

The Chicano Movement and the Latino/Native American Connection

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Description

This piece takes a brief look at the historical and current intersections of Latino and Native American identity in the United States.

Keywords

- Chicano
- NAFTA
- Aztlan
- *Reconquista*
- Mexican Cession

Key Points

- “Latino” is an ethnic group overlapping with many racial identities, including Native American
- The 20th century Chicano Movement popularized Latino celebration of indigenous heritage
- Since the mid-1990s, the number of Latinos in the US identifying as Native American has tripled
- *Reconquista* has caused some level of controversy between Chicano activists and Native American tribes

The Latino ethnic group is a convergence of people of many races and ethnicities, including the descendants of white European settlers, enslaved black Africans, Asian laborers of various ethnicities, and native peoples of Central and South America. Given this fact, it is perhaps not surprising that there should be rather strong connections between Native Americans, broadly defined as native peoples of North and South America, and Latinos, despite the fact that they are often considered separate from each other in everyday discourse. As this shared history has been more widely recognized and accepted by the Latino population, there has been an increasing push to openly identify with one's indigenous roots.

Perhaps the first widespread acceptance of this ideology came from the Chicano Movement that began to take hold after World War II. This was a movement primarily centered around the relationship between Mexican Americans and the white American majority,

“addressing issues such as farm workers’ rights, land tenure, educational reform, political representation, the war in Vietnam, and ‘police brutality’” (Escobar). Leaders of the Chicano Movement also sought to undo the various stereotypes and stigmata associated with Mexican culture, including open acknowledgement and celebration of indigenous heritage. In fact, the word “Chicano” itself is thought to be derived from a tribal demonym for people in central Mexico, which had previously been used as a sort of anti-immigrant slur. However, “during the late 1950s the meaning of “Chicano” largely transformed from a negative signifier of ‘Mexican immigrant’ into a positive self-identifier of ‘U.S. natives of mexicano descent’” (Carrasco).



Source: http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/Chicanomovement_part1.htm

Although the Chicano movement itself was largely targeted specifically toward Mexican Americans, the general ideology behind the movement began to persuade Latinos, both native-

born and immigrants, of various national and ethnic identities, to embrace their indigenous heritage over time. In the wake of the 2010 US Census, the New York Times reported that “the number of Amerindians – a blanket term for indigenous people of the Americas, North and South – who also identify themselves as Hispanic has tripled since 2000, to 1.2 million from 400,000” (Decker). In part, these changing numbers are due to an influx of immigrants from Mexico and Central America since the approval of NAFTA in 1994, but it also represents a widespread rejection of white identity, considered normative in the United States, in favor of one that recognized a previously stigmatized and marginalized history.



Source: <http://www.tlaxcala.tlax.com/cgi-bin/mostrarImagen.pl?galeria=60&imagen=100>

Unfortunately this ideology has also caused tension at times between Chicanos and Native American tribes in the United States. Most of this tension stems from a sort of nationalist offshoot of the Chicano movement, which centered around a place called Aztlán being the place

of origin of Mexican civilization. Just as Jewish Zionists advocated for the repopulation of Israel by the Jewish diaspora, some Chicanos advocated for what they called *Reconquista*, the repossession of the Mexican Cession, lands ceded to the US after the Mexican-American War, currently comprising a huge area of the southwestern United States. However, several Native American tribes, particularly those who have reservations in the area, continue to consider the same regions their historical homeland and insist on their own right to those lands. Thus, ironically, an attempt to embrace common heritage and history between Chicanos and Native Americans eventually led to disputes and tension between the two.

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