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The Future of Chicano/a Studies: A Neophyte Reflection
By Felix Medina, Jr.

When I was asked to do this panel I thought about the theme, “the Past, Present, and Future of Chicano/a Studies.” As I thought about it more, I thought to myself, well what is the future of Chicano/a Studies? I had to think about this because soon, hopefully, I will be leaving Michigan State University with a Chicano/Latino Studies PhD, and I have to start thinking about getting a job. And with what has been transpiring in Arizona, the future is looking unfavorable for me and possibly other Chicano Studies doctoral candidates. So it was difficult not to ask, “What is the future of Chicano/a Studies?”

To try to answer the question I looked to *El Plan de Santa Barbara*, Rodolfo Acuña’s *The Making of Chicano/a Studies: In the Trenches of Academe* (2011), *America Libre: A Novel of a National Nightmare* by Raul Ramos y Sanchez, and I interviewed a few people ranging from other Chicano/a Studies doctoral candidates, an undergraduate who minored in Chicano/Latino Studies and graduated recently, and a former professor of Chicano/a Studies. My thoughts, possibly as a literature person, first drifted to *America Libre*, a fictional look at Mexican-American and American relations, where after a series of events the U.S. government cracks down on us by building walls around us in the same American states we live in, essentially herding us into interment camps, referred to as “Quarantine Zones” in the novel. This eventually leads to a guerilla style revolt led by the protagonists, Manolo Suarez, and Josefina Herrera. What occurred in *America Libre* intrigued me, because in my mind, due to the current climate in Arizona (and in the U.S. in general) this almost seemed inevitable. I imagined the people of the sun taking up arms in response to the dissolution of Chicano/a Studies; and I envisioned the activist scholars amongst their ranks; finally, instead of talking and lecturing about revolution we would create revolution, but as one of my colleagues who read the same book pointed out, “it would suck if that happened, because [as history has taught us] we would be the first ones they’d come kill.” “We,” being the intellectuals, the Chicano Studies intelligentsia. Once I was able to pull myself away from the not-so imaginary world of *America Libre*, I made an attempt to look into the past in order to try to look into the future of Chicano/a Studies, by scouring through *El Plan de Santa Barbara*.

However I made a mistake going into the *El Plan de Santa Barbara*, thinking it the end all be all for how to institute and run a Chicano/a Studies program or department, but as Dr. Acuña pointed out in *The Making of Chicano Studies*, it is an important document, but at the time of its inception, there were other “departments, institutes, centers, and other models ready to be launched in the fall of 1969. So what happened [in the *Plan*] would not change what had been set in stone” (Acuña 59). Acuña cites Reynaldo Macias who states that it was important because it was printed; it was “an authoritative voice on the desires of the Chicano Movement . . . with regard to higher education . . . [and it] was reporting on what was being done in different institutions in the state” (59). Ultimately the Plan de Santa Barbara “is a manifesto that follows the pattern of a long line of revolutionary manifestos in Mexican history. The influence of Juan Gomez-Quiñones, trained as a Mexican historian, is all over the document – the mixing of Spanish and English and allusions to Mexican history, [and] the philosophical tone.” (Acuña 60). Of relevance, Acuña also writes that “It is not so much what the document says, but how it says it. It does not make students feel stupid but rather feel that they are somebody – *quesi se puede*”

(60). This statement would also become the theme of the interviews I conducted, but it also helped me look at the *Plan* not only as a “how to,” for the creation and sustainability of Chicano Studies, but a “how to,” for the inspiration of those who have the largest stake in Chicano Studies, the students and the *comunidad*.

Across many Chicano/a Studies programs, students fight to keep the structure that was laid out by the *Plan*, but universities now more than ever seem to use “professionalization” as a means to dismantle Chicano Studies, and restructure it in their own image, conversely the *Plan* “proposes a process to control the structure and to establish autonomy within the structure” (Acuña 62). As a professor told me, there is nothing wrong with professionalizing our programs, however “professionalization” seems to become another way for the co-optation of Chicano/a Studies programs, the same is done when universities try to pigeon hole us under Ethnic Studies or Latino Studies, it’s simply another way to dismantle Chicano/a Studies and to try to keep us from demanding more classes, teaching lines, and funding. DEMANDING these things, in their eyes is considered disruptive; we’re supposed to ask.

Is there a future for Chicano/a Studies without *El Plan de Santa Barbara*? There is, there has to be, but it lies with us and other up and coming Chicano/a scholars, just as much as it does with the students, some of whom can walk away feeling betrayed or weary after struggling to establish or keep a program. As was the case with a recent Michigan State University graduate who was involved in the struggle to sustain the structure (based on the *Plan*) of the Chicano/Latino Studies program, but who after having lost the struggle felt drained.

When asked to give her thoughts on the future of Chicano/a Studies, she had a bleak outlook:

“It’s going to be Hispanic and if not it will be Latino for sure. The premise of Chicano Studies having a strong connection to the community, is being lost, it’s taking away a lot of that notion that a radical program like ours should have. I think the future of Chicano studies is pretty sad.”

What she verbalized throughout her interview was essentially that the Chicano/Latino Studies program along with all other established Chicano/a Studies programs or departments were going to eventually be co-opted by the university. However dismal her view though, she did walk away with the acknowledgement that what occurred at MSU was a microcosm (echoing a similar statement by Acuña) for what she was experiencing now as an employee for a non-profit organization, where she has ran into a few of those people who had opposed her and the other undergraduates during their struggle. She also sees herself and the non-profit organization kowtowing to corporations for funding, something she can’t see herself doing for long, due in no small part to ideologies the Chicano/Latino Studies program bred in her. This undergraduate experienced the impact of what the *Plan* stated, that: “It is all too easy for programs to be co-opted, for them to function as buffers of denial and agencies of control . . .” (14), and her response to this, a sentiment felt by others in that struggle as well, is in that “case better no program at all” (14). In essence we are facing the removal of programs or the co-optation of programs, or what the aforementioned professor referred to as “Chicano Studies programs on paper.” That is to say, that they are programs that are “left alone [by university administration] because they don’t demand more help for students.” However depending on the direction that some of us lean, “Chicano Studies programs on paper” offer a bright future, because it means we might have jobs, as long as we raze the *Plan* from the architecture of Chicano/a Studies.

That being said, I had to ask the interviewees the role of NACCS in the future of Chicano/a Studies, and there seemed to be a general consensus that this is another space where

we need number one: unity, and number two: we should reevaluate our vision. One of the graduate students put it well when she said, “I remember protests, we should do that again. We shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that if we want alternate visions, it should provide support for people who are really into Chicano studies you can’t really overestimate the power of those collective experiences. It can be professional development but it has to support undergraduates and [we should ask ourselves] what’s our vision for the United States . . . ?”

Another graduate had a parallel sentiment, saying that “we need unity, key issues need to be addressed, some of them have been addressed over and over again, every 10 years we talk about going back to the original goals of the *Plan* or Chicano Studies . . . but there is some distance amongst [Chicano/a scholars], another issue might be that we define community differently.” Both of these interviewees acknowledge the fact that there are alternate and conflicting visions for Chicano/a Studies, there does not seem to be any disdain toward professionalization, but there is a sense of caution. There is a recognition that it can be difficult to redress the issues with Chicano/a Studies when we arrive at the academy because there is pressure for us to get and keep jobs, by publishing articles, books, presenting papers at conferences, and doing intensive research, all while trying to teach, and we can’t really make excuses to the university for long, because as Acuña has made explicit throughout his book, the university is not fair. Which in turn made me wonder, how was Acuña able to do it? How or maybe better yet why is he still doing it at eighty years of age? In a series of blog posts he wrote for *Aztlan Reads*(www.aztlanreads.com), he addresses this very question, “as a member of a community – a husband, father, grandfather, and teacher – I have no choice but to fight. The bottom line is that I care about the kind of world we leave behind.”

Currently there are a number of Chicano/a Studies doctoral candidates entering this world soon, and they’ll be the ones carrying on the fight alongside those who continue to do so presently, and what they have to say is equally important. Such as:

Graduate Student 1:

“The future of Chicano studies is complex, you have a lot of different camps . . . we have to go back to the original goal about community. And us in the academic world, sometimes we forget about that, to focus on our own personal careers . . . the plan really focuses on action research and community . . . we’ve been talking about Chicano studies for ages and we always say we need to go back to the original function . . . but what happens is there is a focus on individual careers or a focus on this idea of professionalism”

Graduate Student 2:

“I think it’s going to come down to a struggle between people that want to have Chicano Studies the way it should be, with more community [involvement], versus personal interest . . . The field is in decline, and the field is going to die if nobody takes charge of it.”

Graduate Student 3:

“Chicano Studies creates a space where they [the students] can talk about racial issues without the condemnation of white people. The best part of Chicano/Latino Studies [at MSU] was that it was a place where people could go and be validated for being Chicano or Latino, we’d give them a hand up. If someone said I think it’s racist that my professor said “X” today, ninety-nine percent of the time we would agree.

Chicano Studies has to have an ideological vision, if it’s just about promoting anything and everything that’s brown, it’s just going to end up promoting the status quo. How we run Chicano Studies programs should be a representation of our vision of what Chicano Studies should be on a bigger scale.

Incremental change has to be made in the mean time, because we live in the mean time. Human life is so precious. But how can we plan to push things farther, the systems response in Arizona is desperation. They want to do to Chicanos what they did in the forties and the fifties and make sure that we . . . know our place, feel bad about being Mexican, that we learn that we should feel lucky for having this job in the fields.”

Graduate Student 4:

“. . . There is a basic difference between the stated outcome of Chicano Studies and higher education in general, our goal is not to simply produce workers to educate young people to become part of the workforce, Chicano Studies is part of centuries of struggle, that struggle is to keep alive Mesoamerican culture, to keep alive our connection to the land, our right to be here, to be individuals, to think and worship in the ways that we want to or that are unique to our people. It’s about cultural reaffirmation, by necessity colonized people must return to history . . . it cannot simply boil down to personal development, there has to be more. Western civilization education is about indoctrination. Chicano Studies has to [address] this in the future. Either we are a subset of the U.S., a minority, or we are a distinct sovereign people, there can’t be an in between, but we have to decide quickly, and if we decide to be a subset then we need to shut the fuck up, and assimilate, but if we’re more than that we need to do exactly the opposite.

[The MSU president] said Chicano studies doesn’t belong to you it belongs to the university. That is a statement I would categorically reject. Chicano studies does not belong to you, it belongs to the people in the classes, the people who teach it, it belongs to the community, it does not belong to the university, and when it does belong to the university, it is not Chicano Studies, it’s something else, I don’t care what they call it. Are we going to continue to make it what it’s suppose to be, what it has been or are we going to allow a corporate takeover of our own culture and identity, I’m not down with that, I’m not getting a scan code.”

Their responses to my question show that we all care about the future regardless of our conflicting visions or personal stake in our discipline, but I think it is imperative to figure out what type of Chicano studies we want to leave behind.

Having done this, was I any closer to figuring out the future of Chicano studies? No, I wasn’t, and I didn’t, but I was definitely enlightened about the continuing struggle against the apparatus of universities as they continue to slowly but surely, wane away at the disruptive and communal spirit of Chicano/a Studies, in the supposed pursuit of professionalization. As to what I would like to personally see for the future of Chicano/a studies? Once again I have to turn to Acuña to be reminded me that “Chicana/o Studies has survived because of the sacrifices of Chicana/o and Latina/o students, not because of the vision of the academy” (191). I went into this looking into the past, and possible future by asking others and myself in the present, what is the future of Chicano/a Studies? But I think that a *compañera* in the program put it best, when she said, “A better question would have been: What should be our vision for Chicano studies? What do we want to happen? We don’t want to let the future happen to us.”

Afterthoughts About the NACCS Conference In Relation to Professionalization and El Plan

Having been given the opportunity at NACCS to present this paper, it was not only my first time presenting, but also my first time attending. Attending NACCS along with some of the workshops I noticed more and more the existing divide that I refer to in this paper, that is the divide between reformists and those of us who believe in the collective and activist spirit of *El Plan*. The reformists tend to think that they and the administrations know what is best for Chicano/a Studies programs, and that is professionalization at the sacrifice of a program

practicing collectivity. There is room to work together to help realize professionalization, but it should not disavow the students who are the *comunidad* that we are there to serve the most and we should not allow ourselves to simply become puppets or carbon copies of the administrations. Unfortunately most reformists want to follow the authoritarian model that we have had to struggle with before and since the inception of Chicano/a Studies. However there are larger issues to address aside from the ideological approach to Chicano Studies programs, such as the very real and present day occurrences in Arizona. I would like to think that all of us, regardless of which side of the line in the sand we are on, realize what is occurring out there is wrong, and we should either band together to protect what is ours, or continue working separately until that issue is resolved. However I understand it is difficult to concern ourselves with struggles outside our campuses, but at the moment we have a common enemy. Once that battle is won, both reformists and the more “radical” minded should come together to work out how we should approach incorporating professionalization and collectivity into our programs, as opposed to willingly co-operating and gifting our very identity and soul to the top down model of patriarchal authoritarianism that many of us say we are against.

C/S

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