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## Inside the Dream Factory of Chicana/o Studies

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**Inside the Dream Factory of Chicana/o Studies**  
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**Metropolitan State University**

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Come with me into the Dream Factory of Chicana/o Studies: the bubble machine that spins and structures our dreams and yarns. On the walls, large, heroic portraits of our avatars of consciousness look down upon us— halls and halls of worker bees, crafting the tools of the dream: arguments, papers, books, ideas, syllabi, aphorisms, appropriately revolutionary outfits. As Eve Channing once famously remarked, in a cloud of martini fumes, “You're in a beehive, pal. Didn't you know? We're all busy little bees, full of stings, making honey, day and night. Aren't we, honey?” It is unclear, however, who is buying the robust products we labor to create. This question of doubt never seeps onto the factory floor. The Dream Factory, through the magical force of inertia, continues to manufacture its own rationale as well as the products of the Dream.

In the Dream Factory of Chicana/o Studies, we are all revolutionary poets, Aztec warriors, temple attendants to the Goddesses, Zapatistas and bandits, reborn Indians and children of the pyramids, Che Guevarra and Frida Kahlo. Each of us has a role to play, and we work with precision at crafting our performances. With words and paper and pixels, we are the keepers of the original flame. And we bicker constantly amongst ourselves over who is more devout to the true vision, who is more faithful to the

original mission, even though the foundational texts have long been lost, the tribe scattered to the four winds, married to an Anglo or moved out to Walnut Creek or graduated from a Cal State and working for Wells Fargo. The shortwave of the Dream Factory finds it difficult to penetrate the walls of Costco, much less the shiny ziggurats of Mammon downtown.

It's been 50 years since the start of the Chicana/o Movement, and the wobbly, uneven, and embattled field of Chicana/o Studies lurches on. The founders of the field could not have envisioned the fractured success of their endeavors, or the bitter ironies of that success. Divorced from the social movement that founded it, Chicana/o Studies has had to find its own pathway through the byzantine structure of the hostile environment of the university in an era of neo-liberal retrenchment and the crisis in critical thinking presaged by the attack on the liberal arts. The fact that we're still here, still discussing Chicana/o Studies, and have modest but powerful ranks in the professoriate, is material evidence of our success. But the price of our success has entailed sustaining contradictions that are difficult to maintain, contradictions that form the very girders of the Dream Factory.

A primary symbol of Chicana/o Studies has been NACCS, which through the years has also evolved, shifted, and changed to reflect the growth of the field, its battles and challenges, and its great successes. And it is through the prism of NACCS that more often than not the hopes, fears, and disagreements of Chicana/o academics are refracted. Another way to put this is that NACCS brings the Drama, and the Drama is the one constant through the history of the organization and the field more largely. It is the

principle emotion of the Dream Factory. This is even more surprising when one realizes that NACCS is on the margins of academic power. The real terrain of influence lies elsewhere, at the Modern Language Association, the American Studies Association, the American Sociological Association, and the American Anthropological Association. NACCS is small potatoes compared to these powerhouses; yet, the organization bears an inordinate weight of attention.

Many Chicana/o scholars, even those without an active connection to the organization, feel a strong sense of ownership over NACCS. Like the swallows of San Capistrano, they relentlessly return, all of which reveals to us that while NACCS may not be a true pathway to professional power, it serves as an emotive space of melancholic longing; like the Dream Factory itself, a Potemkin village of a halcyon past, before the Fall, before that damn snake, before we bit the apple. The Drama of NACCS is reflective of an unsustainable investment in the historic symbols and values of the field, a barely restrained hysteria that threatens to erupt at any moment, for any perceived fault or misstep (and they are myriad). We are very hard on each other in the Dream Factory. We are perfectionists in a deeply imperfect world.

If anything, the progression of Chicana/o Studies has been a perfectly imperfect process. This does not stop us, however, from living in utopian possibility. Yet, it may be useful, at this particular moment, for us to step back and reflect upon these imperfections and contradictions, not to stunt our movement forward but to assist it. Chicana/o Studies was envisioned as a primary part of the larger Chicana/o Movement, the academic arm of a vibrant and powerful larger force that would initiate and lead

change in the United States for Mexican American peoples and communities. When that did not happen the way it had been planned in smoky meeting rooms and back porches and on the streets and at the nascent conferences, the field continued, committed to its mission, but the parameters and dimensions of the world had changed, and the field had to change with it. Patterns of professionalization began to increasingly determine individual and programmatic pathways in the hierarchy of the university, and we were good at it, good at strategizing and planning and anticipating, if not in the macro-vision of universal programs envisioned by the Movement, at the very least in microbursts of creativity and survival.

But these strengths came with a price. The very things that guaranteed us a place in the hostile environment of the university also struck many of us as contrary to the mission of the field to aid the success and empowerment of our communities, which by and large were and remain locked outside of the gates of academe. Because education, and especially achievement in the upper echelons of US higher education, entails significant processes of alienation from community and from self, those of us who attained success also became uncertain and anxious over our putative success. The Dream Factory arose to fill the void left by the Movement and to assuage our own fear of failing, to reassure us that we remained fundamentally committed to the vision and mission of the foundations of Chicana/o Studies. Inside the Dream Factory, we continued to party like it was 1970: the Golden Age of Chicanismo. Or so we have come to believe.

However, outside of the Dream Factory of Chicana/o Studies, the world continued to evolve, in two principle ways that I wish to speak to briefly here. Firstly, Mexican America itself, most prominently, changed beyond recognition. I grew up in a Mexican American barrio in Northeast Los Angeles in the 1970s and 1980s. That community, and the people who lived within it, are gone, washed away, disappeared within the demographic changes in the community and the personal and professional narratives of assimilation and change. Post-1965 immigration entailed not only growing numbers of Mexican immigrants, but also Mexicans and many other Latinas/os with a completely different historical and social relationship to Chicana/o history and experience. What does it mean when one's community suffers an Atlantian catastrophe? My community is no more; the actual place that created my Chicanismo no longer exists, except in memory. And I too, have changed. So what is my Chicanismo now?

Twenty years ago, Cherríe Moraga lamented the passing of the Last Generation. Reading her essay at the time, young and rather full of myself, I rolled my eyes way back in my head. Living in California in the 1990, my thoughts were similar to the character of Mercedes in John Sayles' remarkable film of the borderlands, *Lone Star*. In response to her Chicana daughter Pilar's anxious plea for a recovery of Mexican cultural anchors, Mercedes, a Mexican migrant who herself arrived in the United States without papers, offers a sanguine response: "You want to see Mexicans, open your eyes and look around you."

Older now, I more fully understand Moraga's critical perspective, perhaps in a slightly different fashion. This does not mean that Chicana/o and Mexican culture and struggle in the United States has been lost to shiny, sharp toothed Anglo mannerisms, but rather that the cultural and historic conditions that informed the rise of a particular understanding of Chicanismo have been transformed so completely that they no longer speak to the realities at hand, although this inconvenient truth has not stopped us from trying to fit the square peg into the round hole. Such contortions are quite typical of the work of the Dream Factory. Yet our tragedy is that the dark arts of our rhetorical sophistry will not provide an answer to this particular conundrum. It is not that the old narratives are no longer important, but rather they can no longer sustain us alone.

Secondly, our professional successes are redolent of the challenges in the neo-liberal university, namely, rankism, professional hierarchy, and unequal outcomes and rewards, sycophantry and ass kissing. We not only compete within the structure of white supremacist institutions, but also within the networks and cliques of Chicana/o Studies, with material differences between us that have real social, economic, and professional meaning.

I speak to you today as a professional Nobody. I currently work at a non-ranked regional-comprehensive university that serves nontraditional students in the upper Midwest of the United States, far from the centers of Aztlán and the spotlights of academic fame. What this means in terms of the academic rat race is that I am officially a Nobody. But such a position on the margins also grants a unique perspective. I do not compete with the Gods and Goddesses of Olympus, whose book titles are on the lips of

every graduate student acolyte. Ambitious, careerist neophytes who hang on my every esoteric word do not mob my academic presentations. But I am here today, with you, talking and thinking and struggling. If you think this is mere professional jealousy, then that is part of the problem I am attempting to describe.

We tend to avoid discussing such things as hierarchy, status, and influence between ourselves. So uncouth. Yet, ideally the fact of the professional hierarchies amongst us would lead to a series of empirical and critical questions that would enable us to better understand our shared reality. Questions such as: Who gets the fellowships, the Research 1 jobs, the book contracts, the honoraria, and the professional accolades? Who is given the time to write and produce scholarship, and why? Who is the loudest podium radical, and what are they hiding behind such a perfect performance? Who are the gatekeepers to the jobs and the benefits that come from particular jobs over others? More importantly, who exactly is getting the jobs? Who or what is the current object of Outrage Inc., and why? Who is actually educating Mexican America, as opposed to Anglo students in Gen Ed courses, and where is this happening? Who is doing the real service that keeps our departments and organizations alive (you know, the meetings, the photocopying, the web updates, the conference calls, the budget, fielding the continuous flow of angry emails)? What are the gendered and sexual and professional elements of this service class of worker bees? Where are these people located: R1s, R2s, Community Colleges? Are they tenure-line or contingent faculty?

Why is it so easy to not ask these questions regarding the ranks within our file? Because these are the central questions now, not whether our politics are appropriately



performed. The bread and circuses of the Dream Factory mean that we are continuously distracted by the symbolic politics of correct radicality as opposed to the harder realities of what we actually do, when what we actually do is far more important. We are stuck in our perfect moment of 1970, and are reluctant to leave the warm embrace of its security, its assured confidence. Who are we without our mythology, outside of the Dream Factory? The answer that makes us shift uncomfortably in our seats would be that we are a series of unequal classes of academic peoples, with different rewards and punishments. We would realize this only if we looked upon the actual structure of the Dream Factory itself, which is vertical as well as horizontal.

Richard Rodriguez, everyone's favorite vendido, once remarked that "Success is a terrible dilemma for Mexican Americans," and I find this pithy observation truer every year, especially for Chicana/o academics. Instead of reconciling the contradictions of our professional lives, we retreat further into the Dream Factory, where the hum of machinery and the din of familiar chatter reassures us that what we do in the university still has meaning in 1970, still has importance even though we are almost a half-century away from that moment. What does it mean to be committed (whether consciously or unconsciously) to a continual drama of utopian resistance politics and a rabid introspection that has become, for many years now, like a snake eating its own tail.

We must throw off the shackles. We must cut the bolt and pry open, together, the rusty doors of the Dream Factory to emerge, blinking, into the harsh light of the day, even if we are not ready for our close-up. We must leave behind the comfortable

shibboleths we have grown accustomed too and confront our world and ourselves in new ways.

We must develop conscious, mindful, and deliberate mechanisms for discussing significant differences between ourselves without going to our battle stations of true commitment, authentic vision, "la comunidad," and continual accusations of vendido politics- our rather typical and worn out talismans that we see again and again, a kind of Zombie politics that has little interest or relevance outside of the Dream Factory. We must consciously engage with and ameliorate the hierarchies between us. We're not, at this moment, in it all together. Where one is professionally placed has impacts that we need to better understand and address. We must mentor and develop all of our students, not just the ones that remind us of ourselves. We must develop more effectively connections with real, live Mexican American peoples and communities that rhetorically includes not only los pobres and the undocumented, neo-indigenous practitioners, as well as the requisite decolonial activists and radical marginal artists, but all sorts of constituencies, including deeply assimilated middle-class Mexican Americans, the aspirational poor and working classes, and the masses of new migrants who self-identify racially on government data forms as 'white'? Several key constituencies of Mexican America remain outside of our rhetorical and analytic purview. Our challenge is to nurture and sustain buy-in from the very people we purport to represent.

By refusing the Dream Factory, we are actually engaging in a much more difficult politics at a tricky moment in the maturation of the field, one that encompasses understanding and ultimately accepting our own limitations as well as our considerable

achievements: a difficult, rocky recognition that we are always already compromised, always already a vendido in someone's eyes.

Let us pause to reflect and shift our lens, in the harsh, unflattering light of the world outside of the Dream Factory: What does it mean to do good work? How can we realize the principle that there are many and different ways to do good work? Can we be better at recognizing each other's value, working towards a not dissimilar series of goals? Can we become more perfectly imperfect?