

FEATURE ARTICLES: THEORY, RESEARCH,
POLICY, AND PRACTICE

Searching for Curanderas:¹
A Quest to Revive Chicana/o Studies

Marcos Pizarro
Mexican American Studies
San José State University

Chicana/o Studies has fallen victim to the contradictions of challenging the academic apparatus from within. In this article, I argue that Chicana/o Studies and its scholars are still struggling with the most basic issues introduced in the early 1970s. This is of grave concern because a race war is now being fought in U.S. academia and Chicana/o Studies and its scholars are losing. The heart of this analysis focuses on the possibilities of reinvigorating Chicana/o Studies by creating a new framework that emerges from the unique world-views and systems of knowledge that exist within Chicana/o communities.

Key Words: Chicana/o Studies, education, epistemology

Chicana/o Studies is in a coma. We are alive, no doubt, but besides breathing and being sustained through the feeding tubes of our institutions, it often seems we do little else. This hypercritical statement might take some aback, but our limited effectiveness in making change in the university and for our communities (the original goals of Chicana/o Studies) suggests that we are increasingly simulating the lifeless stag-

Requests for reprints should be sent to Marcos Pizarro, San José State University, One Washington Square, San José, CA 95192–0118. E-mail: pizarro@email.sjsu.edu

¹I chose to use the feminine curanderas to both challenge the gender bias in the Spanish language and to acknowledge that mujeres have done the most for Chicana/o Studies and may be the ones to save us.

nancy of mainstream academia. This mainstream, even when concerned with real-world problems, keeps a comfortable distance from them, often ignoring their concrete and immediate realities, and in so doing allows these problems to remain. This is particularly dangerous for Chicana/o Studies because the field is deemed marginal and second-rate by the mainstream, who are always looking for a way to further trivialize or even pull the plug on Chicana/o Studies departments and programs. In this article, I describe the symptoms of our sickness, but I also make a proposal as to how—through the exploration of Chicana/o knowledge systems—we can initiate a resuscitation that will make the 21st century significantly more intellectually vibrant and transformative than the 20th. The article begins with a historical analysis of Chicana/o Studies and then turns to personal experiences and my own evolving thinking as to how we can revive Chicana/o Studies.

THE BIRTH OF CHICANA/O STUDIES

In the late 1960s, while the country and much of the western world was in turmoil, Chicana/o students in the Southwestern United States realized that they needed to revolutionize their pursuit of educational equality. They understood that the tactics of earlier generations had not produced the changes they deemed so necessary. The tradition of fighting for educational “equality” in the courts had proven unsuccessful as the limits to Chicana/o educational opportunity remained generation after generation: court victories had not affected the ideological structures that, for instance, influenced the thinking and practice of school teachers and administrators. In East Los Angeles, for example, students conducted surveys in the high schools and found concerns amongst the Chicana/o students that mirrored those of earlier generations. These students wanted Chicana/o teachers and counselors, better funding of programs, bilingual education, and among other things, their own inclusion in the curriculum. In looking back at their history to understand how and why they found themselves confined to the same limited educational and employment opportunities as their parents and grandparents, these students saw how much there was to learn from their own history. Unfortunately, they also found that this history had been excluded from the schools. It was struggles like this that led Chicana/o students to demand the creation of Chicana/o Studies programs.²

The young visionaries of the 1960s had the insight to understand that if we look at the world, especially the academic world, through the eyes of Chicanas/os, we might see that world in very distinct ways that can lead to positive changes. They understood that there was not simply one, objective, “American” way of understanding our society and its history. This, I believe, is still the most significant idea in the development of Chicana/o Studies. Not having been exposed to anything but

²See Muñoz (1989) for an extended discussion of this student struggle.

conventional, mainstream schooling, however, these students did not have the tools to develop Chicana/o Studies programs that considered radical and unconventional ways in which the new field could make innovative contributions to the community, the university, and our society. Similarly, the graduate students and professors who would become the first Chicana/o Studies faculty had neither an established understanding of the multiple arenas in which Chicana/o Studies could challenge the university, nor did they have any formal training in making these challenges. That is, the individuals who implemented Chicana/o Studies had been trained for years in the mainstream academic world and had no professional exposure to nontraditional frameworks of approaching academic work.³

This is perhaps the most critical factor involved in stunting the development of Chicana/o Studies. Since its inception, by definition, Chicana/o Studies programs have been developed and fundamentally influenced by the institutions and traditions in which they find themselves and which they simultaneously attempt to challenge. Muñoz (1989) exposed the impact of this reality on the development of Chicana/o Studies programs as he showed that there was little organized effort to discuss what Chicana/o Studies should be. To the contrary, there seemed to be an understanding that Chicana/o Studies was simply Chicanas/os leading intellectual inquiry, so that anywhere there was a class on Chicana/o subject matter, taught by a Chicana/o, there was “Chicana/o Studies.” For this reason, the programs that developed out of the struggles of the 1960s were all very different. Each campus and each group of faculty had a different idea of what Chicana/o Studies is, although many generally focused on the importance of telling Chicana/o history, of Chicana/o identity development, and/or of the preparation of community activists. Still, although individual campuses identified the goals of their programs and curricula, there was no effort to identify the basic principles or frameworks that would define the larger field.⁴ Although there were attempts to employ the internal colonial model as a foundational theory for a time, the theory proved problematic for many and did not facilitate the development of a Chicana/o Studies framework.⁵ All of these factors translated into the disorganized and disjointed development of Chicana/o Studies.

The result of this troubled early history has been that Chicana/o Studies, unlike other disciplines, did not develop its own theories, its own methods, nor its own

³This is still a significant problem today as described in Romero (1997) and Garcia (1996).

⁴We must acknowledge that this is not simply the fault of those involved in the early development of Chicana/o Studies. Rather, it is a product of the exceptional difficulties these individuals faced through their own marginalization and that of Chicana/o Studies in academic institutions. Romero (1997) provided important examples of these difficulties. Garcia (1996) was more critical of Chicana/o scholars (both the elders who have withdrawn from the struggles and the new generation, whom he believed had more middle-class orientation) as he blamed them for abandoning the early goals of Chicana/o Studies.

⁵Later efforts (e.g., Mirande, 1985), although important, similarly did not lead to the development of a Chicana/Chicano Studies framework or paradigm.

pedagogy, and has thus continually depended on traditional academic disciplines very heavily. This has resulted in scores of Chicana/o Studies programs, classes, and writings that are basically traditional approaches to Chicana/o content.⁶ In short, we typically find studies of Chicanas/os rather than Chicana/o Studies (if not already apparent, the difference should soon become clearer).

The struggles facing Chicana/o Studies, however, are amplified when placed in the context of larger societal trends in “explaining” race in the United States. Understanding this also requires a brief historical review.

THE POLITICS OF ACADEMIA: CHOKING CHICANA/O STUDIES

Chicana/o Studies was, like all things, a direct product of its times. As the country was faced with large social movements and protests in the 1960s, left movements turned politics and, in particular, the politics of race on its end. The mainstream had little contemporary experience dealing with massive social protest that questioned the nature of race relations in the United States. Never having been publicly challenged to address the degree and reality of racial injustice in the United States, those in power felt that the issues being raised by the ethnic left had to be addressed in some formal means. The reality, of course, was that with tensions as high and the issues as blatant as they were at that time, something had to give. This resulted in the creation of affirmative action programs, equal opportunity programs, bilingual education, and ethnic studies programs. Although one can argue as to how conscious politicians and other officials were of the limited potential these programs had for creating true social change, it is clear that being embedded in traditional institutions had a significant, negative impact on their development. Changing institutions from within is problematic because the institution itself typically defines how this “change” is sought. Often, these institutions “change” cosmetically, but not substantively in any way. Perhaps even more important, after the implementation of these programs, conservatives quickly composed themselves and were able to *re-define* the politics of race yet again. By validating the need for these early programs and then cleverly using their implementation as an indicator of the changes that had occurred in society and of the mainstream’s readiness to address and confront racial injustice, conservatives regained control over racial thought in this country. This shift led to the dominance of color-blind discourse whereby conservatives described themselves as objective and fair and suggested that anyone who believes in special programs that consider race (e.g., as a criteria for awards) is, in effect, racist. With this development, conservatives began to assault the very logic of the pro-

⁶Garcia (1996) provided a lengthier discussion of the problems.

grams that came about as a result of the 1960s movements. Affirmative action programs, for example, are now fighting for their lives in those places where they still exist. Within the discussion of the racism that conservatives identify as implicit in affirmative action, there is never any recognition of the racial injustice that still dominates the educational, economic, and political scene of the United States in the early part of the 21st Century.⁷

As the assault on affirmative action becomes the logic and rationale for similar attacks on “unnecessary” and “outdated” programs like bilingual education, it is only a matter of time before Ethnic Studies programs become the next point of attack in the war against the racial left: Within the universities of this country, there has long existed a common perception that ethnic studies programs are simply concessions to the unqualified.⁸ In fact, in the late 1990s, there was a call (by members of the Regents of the University of California) to review Ethnic Studies programs (with an implicit assumption that they lack the rigor and benefits of other fields).

Chicana/o academics and intellectuals are, for the most part, unprepared for engaging in the warfare that now awaits us. As mentioned, our preparation has been encumbered by the fact that our history and institutional location has limited our development of the discipline of Chicana/o Studies. Our inculcation in conventional academic models and approaches has kept us from seeing or addressing the fundamental hypocrisies of academia and Chicana/o Studies. This seems as true among the new generation of Chicana/o Studies scholars as it was in the “old guard” that we often critique. For although the “old guard” was often heavily influenced by sexism, essentialism, and identity politics, much of the current generation of scholars has fallen prey to the academic seduction of intellectualizing for the self and for self-importance, of which earlier scholars were much more wary. Although we have made some recent contributions that have allowed us to justify our position within the university to an extent,⁹ as conservatives up the ante in the

⁷Omi and Winant (1994) provided a thorough discussion of the shifts in racial discourse described in this paragraph.

⁸Delgado (1995) provided an excellent counter to this argument as he suggested that the university actually operates on a system that could be best characterized as affirmative action for Whites. He describes how faculty of color have to be better scholars than their White counterparts in order to be successful and that they have to do this with significantly greater demands placed on their time (e.g., through committee work and advising). Both García (1996) and Romero (1997) provided concrete examples of this reality.

⁹The work in the late 1980s and 1990s of Chicana feminists like Anzaldúa (1987), Castillo (1994), and many others invigorated the field of Chicana/Chicano Studies and had a major impact on areas like Women’s Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and other interdisciplinary fields. Despite these contributions, Chicana/Chicano Studies still exists on the fringe of the academic world with little acknowledgment of its importance to the academy at large. I disagree with García’s (1996) critique of Chicana scholars and do not see them as dividing or misrepresenting the reality of the Chicana/Chicano community, although they are seen as a threat by many male Chicano scholars who are often unwilling to see our own complicity in sexism within the Chicana/Chicano community.

war on race, so too must those of us in Chicana/o Studies. In short, our coma seems induced by our comfort and even complacency¹⁰ in our institutions, as the goals of community empowerment that represented our vibrancy in the late 1960s and early 1970s have been forgotten or deemed unrealistic. In short, our future is in serious doubt because, as the politics of race stack up against Chicana/o Studies, these programs and their caretakers have not prepared a counter-offensive.

SIGNS OF LIFE: HOPE FOR THE RECOVERY OF CHICANA/O STUDIES

Although Chicana/o Studies has been significantly limited, one of its greatest strengths is the battle that led to its creation. In the early struggles to create Chicana/o Studies, it was established that Chicana/o Studies should be intimately involved and grounded in the community and should serve as a means toward improving the conditions of Chicanas/os in our communities by seeking a praxis that helps Chicanas/os empower themselves as individuals and as communities.¹¹ These goals reflect my own interests in academia and my research itself. The difficulty of engaging in these efforts, however, has created a significant degree of conflict for me in attempting to achieve my goals. This conflict has helped me arrive at the way in which, I believe, we can prepare for “the coming race war.”¹²

In earlier works, I have described the struggles I have faced in attempting to make both my teaching and research (or even just my location in the university) part of a process through which Chicana/o students and communities can empower themselves. Two important realizations have come from these struggles:

1. Through my schooling and later teaching in the university, I found that Chicana/o students often exist in a world in which their own approach to schooling is in conflict with that of the university. That is, Chicana/o students often want to use the university as a tool toward the empowerment of their communities. This becomes difficult for them as their approach is constantly threatened by the “American” capitalist model of education in which the consumption of “knowledge” as reflected in grades and other materialistic representations of

¹⁰In recent years, many Ethnic Studies programs and departments have made the move to become more formally integrated into the hierarchies of their academic institutions and have directed their curricula to topics that are of interest or acceptable to these administrations. García (1996) discussed this in detail.

¹¹It should be noted that this did not represent a Chicana/Chicano Studies framework because the goal was all that was developed.

¹²This is a phrase coined by Delgado (1995, 1996), who provided a series of examples of the race war being fought in the academy today.

achievement is more important than transformational knowledge or intellectual skills.¹³

2. Through my research and efforts to participate in the empowerment of those with whom I worked, I found that traditions of objectivity and validity in methodology were in fact biased in their slant toward framing knowledge as “fact” rather than as a tool for either attacking and transforming *or* maintaining social relations in this society (which is what knowledge typically becomes in the United States). I struggled to deconstruct the bias in these traditions and worked to develop a new method that challenged the most basic principles underlying mainstream methodology.¹⁴

In coming to these realizations, I was forced to take another critical step. I had to return to the very basic concept of knowledge. I had to question the way in which we construct the meaning of knowledge and knowledge production. In so doing, I was then compelled to acknowledge that the impetus of my critique was nothing less than the conflict between my own understanding of knowledge as a Chicano and that of the mainstream in the United States. As I began to critically think through this idea, I came to see that, in fact, Chicanas/os have a distinct and unique way of organizing and passing on knowledge that has potentially powerful possibilities for our work in the university.¹⁵ The implications of this rather simple, even obvious idea are tremendous. Before turning to these implications, I want to provide examples that have helped me see the unique knowledge systems within Chicana/o communities.

STORIES FROM THE FRONT LINES: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHICANA/O KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

I had just finished struggling through two papers that addressed the realizations just mentioned when I began “teaching” *Chicanas/os in the Educational System* in the fall of 1997. The students and I continually confronted the conflict between the world of Chicanas/os and that of mainstream “America.” There were several occasions that helped us see the distinctions between the systems of knowledge in each of these communities. The first came through a discussion of Freire’s (1970) work.

¹³See Pizarro (1998b) for a complete analysis of Chicana/o student contestations and their implications for curricula and pedagogy in Chicana/o Studies.

¹⁴See Pizarro (1998a) for a critique of methodological traditions and the implications of Chicana/o knowledge systems for Social Justice Research.

¹⁵Other Chicana/o scholars have supported the importance of this idea by suggesting the benefits of a Chicana/o world-view (Mirande 1985; Rochin & Sosa-Riddell, 1992), although none have focused on the concept of knowledge construction in particular.

In many ways, Freire challenged the conventional U.S. system of knowledge as he suggested that “students” should be teachers and that they need to control their own education by way of the unique applications they hope to find for their education (which are grounded in their own location in society). As we were discussing Freire’s work, I tried to make the discussion more real. I placed an apple on a desk in the center of the room. I asked the students to describe and analyze the apple in writing. They spent several minutes looking at the apple: some got up and touched it or smelled it and many (as is almost always the case) sat wondering what it was I wanted them to get from this. After a few minutes, we began to discuss what they had written. The first several students provided a long list of adjectives: red, shiny, smooth, and so on. Just before I was going to ask how Freire would analyze the apple, one of the students said that when he looked at the apple he saw his parents out in the fields suffering in poor working conditions and for low wages as they picked these apples. It was a revelatory moment! There was an educational silence that was followed by many students expressing their anger at not learning how to think critically in school. What all of us also realized was that within our own communities there is knowledge and forms of knowledge production that are embedded in familial and community histories and that provide a completely unique intellectual approach to the subject matter covered (or ignored) in school.

This realization became crystallized through an interaction some of us had with a student from another class. It seemed to all of us that our class sessions just flew by and we usually got out of the classroom at least a couple of minutes late. One day, only a couple of weeks into the semester, one of the students from the next class approached me to ask that we return the chairs to a traditional arrangement after we left the room each day. We had been putting the chairs in a circle. He wanted us to put them into rows, as they “should” be, so that the experiment that was our class would not infringe on his class. We had been discussing Freire and his challenge to educational tradition only minutes before and I was struck by the irony of the student’s request. I began by telling the student that I would ask the students in our class to decide if that was what they wanted to do. I also explained that I thought he should acknowledge the assumptions implicit in his request. I asked if he could see that just as he assumed the chairs in a classroom should be in several neatly arranged rows, someone else, myself in particular, might assume that the chairs should be arranged in a circle. I told him that each day when we came in the classroom, we were frustrated because once again we had to move the chairs into a circle. The student eventually walked away angry and urged again that we simply “put the chairs back!”

The framework under which this student was operating reflects the tradition and even stagnancy of the educational opportunities provided in the university. It also shows that these traditions are seen and understood as common sense and logical and that anything else is problematic. The student’s comments reflect the difficulty of creating transformative spaces for teaching innovation in the university at

large and represent the very limitations inherent in mainstream knowledge construction that have hindered the development of Chicana/o Studies within the institution since its birth. Still, the “natural” way in which the classroom was transformed each day we entered it and the depth of analysis and knowledge production that evolved out of our own Chicana/o-based way of learning left us with hope.

Perhaps the most important example of the unseen knowledge system conflicts that shape the very existence of Chicana/o Studies came last. During the summer before we had this class, a reporter had come by the Chicana/o Studies faculty offices. She explained that she was writing a book on the Chicana/o experience of the region and wanted help in deciding the directions she should take. As she described it, the book would be targeted at those who do not know the community. She felt that, as a White woman, she could help other Whites better understand the Chicana/o community. Her interest in the project apparently stemmed from her work with an immigrant rights group that was attempting to help immigrants gain citizenship (among other things). After a brief conversation that summer, I suggested that she work directly with Chicana/o communities in the region. I hoped that this would give her the chance to possibly help these communities through her work and that it might give her the most insight into these communities.

I remembered her name as I heard it over my voice mail one morning during the next Fall semester. She explained that she had gone to a program on campus (that worked with a large number of Chicanas/os and Mexicanas/Mexicanos trying to get their high school graduate equivalency diplomas) and met one of the students in our class. She heard about our class and wanted to attend. She asked that I contact her about this request. I tried to call her back but was unable to reach her. Later that day, she was sitting in the circle when I got to class. Because she was a reporter and would likely write about the class, I felt the students should be the ones to give her approval to do this. I asked her to discuss her project and the students then asked her questions and made comments about her project. They decided to let her join us because they felt that the class might open her eyes to things she might not otherwise see.

After the students made their decision, I felt it was important to explain some of my thoughts on the subject. I mentioned the insider–outsider debate that has raged in academia. I described the problematic history of outsiders attempting to represent the Chicana/o experience. I focused on the fact that the difficulties these outsiders experienced in representing Chicanas/os were not always the result of ill-intent, but rather that they stemmed from the fact that the outsiders did not share the same life ways and corresponding knowledge systems. I limited my discussion somewhat as we had to turn to other matters in the class.

At the end of the class session, the reporter lingered and asked if I had time to talk. Her body language made it clear that she was upset. I asked her what she thought of the class session. She said that it was “hard.” She explained that she had been objectified and held under a microscope as the students decided her future in

our classroom. She felt that I had set her up to be scrutinized, questioned, and even (at times) attacked. I did not expect her response. I replied, however, that I felt she had set herself up as she did not discuss coming to the class with me before showing up and because she was an outsider entering a tightly knit group whose primary objective was to be critical.

The focus of our conversation became the insider–outsider issue. She wanted to know if I felt that outsiders could *not* understand or write about Chicanas/os. I explained that my position was not that simple, and that I was instead saying that outsiders reporting on the Chicana/o community were engaged in a problematic effort and that they needed to be conscious of the difficulties they faced, just as Chicanas/os do. She pushed to get me to see that she could and should write about Chicanas/os and that it might help the community. Having other commitments, I finally said that we might never understand each other’s perspectives. I added that if she decided to write about the class I hoped she would share any writing with the members of the class and strongly consider their feedback. This is when the conversation got interesting.

She said that she did not think she could do that. After all the time and energy I had invested in our conversation, I was frustrated and angry. I said that she had just given evidence to the very issues I was pointing out. She explained that her writing was very personal and that she felt it was art. She said she did not take to criticism well and did not think she could share her work. I lashed out, explaining that the very students she “observed” that day never had the choices she was making: they did not have the choice to take a year off to write a book, they did not have the choice as to whether or not they were racially objectified in the school, and they had no choice as to how they would be represented in the academic world. I pushed further as I said that this was not an issue of feelings or art but that it was a simple matter of fairness, even justice. In my eyes, sharing her work with the students was, in fact, the only “option.”

This lengthy example is critical because it shows the distinctions that exist in the understandings of knowledge in the Chicana/o community and mainstream “America.” In our class, knowledge was shared, it was constructed within families and personal experiences, and it was always applied to making change for the Chicanas/os we knew were suffering at that time. We tried to do this work as part of these communities, and to do it *with* them, rather than *for* them. Conversely, in the mainstream, knowledge is individually understood and created, it is used for personal benefit and gains (be they intellectual, financial, or other), and it has nothing to do with any sense of justice, as it is “objective” and removed.

The potential significance of the contributions Chicana/o knowledge systems can make to the academy and social life in the United States are not simply found in conflict but in creation as well. In a speaker’s series that I helped facilitate during this same time (*Encuentros in Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies*), we saw many innovative approaches to more traditional subject matter that revealed this possibility. One pre-

sentation in particular exposed the hope of this creative possibility. A graduate student in Sociology, Bagby (1997) conducted a research project on Chicana/o views of environmentalism and presented her preliminary findings in the *Encuentros*.¹⁶ What she discovered is that Chicanas/os have a completely different view of the environment and environmentalism than is included in the mainstream environmental movement. The movement and “Americans” in general tend to view the environment as something removed from their daily lives, as remote regions that are undeveloped and/or threatened by pollution and development. Chicanas/os, however, see the environment as the spaces they occupy everyday. Furthermore, Chicanas/os’ greatest environmental concerns relate to the dangers they encounter in their daily lives. Students who were interviewed for the project were most concerned about hazards that face their communities such as dangerous pesticides and working conditions. With respect to my work, the most interesting revelation from Bagby’s project is that it is the unique experiences, world-views (and eventually knowledge systems) of Chicanas/os that brings these issues to the forefront of the students’ discussions of environmentalism. Their contributions allow us the opportunity to completely reconceptualize environmentalism in ways that may have substantially greater meaning to the vast majority of “Americans.”

This brief tour of my own evolving understanding of the knowledge system conflicts I have witnessed is simply intended to show that they exist. There are certainly other, different, and even more interesting examples, just as there are other aspects of Chicana/o knowledge systems that are not covered here. My stories focus on conflicts in the university, where Chicana/o Studies is most often found, and are only provided to illustrate the challenges facing Chicana/o Studies. There is a great deal of work that needs to be done in developing our understanding of the forces that shape both Chicana/o and mainstream world-views and understandings of knowledge and knowledge production.

Still, as we look at the ways in which the very construction of knowledge in the mainstream of the United States limits our ability to complexly analyze our world, we must accept that knowledge and knowledge production as they are typically understood in this society are oppressive. Not only do they limit the possibility for other world-views and intellectual approaches to expand our understanding, but in the process they also allow the continued oppression of those who are marginalized in this society as their very existence is all but ignored. *For it is impossible to have your existence acknowledged and understood if the very way in which you construct knowledge, and therefore represent your experience, is seen as “wrong.”* A compañero here in San José, José Gonzalez, recently reminded me

¹⁶Interestingly, Bagby is also a White woman. She, however, spent a great deal of time learning about and considering the problematics of being an outsider doing research in the Chicana/o community. She also spent time building trust in the community and then relied on Chicanas/os themselves to shape and define her research.

of the real-world implications of these ideas. In a new version of the Chicana/o Education class, Gonzalez raised the concern that we were developing effective practices to help Chicana/o youth, but that none of them were Chicana/o-specific. Gonzalez suggested that they were generic effective practices and although they helped, he asked what unique approaches we need to take that are designed for Chicana/o youth, in particular from a Chicana/o world-view. He simply said, "My concern is that Chicana/o education should have its own framework developed from scratch." This is the goal that this article strives to begin to meet: to expose the importance of creating new intellectual approaches to our work that are grounded in the world-views and knowledge systems of our own communities and to begin to actually use them. Thus, although this is an intellectual argument, it is one that has significant implications for real-world community issues as well.

THE ROOTS OF OUR KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM CONFLICTS

Although very simple, I believe the realization I have come to through these personal encounters has significant potential for the survival and development of Chicana/o Studies: Chicanas/os have a unique way of thinking and of organizing knowledge that informs every aspect of our lives. This Chicana/o knowledge system should be the foundation for the development of Chicana/o Studies and can help us better fulfill the original and evolving goals of the field through theory, research methods, teaching approaches, and community involvement as we redefine the field and even the purpose of academia itself.

My initial approach to dealing with this issue was to begin an analysis of the landscape of Chicana/o knowledge systems. I now realize, however, that we must first understand why Chicana/o knowledge systems differ from that of the mainstream in the United States. Without first asking why the difference exists, our understanding of the differences is impaired.¹⁷

Our effort to understand why Chicana/o knowledge systems differ from that of the mainstream begins with what is unique about Chicanas/os and the Chicana/o experience. As I see it, the complexity of this uniqueness must encompass both the cultural attributes that make Chicanas/os distinct, but also the sociopolitical elements of the Chicana/o experience.

At the cultural level, the Chicana/o community, as I know it, has a fundamentally different world-view than that of mainstream "America." That is, in the Chicana/o communities in which I have worked or lived, I have found that

¹⁷Pizarro (1998a) revealed this limitation as the initial description of Chicana/o epistemology is not well-developed precisely because it is not preceded by an analysis of the reasons for the unique knowledge systems of Chicanas/os.

Chicanas/os have a different understanding of what it means to be a human being; of the purpose of life itself. In the mainstream of the United States, life is understood and organized through the significance of individuals (as informed by the Protestant roots of the country and their relation to the development of capitalism; see the work of Weber, 1958, for a more developed analysis). Individuals are responsible for their own fate and must seek their own advancement through their personal development (schooling, grades, awards, employment, acquisitions, and success as defined by the images spewed out through the modern media). For Chicanas/os, however, within our communities, life is understood at the familial and community level. Individuals typically seek the love and respect of their families and community members above all else. Life is to be lived for and existence is defined by the family/community as individuals seek strong and caring families and relationships. Success is defined by the contributions that individuals make to their families and the respect they bring to these families. Furthermore, success—educational or employment achievement—is not seen as the product of individual effort, but rather as the direct result of familial and community support and history. The vast majority of traditions, celebrations, and other facets of the Chicana/o culture (including religion) evolve from the unique world-view of Chicanas/os. In turn, this Chicana/o world-view, as already discussed, then affects the way in which Chicanas/os organize and understand knowledge. Knowledge and schooling are simply part of this larger framework, in which Chicanas/os are seeking the advancement and empowerment of families and communities. This is not to say that Chicanas/os are not also influenced and/or conflicted by mainstream “American” culture and knowledge systems. Many, in fact, find the conflict between Chicana/o and “American” world-views so overwhelming that they surrender both the Chicana/o knowledge system and the culture.

Although we can begin to see why Chicana/o knowledge systems differ from “American” knowledge systems at the cultural level, there are other influences at the sociopolitical level that are just as significant. Although in an earlier work I had identified the significance of social justice to the way in which Chicanas/os organize and use knowledge, it was through subsequent conversations with a Puerto Rican colleague, José Anazagasty-Rodriguez, that I was able to understand that this reflects a completely different realm of influence on Chicana/o knowledge systems. In reading my initial writings on Chicana/o knowledge systems, he suggested that the significance of social justice was similarly important in the experience and knowledge systems of other Latinas/os. He went further to propose that these similarities might be a function of the sociopolitical position of Latinas/os in general and minorities as a whole in the United States. As these groups are systematically marginalized in the United States, this marginalization demands a response. The response that I had identified within the Chicana/o community was the pursuit of social justice as reflected in, for example, *corridos* of the 19th century and the discourse of Chicana/o students in the late 20th century. As Anazagasty

suggested, this is not an intrinsic aspect of the Chicana/o culture or experience, but rather the response to and product of our social location in the United States. Although we cannot isolate any aspect of the Chicana/o experience and say that it is wholly intrinsic to the culture (especially because many of these basic tenets are the product of and response to Spanish colonization), the significance of social justice to Chicana/o communities seems tightly bound to the sociopolitical climate in the United States. Thus, although there are aspects of Chicana/o knowledge systems that appear to reflect the culture itself, many represent our response to oppression.¹⁸ Again, we must keep in mind that the sociopolitical forces that inform Chicana/o knowledge systems and world-views are multiple and shifting, and thus not uniform for all Chicana/o communities.

Overall, in thinking about the roots of the uniqueness of Chicana/o knowledge systems, we must seek to understand the complexity of the forces at work and the blurred lines that exist between the cultural and sociopolitical influences. In fact, further study might help us create new means of categorizing and understanding Chicana/o knowledge systems and their influences. We can understand this need more clearly through several examples. Returning to the movements of the 1960s, as many as 10,000 Chicanas/os walked out of schools in East Los Angeles in the spring of 1968 (Muñoz, 1989). They were protesting the inadequate education Chicana/o youth received in their schools. The students criticized an irrelevant curriculum, inadequate resources, and racist teachers and counselors. Chicanas/os in the 1960s sought an education (knowledge) that reflected their experiences and was relevant to their efforts to succeed and improve the conditions of their communities. In so doing, they created new knowledge and understandings about who they were that were strongly influenced by the cultural aspects of community that shaped their unique knowledge systems, as well as their obvious resistance to their sociopolitical position.

In the 1990s, this same approach was prevalent among Chicana/o students. In 1993, a group of Chicana/o students at the University of California Los Angeles, frustrated with the university's double talk, began a hunger strike. They too sought the opportunity to have the curriculum reflect the Chicana/o history of struggle and to apply that history to their interests in improving the appalling conditions faced by many Chicanas/os in the Los Angeles area. Through the re-creation of their history, they wanted to develop new knowledge that reflected the strength of their in-

¹⁸Anazagasty-Rodriguez made one last important comment on my work on Chicana/Chicano systems of knowledge. He explained that because aspects of our own knowledge systems are responses to a problematic mainstream culture and its system of knowledge-production, we must be critical of our own knowledge systems. Chicana feminists, for example, have shown us that Chicana/Chicano culture is heavily influenced by a long history of sexism. It is only by being as critical of our own knowledge systems as we are of those of the mainstream that we can develop empowering possibilities that move us beyond simple glorification of a past that is laden with problematics (which is commonly done in the unquestioning idolization of the Chicana/Chicano indigenous past).

digenous roots. With nothing to gain for themselves as individuals, this small community of Chicanas/os endangered their long-term health by going 14 days without food, until the university made significant steps toward creating a strong Chicana/o Studies emphasis (Acuña, 1996). Again, the role of culture and sociopolitical position are equally important, as the students focused both on the importance of their cultural roots and the ways in which those in power had served to oppress their communities.

Burciaga (1993) provided perhaps the best example of the uniqueness of the Chicana/o world-view that informs our knowledge systems and of the complexity of forces influencing its formation. After deciding to paint a mural at Stanford University dedicated to Chicana/o heroes, he turned the task of identifying these heroes over to students and activists. Among the lists of heroes/heroines were “mothers, fathers, grandparents, Vietnam veterans, *braceros*, *campesinos*, and *pachucos*.” The mural’s dedication, submitted as the heroes of one student, depict Chicana/o world-views best, as he explains that his heroes are “all the people who died, scrubbed floors, wept, and fought so that I could be here at Stanford” (Burciaga, 1993, p. 95). The significance of family and community reflects the unique world-view and knowledge construction of Chicanas/os, while at the same time the dramatic influence of the oppressed sociopolitical position of Chicanas/os also plays a critical role. Further evidence of this relation is increasingly seen in the work of Chicana/o scholars. Curry Rodriguez (1997), for example, framed her research by always asking if she would be comfortable if her mother was a “participant” in the project. By relying on the cultural forces that influence her own construction of knowledge, she reconceptualized how scholars should develop, conduct, and write about research, and thus responds to the injustice that results from the power dimensions shaping mainstream approaches to intellectual inquiry.

Finally, Valenzuela (1999) captured many of these ideas in her powerful analysis of the forces at work in the schooling of Chicana/o youth in one Texas high school. By exposing the “subtractive schooling” process these youth go through, Valenzuela highlighted the strengths that Chicanas/os bring into the schools that so often go ignored. Valenzuela emphasized the unique understanding of “*educación*” in Chicana/o and Mexicana/Mexicano communities that she defined as, “the family’s role of inculcating in children a sense of moral, social, and personal responsibility [that] serves as the foundation for all other learning” (p. 23). This definition could be expanded to include each of the ideas discussed in these last two sections of the article. Valenzuela’s analysis is critical because it allows us to attach a specific construct within the Chicana/o community (*educación* and the goal of raising children *quienes son bien educadas/os*) to this larger analysis of the unique knowledge systems in Chicana/o communities.

Together, these examples help us see that in the Chicana/o culture, knowledge is not seen as objective or linear, and that it is not passed on through “legitimate” histories but through the elders who represent our cultural legacy. Thus, Chicana/o

culture itself (and the Chicana/o world-view that emerges from and reflects this culture) is central to a unique, Chicana/o knowledge system. We must be careful, however, not to confine the definition of both Chicana/o culture and knowledge systems in any narrow way, as they are also shaped by multiple and shifting factors such as class, gender, and community history.¹⁹ Furthermore, the examples also reveal the complex way in which power relationships and the oppression of Chicanas/os simultaneously influences the world-view and knowledge systems of Chicanas/os and serves as a critical catalyst in Chicana/o resistance.

In seeking to identify and understand the landscape of Chicana/o world-views and knowledge systems, we must realize that their uniqueness is a product of both the culture itself and the way in which Chicanas/os are influenced by the larger society at a sociopolitical level, particularly because Chicanas/os are marginalized in this country. By initiating an analysis of the reasons why Chicana/o knowledge systems differ from that of the mainstream in the United States, I have been able to create a preliminary framework to aid in the process of identifying the components of the Chicana/o knowledge systems that were discussed earlier. Future work must focus on *understanding the complexity of and diversity within Chicana/o knowledge systems*.

CONCLUSIONS: TOWARD A CHICANA/O STUDIES PARADIGM

Although Chicana/o Studies is not yet at the stage where we can fully discuss the nature of Chicana/o knowledge systems and world-views, if Chicana/o Studies scholars can take up the project of understanding and identifying Chicana/o knowledge systems, we can prepare ourselves for the battles that now face us in

¹⁹We can, for example, argue either that there are distinctions between working-class and middle/upper-class Chicana/o knowledge systems *or* that some middle/upper-middle Chicanas/os have surrendered to and adopted the mainstream knowledge systems of the United States. Regardless, there are important connections between class and systems of knowledge that must eventually be considered. Given the focus of this article, however, I refer to working-class Chicana/o knowledge systems exclusively. In addition, not only are there many nuances to Chicana/o knowledge systems that must be addressed in future works, there are also a number of critical Chicana/o characteristics that inform them (e.g., spirituality, duality, language, work ethic, etc.) and that must be integrated into a more comprehensive model. Perhaps most important to this model will be an analysis of gender and sexism within Chicana/o culture and its link to Chicana/o knowledge systems. The woman is central to the survival and strength of Chicanas/os in the United States, but at the same time, Chicanas face a significant degree of sexism within their own communities. This must be confronted as we move toward a more holistic model of Chicana/o epistemology and also attempt to translate it into methodology and empowerment. Although there is a diversity to Chicana/o culture and knowledge systems that cannot be ignored, the examples I have provided in this text range from East Los Angeles to rural Washington and from poor public schools to large public universities to small, elite, private universities.

fighting for our survival in the academy. This is an urgent matter because although we have always understood that the Chicana/o world-view is distinct from the “American” world-view, we have not explored or identified the basic tenets of and influences on Chicana/o knowledge systems. There is a significant body of work that has analyzed the uniqueness of Chicana/o culture and the multiple forces that have influenced both Chicana/o culture and a Chicana/o world-view (Chicana feminists are among those who have done excellent work in this area; see Anzaldúa, 1987; Castillo, 1994; Trujillo, 1998, for examples). Although much of this work has important implications for our understanding of Chicana/o knowledge systems, little has been done to deconstruct these knowledge systems and both their exclusion from Chicana/o Studies teaching and the potential power they can add to the development of Chicana/o Studies.

Our shortcoming in Chicana/o Studies is simply that we have never seriously and concretely met our responsibility for defining Chicana/o Studies as a unique intellectual approach. This is reflected in the simple fact that most of us, when we do define Chicana/o Studies, do so by focusing on its principles as a teaching field. We have never struggled to define Chicana/o Studies as a research field. Furthermore, Chicana/o Studies teaching and research are both typically placed into this classification simply by virtue of their content and not by approach. Creating a Chicana/o Studies approach to intellectual work must begin with a careful analysis of knowledge-production in Chicana/o communities as well as an analysis of Chicana/o intellectual history.²⁰

As we initiate this analysis, we can make the critical point that our knowledge systems and world-views can offer insights into the problems facing our society that are not otherwise attainable because of the simple reality that it is all but impossible for anyone to see things from outside of their world-view (particularly those in the mainstream, due to their privilege and power). This was already made clear in the discussion of Chicanas/os and environmentalism, as one small study suggested the possibility for completely reconceptualizing the environmental movement in ways that could improve the lives of those who are currently suffering. Furthermore, the insights gained from this analysis can provide a means for re-defining affirmative action and its rationale—by revealing the need for alternative frameworks and for individuals who can implement them—and, therefore, reconstructing what constitutes “qualified.”

Simultaneously, the exploration of Chicana/o knowledge systems and world-views can provide the framework for re-thinking the field of Chicana/o Studies and better addressing some of the original goals of the field. This can lead to the development of a paradigm and theories in Chicana/o Studies that can then

²⁰As early as 1968, Romano urged us to develop an understanding of Chicana/o intellectual history, which remains one of the most urgent avenues for exploration within Chicana/o Studies.

inform the research and teaching methods as well as community linkages that are critical to our work.

By outlining the influences on and uniqueness of Chicana/o knowledge systems, I hope to initiate this process. A Chicana/o paradigm must begin with the understanding that Chicanas/os have, over the course of thousands of years, developed unique world-views and knowledge systems that challenge those of the mainstream in the United States. The paradigm must further explain that the construct of power is at the heart of the Chicana/o experience as it determines not only the social location of the Chicana/o, but shapes the very way in which a Chicana/o world-view and Chicana/o knowledge production develop, as well as the multiple and shifting dynamics of these processes (through factors such as community history, class, and gender). This paradigm will then allow us to develop new theories that explain the Chicana/o experience at a number of different levels (culturally, economically, educationally, politically, socially, etc.) and within a variety of arenas (literature, music, theater, and even the sciences). Simultaneously, this paradigm will provide the foundation upon which to develop research and teaching methods that, rather than representing the conflict between Chicana/o and mainstream knowledge systems, reflect the unique world-view and means of knowledge production of the community. This, in turn, will allow the field of Chicana/o Studies to grow and re-define itself as it is finally able to effectively meet its original goals of working *for* and *with* Chicana/o communities in efforts at empowerment. *Central to this project is the recognition that we cannot effectively use the university as a tool to assist in the empowerment of our communities if we operate within these institutions from frameworks that not only ignore the unique world-views of our communities, but in so doing aid in the subjugation of these communities.* Finally, although it will undoubtedly be contested, this effort will demand the attention of the larger academy and will provide an intellectual rationale for the validity, necessity, and even holistic contributions that Chicana/o Studies can offer other fields.

If we do not begin to address the basic unanswered questions that face Chicana/o Studies, we will remain a field without a strong foundation or framework for our intellectual analyses and community work. Without this foundation, not only will our efforts to liberate our own communities remain limited, but we will be standing targets for the conservatives who are already preparing for a comprehensive attack on Ethnic Studies. The future of Chicana/o Studies, and perhaps our communities as well, depends on a return to our own unique world-views and forms of knowledge production.

For this reason, this article, in its title, calls for the help of curanderas. These traditional healers rely only on the knowledge and wisdom passed on to them through indigenous knowledge systems that are thousands of years old. The power of their wisdom is so great that even the mainstream medical world has begun to take note of their practices. Chicana/o Studies needs to learn from curanderas and, in many ways, we need to look for and mentor a new generation

of intellectual healers—a curandera intellegentsia—who are not constrained by the oppressive conventions of academia. In my latest work with *MAESTR@S*, an Institute designed to cultivate the educational liberation of Raza communities, we are striving to do exactly this as we have begun to develop a way of looking at the world that is grounded in Chicana/o knowledge systems and ways of living and that relies on them in the development of new learning paths. What we have found is that this must become our mission itself and whatever specific educational interests we have, in the end, are only steps toward that ultimate goal.

Finally, this quest demands continual self-critique. We must look for the shortcomings in Chicana/o world-views and knowledge systems as well as the strengths. We must strive to understand the diversity within our culture and knowledge systems and avoid trying to create one model that simply cannot apply to all of us. In short, we must seek a wisdom that is informed by our traditions and the power they bring, as well as by the limits they may impose.

FINAL NOTE: A CALL TO ACTION

I have chosen this article as a way of carefully analyzing the struggles faced by Chicana/o Studies today. Although this is a necessary first step, more important than the writing and the reading of this analysis is acting on it. As scholars we must begin to create paths of engaging in *living* the intellectual discussions we have been *talking*. My work with raza educators in *MAESTR@S* has shown me this clearly, as this group of educators and their needs have pushed my own work significantly and demanded more complex and grounded analyses. Similarly, Chicana/o Studies demands that we create paths for true action on our ideas, getting away from simply presenting those ideas in 15-min segments at annual meetings. We have to change the nature of our practice as intellectuals because the university will not do that for us. The struggle for a Chicana/o Studies that is more engaged in our communities and in the systems of knowledge that gave birth to our intellectual work requires that we act—not for ourselves as individuals in the academy and not for our own promotion but for our families, our communities and those who each day are faced with a “subtractive schooling” that physically and psychologically assaults them!

REFERENCES

- Acuña, R. (1996). *Anything but Mexican: Chicanos in contemporary Los Angeles*. New York: Verso.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La frontera: The new Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute.
- Bagby, K. (1997, October). *La raza y la naturaleza: Chicano/Latino discourses on the environment*. Presentation at the Encuentros in Chicana/Chicano and Latina/Latino Studies Speakers Series, Washington State University, Pullman, WA.
- Burciaga, J. A. (1993). *Drink cultura: Chicanoismo*. Santa Barbara, CA: Joshua Odell Editions.

- Castillo, A. (1994). *Massacre of the dreamers: Essays on xicanisma*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Curry Rodriguez, J. (1997, October). *Oral history, self inscription, and mobility: Dilemmas and discoveries of research labor*. Presentation at the Encuentros in Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies Speakers Series, Washington State University, Pullman, WA.
- Delgado, R. (1995). *The Rodrigo chronicles: Conversations about America and race*. New York: New York University Press.
- Delgado, R. (1996). *The coming race war? And other apocalyptic tales of America after affirmative action and welfare*. New York: New York University Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- García, I. (1996). Juncture in the road: Chicano studies since "El Plan de Santa Barbara." In D. Maciel & I. Ortiz (Eds.), *Chicanas/Chicanos at the crossroads: Social, economic, and political change* (pp. 181–203). Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Mirande, A. (1985). *The Chicano experience: An alternative perspective*. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Muñoz, C. (1989). *Youth, identity, power: The Chicano movement*. New York: Verso.
- Omi, M., & Winant, H. (1994). *Racial formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York: Routledge.
- Pizarro, M. (1998a). Contesting dehumanization: Chicana/o spiritualization, revolutionary possibility, and the curriculum. *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 23, 55–76.
- Pizarro, M. (1998b). "Chicana/o power!": Epistemology and methodology for social justice and empowerment in Chicana/o communities. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11, 57–80.
- Rochin, R., & Sosa-Riddell, A. (1992). Chicano studies in a pluralistic society: Contributing to multiculturalism. *The Bilingual Review/La Revista Bilingüe*, 17, 132–142.
- Romano, O. (1968). The anthropology and sociology of Mexican-Americans: The distortion of Mexican-American history. *El Grito*, 2, 13–26.
- Romero, R. (1997). Troublemakers. In W. Penn (Ed.), *As we are now: Mixblood essays on race and identity* (pp. 199–218). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Trujillo, C. (1998). *Living Chicana theory*. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.–Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Weber, M. (1958). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. New York: Scribner's.