to the Chicano movement, there were two distinct trends/movements. One was concerned with making whole the historical experience of the mestizos and indigenous (Chicanos), and the other was focused on obtaining full civil and social equities.¹² During the 1940’s and 1950’s there were many farm workers, mostly in California that were not getting paid or getting paid very little and treated badly. The Chicano movement grew out of an alliance that was formed in the 1960’s by exploited farm workers attempting to create unions against the powerful agricultural and ranching businesses in California and Texas, those attempting to repossess lands taken by Americans after 1848.¹³ During the 1950’s and 1960’s there were many different types of racial problems that were exposed all around the world and especially some parts of the United States. The two distinct focus groups eventually united to become the Chicano movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s. During this time, the Chicano movement was focused on three main points. The first thing the movement was focused on was farm workers. Farm workers were not treated with respect and worked for little next to nothing. The other two main points were focused on the educational system and voting and political rights. The people who migrated in an influx into America, especially the south west, with California as one of the main states, needed to be treated with dignity and respect. The urban working classes and growing student movement joined forces to take back what was once rightfully theirs. The movement dealt with economic struggles in rural areas and urban issues such as police brutality, civil rights violations, low wages inadequate housing and social services, gang warfare, drug abuse, limited education

¹³ Vigil, J.D. op. cit., p 160.
opportunities, and lack of political power. According to Carlos Munoz, the Mexican American population in cities like Los Angeles was increasing and schools began receiving less funding. Thus, “a growing number of Mexican Americans became aware of the inferior education they received”. Overcrowded classrooms, double sessions, a lack of Mexican American teachers, and a general neglect of their schools encouraged pushouts (dropouts). Other issues such as the high unemployment rate and tension between the police and the Mexican American community made Mexican Americans more politically conscious. By 1967, youth in California became involved with groups such as the Mexican American Movement (MAM), the Community Service Organization, and the Young Chicanos for Community action (YCCA). Soon after, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales the leader of the movement organized the National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in Denver, Colorado. The Youth Conference was significant in establishing an identity for the movement. In this conference youth from across the Southwest discussed issues of identity. Thus, “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán” was adopted, establishing cultural nationalism and self-determination as their ideological orientation.

Part of the Chicano movement was a quest for an identity and an affirmation of their brown power and beauty. Adopting the term Chicano was a form of “cultural resistance” because they were reclaiming a derogatory term referring to recently arrived immigrant farmworkers. As Muñoz argues, “Chicano youth radicalism represented a return to the humanistic cultural values of the Mexican working class. This in turn led to the shaping of a nationalist ideology, which stressed the nonwhite indigenous aspects of Mexican working-class culture.” During this time, many young Mexican-American’s were inspired to join the “Raza” in the movement. One of those was Magdaleno Manzanarez Ph.D., a young

15 Munoz, C. op. cit.
college student at the time who joined forces with National Public Radio’s Enfoque Nacional. This radio station gave life and voice to those farmers who went through so much strife in the late 1960’s. Magdaleno had the pleasure of interviewing Cesar E. Chavez on several occasions, along with Dolores Huerta, and Senator Robert Kennedy, who was a great supporter of the Chicano Movement as well. Magdaleno was born in La Costa Grande, Mexico near Acapulco, Mexico. At a young age he received a scholarship for his academia and moved to California and he has been in the U.S. since then. Even though he is Mexican he still considers himself as a Chicano because he has seen firsthand the struggles the Mexicans, Hispanics, and Latinos have had in the U.S.

When interviewing Magdaleno, he provided in depth the history of the Chicano and the ideology of what it means to be a Chicano; he mentioned that it is a learned identity that carries political and cultural awareness. The Chicano also understands the history of the Mexicans, especially after the Mexican-American War when, after the Treaty of Guadalupe, Mexicans were forced to create a new identity so that they could fit in because they became U.S. Citizens. He goes on to explain that people today do not see themselves at Chicano because they did not participate in the movement. They have assimilated completely into the U.S. culture and are slowly forgetting their heritage. The people from the Movement did what they had to do at the time and believed that was enough and did not continue to instill their beliefs and the importance of why you are a Chicano to the next generation. Today’s schools do not implement the Chicano movement into their curriculum, and there are schools in Tucson, Arizona that have banned books having anything to do with the Chicano Movement and have also banned clubs such as MeCha from forming. How can youth today even begin to understand what a Chicano is if they don’t even know who they are?
Magdaleno Manzanarez and Cesar E. Chavez after a rally. (circa 1986)
In March 1979, interviewed farmworkers who were involved in a lettuce strike in Salinas, California. César Chávez had just finished delivering a very inspiring speech.

Here with his grandfather Rumaldo de la Cruz Torre (wearing hat) and Dr. Harold Kirkpatrick in Cholula, Puebla, Mexico (May 1981)

His Grandfather was a Captain in the Mexican Revolution.
Based on the interviews, we learned that some people knew exactly what the Chicano Movement was and some people had no idea what it was about. One of the interviewees, identified as Mary Othon, is a 22-year old female born in Tucson, Arizona, where she was raised. Mary is the daughter of Josie and Marco who are both Hispanic. Mary’s father was born in Mexico and her mother was born in the U.S. Both of her parents are very traditional and both of them speak Spanish fluently. When I asked Mary about the Chicano movement, she did not know what the Chicano movement was about. However, her parents do have an understanding of the Chicano movement and what it was about. Mary identifies as a Mexican American. Mary takes pride in the way she was raised and she is very proud of who she is and is very proud how her family is still very traditional.

The Chicano movement gave people pride in who they were and where they had come from. The Chicano movement also helped the people fight against discrimination. The Chicano movement also helped improve the peoples’ social, political, and financial status and resolved problems they were having. However, according to Gomez-Quinones and Vasquez, the movement ultimately disintegrated like others before it because it was not unified/united under stable, skillful leadership that took into consideration gender and had an organized, class-based constituency. It lacked a national communications network, national goals (critical ideology), disciplined national organizations. The ideology remained rhetorical, and there was a lack of funds to carry out simultaneous national events.\textsuperscript{16} This can be compared to the feminist movement, which was always viewed as a white privileged, educated, middle class women’s movement (think Gloria Steinem) which failed to take under its wing and empower the various sub-segments of the population of feminist women, including women of color,

\textsuperscript{16} Gomez-Quinones, J. and Vazquez, I. op. cit., pp. 335-337.
women of different abilities, women living in poverty, women of a variety of sexual identities and orientations.

The future of the Chicano movement, as in any movement, requires a rethinking of strategy, and an overall inclusiveness of many marginalized segments of the greater whole. Just as our world has become globalized, our movements for political and social change must become global. We have seen this happen in the Middle East and in Asia. Where is the Hispanic/Latin American/Chicano wave? We must seriously reflect on and consider that the reason the Chicano movement was largely male-centric was a result of the impact and vestiges of Colonialism and Catholicization of the Indians. According to Rios, the new Xicanismo recognizes the transnational dimension, as well as the equal importance of gender, class, and sexual orientation to race and ethnicity. It is a multi-dimensional identity, one that recognizes connections and concerns with indigenous movements everywhere, and sees the interconnectedness of things. The difference is while Chicanismo worked outside the system, Xicanismo works both inside and outside the system.¹⁷

¹⁷ Rios, F. op. cit., p. 5.
Bibliography

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