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Reflections on the Field

Deena J. González

If a Chicano scholar had fallen into a coma in 1969 and just now awakened, what a strange and wonderful world he would find. First, the word “Chicano” would always be followed or preceded by “Chicana.” Might he be puzzled by the persistent use of the slash mark, as in Chicana/o studies? Feminist scholarship began embedding itself by 1975—soon after our male scholar fell asleep—and by 1985 it was reshaping the old boys’ labor and economic renderings of past and present, from Aztec to high-tech, as the performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña puts it. Feminist scholars of the Euro-American tradition speak about waves, and the first wave of feminist scholarship either extends back to the first landings on the Atlantic seaboard or begins somewhere close to Abigail Adams.

For Chicana/os, a “first wave” would be cast as a story of Aztec origins, beginning in 1325 in the Valley of Mexico, or farther north where it is said they originated, in the mythic homeland of Aztlán. Indigeneity remains central to the field and the scholarship, but not as the beginning point. Indigeneity was a response to the assimilationist conversations that necessarily pervaded Chicana/o scholarly works in the 1940s and 1950s, because to fit in or not to fit in to the established social science landscape was a prerequisite for any Chicana/o seeking to publish scholarly or creative work in the era before the “flourishing” began. There is now less need to keep retelling the origins story as a unique one, and new works in performance, theater, and art, as well as in sociology, education, and history reflect this.

By 1987 the winds were shifting. Two important books were added to those earlier published by Chicana scholars Irene Blea and Marta Cotera. Vicki Ruiz and Gloria Anzaldúa produced two firsts: the first secondary monograph by a Chicana historian and the first theoretical essay in the form of a book by a Chicana lesbian, nonacademic author. This new work layered onto the previous path-breaking, if solitary, books by or about wise living

or deceased Chicanas. Our academic organization, originally the National Association for Chicano Studies (NACS), acquired an extra C, becoming the National Association for Chicana and Chicano studies (NACCS). Women were being invited into the academy as assistant professors with the possibility of tenure, and the entire social science paradigm or emphasis was changing as postmodernist currents shaped the arts, literature, and the humanities.

Since the establishment of departments or faculties in Chicana/o studies, and with the ongoing persistence of our national scholarly organization, the field has changed rapidly. Blogs, websites, and individual pages are filled with debate about what constitutes “authentic” Chicana/o scholarship. The conversation is not only about identity politics; rather, it is about direction, shifts, and methods or approaches that help us teach a curriculum and create a field of study. In the past five years, for example, work on sexuality and on gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered queer Latina/os has become an arena of study as well as a methodology within Chicana/o studies.

By the 1990s, Chicana/o scholars were contributing to the establishment of the field of Latina/o studies and to comparative studies of Chicana/os and other Latina/o groups. Chicana/o studies originated in a civil rights movement, one scholar notes, whereas Latina/o studies has different points of origin: conquest and colonial status, followed by circular migration, for Puerto Ricans; immigration for Cubans and many other Latino groups; original diasporic points of conquest for Dominicans; civil/imperial wars in the 1980s for Central Americans; and Central and South Americans’ nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century migrations to the U.S. West. The diversity of groups within the Chicana/o population, and their location within and relationship to the United States, is an important element of the new Chicana/o studies scholarship. Some populations have been here for four centuries, such as those who have been in New Mexico since 1598—before the founding of Jamestown. Others arrived in the past two decades and have changed the face of entire cities: Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago, New York, Atlanta. Within Chicana/o studies, books, articles, and policy papers continue to focus on content, that is, on artists, theater groups, and politicians past

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and present, while they also explore different approaches—integrated, distinctive, separate, or melded. Is Chicana/o studies to become a part of Latina/o studies? Is it to be subsumed, conquered in a different way? Or will Chicana/o studies retain its original spirit and purpose and maintain control of its own content? When are comparisons and contrasts between Latina/o groups useful? Unnecessary?

We are lucky to have been in on the creation of this important and growing field. PhD programs in Chicana/o studies will soon number three, including UCLA's. Their creation reflects the necessity and significance of continued scholarly work, energy, and commitment. In scholarly publishing, established journals are making their mark: *Aztlán*, for one; the renewed *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of MALCS*, for another. There are Chicana/o studies book series at UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center and at the University of Texas Press (the Chicana Matters Series), and others such as Duke University Press and Oxford University Press are publishing in the field as well. All this testifies to the growing permanence of Chicana/o studies in the academic landscape. At the half-century mark, we must imagine an enormous conference, with global participants, and on display all of the 200-plus new works published in this field since 1969!