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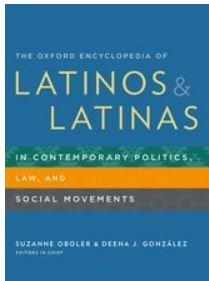


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Acuña, Rodolfo

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The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in Contemporary Politics, Law, and Social Movements

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Acuña, Rodolfo (b. 1932), writer, political activist, and professor.

Known by many as the father of Chicano/a studies, the historian Rodolfo Acuña is a prolific writer, political activist, and professor. Beginning his career before the Chicano/a movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, Acuña has worked tirelessly for Chicana and Chicano civil rights and representation in multiple social and political arenas.

Education and Early Career

Born in Los Angeles into a traditional Mexican family originally from northern Mexico, Acuña attended the University of Southern California, completing a PhD in history in the 1950s, an era when few Chicanas and Chicanos were represented in the discipline. Acuña sought in his dissertation and subsequent work to fuse an entirely new field that served both the scholarly or academic community and the workers and laborers whose interests he supported and studied.

The quintessential scholar-activist, Acuña worked with others in the Chicano/a civil rights movement to produce *El Plan de Santa Barbara* (1969), a plan of action for establishing curriculum and structures that would help Chicanos and Chicanas gain access to higher education. The plan resulted in the founding of several Chicano/a studies programs and departments across the country. One prominent Chicano/a studies department, the oldest and largest at the beginning of the twenty-first century, was at California State University, Northridge, where Acuña was the founding chair.

During his tenure as chair and while teaching thousands of students in the many courses a public and large university requires, Acuña published the widely read *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (1972), a survey of Chicano history since the Spanish conquest. This text serves as one of the core books in introductory Chicano/a studies courses and is continually revised and reprinted. *Occupied America* is only one of the many scholarly books Acuña has written in the field of Chicano/a studies. Throughout his career, he has written monographs dealing with such issues as racism, affirmative action, labor rights, resistance movements, and ethnic/cultural identity.

Political Activism

In addition to his scholarly contributions to the Chicano and Latino community, Acuña is known and highly regarded for his activism in the political arena. Acuña is involved with the Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project, an organization committed to educating the Latino community about the electoral process as well as helping them register to vote. His continued participation in political and social activism is illustrated in his work as an expert on racism and desegregation with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), including its 1998 challenge to California Proposition 209, which argued against bilingual education. Acuña also writes several editorial columns and contributes to many newspapers and magazines as well as to talk shows and public radio.

Acuña's continued involvement in social and political activism has involved him in heated debates and situations in which he is required to defend his political beliefs. Acuña made no secret of his participation in the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), the Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán; in addition to being a former member he is also an advisor to the organization. During the 2003 California gubernatorial election, the college membership in MEChA of the lieutenant governor and candidate for governor Cruz Bustamante was questioned and attacked by opponents identifying the organization as racist and separatist. Acuña came to the defense of MEChA and questioned the media's bias and purpose.

In 1989 the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS) recognized Acuña's great commitment to the Chicano community and awarded him the NACCS Scholar Award. This association awards the title to scholars recognized as having contributed to the development of Chicano/a studies as a discipline and whose work significantly influences the study of the Chicano community. Although Acuña received this award in 1989, his activism and contributions to scholarship continued through the 1990s and into the twenty-first century.

In 1992 Professor Acuña, with some lawyers and other supporters, including the ACLU, launched a lawsuit challenging the decision of the University of California, Santa Barbara, to deny him an appointment in the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies. Although it was evident that the judge was directly linked to the university, Acuña's young attorneys—who place their work and careers on hold while they took on a lawsuit they viewed as a question of social justice—prevailed in one of the few successful challenges to institutionalized racism as it exists in academe. Acuña won the lawsuit, but not on the basis of ethnic or racial prejudice. Rather, because a faculty committee had mentioned his age and the possibility of “undue” influence based on his age, the university was forced to compensate him with \$325,000 for the loss of the appointment. Agism carried the day in the Acuña case, despite any number of other critical discoveries that lawyers found, ranging from outright racial discrimination to hostile racist invective. That a few Chicanas and Chicanos also supported the university in its case against his hiring sheds light on the matter of how much Chicano/a studies has become a part of the mainstream in some academic environments, at least to the extent that it is marked by many of the same divisions that plague all other fields and disciplines. In the final analysis, however, Acuña instructed a sympathetic jury in the reasons university officials and some university professors dislike Chicano/a studies as an area of study; jurors later told the Acuña team that they were keenly aware of the methods being used to discredit his scholarship and his professorial training. The mostly working-class jury saw through the lies and ruses presented by the university to discredit Acuña's scholarship, and jurors were undeterred in seeking proper compensation for discriminatory treatment. More than anything else in his career, this court case occurred because Professor Acuña refused to let the University of California use improper grounds or methods in its hiring practices. The challenge would have enormous implications for the future of Chicano and Chicana higher education.

Recent Activism

Acuña's dedication to social and scholarly activism continued well into the early decades of the 2000s. In 2010 when Arizona passed SB1070—a law that required police to check detainees' immigration status—and HB2281—a law that outlawed ethnic studies courses and banned several key books, including his influential *Occupied America*—Acuña worked tirelessly to bring attention to the political attack on Mexican American Studies and Latinos. He organized fundraisers, interviewed with new outlets, and wrote dozens of articles highlighting the racist, xenophobic,

and politically motivated origins of these laws.

Seeing the crucial link between education and activism, in the early 2000s Acuña remained engaged as a professor emeritus at his campus (CSUN) and supported young scholars and others seeking assistance with legal challenges through the foundation he created with the gains from his lawsuit. Acuña's lifelong commitment to education and activism and his diligent work against oppression and injustice ensure him a place in Chicana/o history.

See *also* [Chicano/a Movement](#); [Chicanos and Chicanas](#); [Mexican Americans](#); *and* [Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán](#).

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