Chicanismo and Indigeneity

Chicanxs believe that they are all descendants of Indigenous people and that is a problem. Previously, I wrote in my second burning question paper that Chicanxs should not be looking to appropriate Indigenous culture, specifically Nahua culture, but now I want to expand on that and focus on the underlying issue instead of myself. Believing Chicanxs and Indigenous are interchangeable terms contributes to the erasure of other races they are descendants of and centers the Indigenous voice onto people who have not had the hardships of an Indigenous person.

Chicanxs are not Indigenous or of Indigenous-descent by default. Chicanx is a term for Mexican-Americans and Mexicans who have lived most of their lives in the United States. This term has no direct connection to the original citizens of the Western Hemisphere. Yet, Chicanismo has made it that way by suggesting that all Chicanxs should be regarded as people who had their identity stripped through colonization. Now, I already included this exact quote from Ernesto Chavez’s writing in my previous paper but I will break it down differently by examining what it indicates.

...but, by beginning with the Pueblo Indians, detailing their conquest, and showing how some Natives were detribalized and deemed genizaros, Gutierrez made us rethink George J. Sánchez’s Becoming Mexican American also examined identity in a nuanced manner that proved significant. Sánchez concentrated not on the structures of oppression, but rather on ethnic the origins of the ethnic Mexican community in the United States. Rather than look back to Mexico as an
originating place, Gutierrez turned our gaze toward the Southwest and brought complexity to Chicanos’ relationship with their indigenous heritage, suggesting that perhaps Mexican Americans were better viewed as descendants of genízaros, thus bringing a new nuance to Latino identity. (Chavez, 513)

Sanchez’s writing suggests that all Mexicans and Mexican-Americans should be thought of as descendants of Indigenous people. The concept of Mexican Americans being genízaros causes problems because not all Mexicans are descendants of Indigenous people. There are many Mexicans that have no Native ancestry. To recognize that is not to disregard Indigenous people but to rightfully include other ancestries that Mexicans may have. Sanchez’s idea not only leaves out Mexicans with ethnic origins outside of just Native and European ancestry, but it also gives a false view of what makes up a Mexican. Mexicans can look like anyone and be of any race. This view purposely mixes up the differences between nationality, race, and ethnicity and upholds the hegemony experienced by citizens in Mexico, who has claimed the Aztec Triple Alliance as its predecessor and presented itself as a nation of mixed-race citizens.

Chicanxs continue to argue with Indigenous people on this subject. Here, archaeologist Kurly Tlapoyawa, a Chicano, responds to Jessica Hernandez, an Indigenous scholar, through a blog post about another blog post that Henrandez wrote critiquing what Tlapoyawa calls Chicana-Chicano indigeneity.

Ultimately, the idea that some native people are “authentically indigenous” while others are merely “of Indigenous descent” is fundamentally flawed. It suggests that colonialism is both permanent and irreversible and that any effort to reclaim what has been lost due to colonization is pointless and futile. It is a misguided idea that denies Indigenous people the agency to determine their own identities in a way that is meaningful and empowering. When we accept the “authentically Indigenous” versus “of Indigenous descent” argument, we actively participate in the very program of Indigenous extermination that began with Spanish colonization. And even worse, we are doing it to each other. (Tlapoyawa)
Tlapoyawa deflects the criticism he receives. It does not cross his mind to think about and assess his own privilege of having had an easier life in comparison to Indigenous people. He wants to claim Indigenous identity without having the lived experiences of contemporary Indigenous people. Instead, he gaslights Indigenous people and suggests that they are who truly contribute to the erasure of Indigenous people and continue the legacy of colonialism that they are victims of. His claim for his identity is also not followed by any mission to help Indigenous people. Jessica Hernandez points this out in her blog post.

...This ignores that mestiz@s also have colonial genealogy — rooted in Spain and other European countries. Yes, I understand that Mexico has a long history of colonization and as a result of the violent assimilation practices enacted on people, there are some who lost their indigenous roots. However, what makes an individual indigenous is more complex than a simple genetic test or ancestry. Many Native American and Indigenous scholars + activists advocate that being indigenous is more than a genetic test, as it is also related to cultural customs, traditions, language, etc. There is a different between claiming to be indigenous and actually having an indigenous community or tribe that claims you. (Hernandez)

The problem lies where people claim Indigeneity while not acknowledging the hardships that Indigenous people face in Mexico, or even in the U.S. In addition, Tlapoyawa's refusal to listen to the Indigenous plight and to center Chicanxs complaints in this matter is the real problem. Indigenous people are not and will not be helped by the continuing misunderstandings made by Chicanxs about what constitutes an Indigenous person.

So what should the solution be? Chicanxs have to listen to the people they claim to be a part of and recognize that they are not Indigenous themselves. Individuals may have Indigenous
ancestry but at the end of the day they are a product of colonialism. Reversing the effects of colonialism should not mean that people are continuing to take from Indigenous people. Energy should instead be directed towards ending Mexico’s hegemonic teachings which caused many of the problems discussed in this essay.
Sources Cited


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