Chicanx and Latinx History Beyond Eurocentric Perspectives

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Abstract

Chicanx and Latinx history is frequently presented as an appendix to a national story centered on European settlement, Anglo-American institutions, and westward expansion. Such a framework obscures the fact that Indigenous, African, Spanish-speaking, Mexican, Caribbean, Central American, and South American peoples have shaped the territories and political cultures of the United States for centuries. This paper examines Chicanx and Latinx history beyond Eurocentric perspectives by emphasizing conquest, border formation, labor, migration, racialization, gender, cultural production, and collective resistance. It argues that these histories should not be treated as stories of recent arrival or cultural assimilation alone. They involve older Indigenous civilizations, Spanish colonialism, Mexican sovereignty, U.S. territorial expansion, imperial intervention, labor recruitment, exclusion, and movements for citizenship and self-determination. The paper also considers terminology, intersectionality, archives, oral history, and public memory. A decolonial approach does not simply insert Latinx figures into an unchanged national narrative; it asks how power determined whose experiences counted as history and how communities preserved knowledge despite exclusion.

Introduction

Historical narratives are shaped by choices about beginnings, geography, evidence, and significance. A Eurocentric account of the United States often begins with English colonial settlement, treats the nation’s borders as natural, and presents western expansion as the spread of civilization. Within that account, Chicanx and Latinx communities may appear only when immigration becomes politically visible in the twentieth century.

This perspective is inadequate. Spanish-speaking and Indigenous communities lived across what became the U.S. Southwest long before the region was incorporated into the United States. Puerto Rico’s relationship with the United States emerged from imperial war rather than conventional immigration. Mexican, Caribbean, and Central American labor has been recruited when economically useful and restricted when politically convenient. Latinx people have also organized unions, schools, mutual-aid societies, artistic movements, legal campaigns, and political organizations that transformed public life.

This paper argues that Chicanx and Latinx history must be studied through changing borders, colonial systems, racial formation, labor, gender, and community agency. Moving beyond Eurocentrism

reveals these communities as historical actors rather than peripheral minorities.

Terminology and Historical Difference

Terms such as Hispanic, Latino/a, Latinx, Chicano/a, and Chicanx have different histories and political meanings. “Hispanic” emphasizes a relationship to Spanish language or Spanish cultural heritage. “Latino” and “Latinx” generally refer to people connected to Latin America, although preferences vary. “Chicano” emerged as a politicized identity among Mexican Americans, particularly during the movement era of the 1960s and 1970s.

No single label captures all communities. A Cuban American history differs from a Puerto Rican, Mexican American, Dominican, Salvadoran, or Indigenous migrant history. Race, class, citizenship, region, language, and generation further shape experience. Responsible scholarship uses collective terminology when analytically useful while preserving these distinctions.

Indigenous Foundations

A decolonial history begins before European conquest. The Americas contained complex societies with established political systems, trade networks, agriculture, architecture, spiritual traditions, and scientific knowledge. In the Southwest, Pueblo peoples and other Indigenous nations developed communities adapted to varied environments. Mexico was home to numerous civilizations and languages, including Nahua, Maya, Mixtec, Zapotec, and many others.

Spanish colonization did not erase Indigenous identity. Colonial institutions extracted labor, imposed Christianity, reorganized land, and created racial categories, but Indigenous peoples resisted, negotiated, adapted, and preserved language and community. Contemporary Latinx populations may also identify as Indigenous, challenging assumptions that “Latino” is a single race.

Spanish Colonialism and Racial Hierarchy

Spanish rule established missions, settlements, military posts, and extractive economies. Colonial society used categories associated with ancestry, birthplace, legal status, and perceived racial mixture. These classifications were inconsistent but helped distribute privilege and labor obligations.

A non-Eurocentric approach avoids romanticizing Spanish colonial heritage. Missions could serve as sites of conversion and settlement while also imposing coercive labor, cultural suppression, and violence on Indigenous communities. Colonial history must therefore include both institutional development and the experiences of those subjected to it.

Mexico, the Border, and U.S. Expansion

When Mexico achieved independence from Spain in 1821, its northern territories included much of the present-day U.S. Southwest. The U.S.–Mexico War ended with the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, through which Mexico ceded an enormous territory to the United States. Residents did not necessarily cross an international border; the border crossed them.

The treaty promised certain protections, but Mexican landholders and communities often faced dispossession through legal costs, taxation, fraud, violence, and unfamiliar property rules. Menchaca (2001) demonstrates how law and racial classification shaped Mexican American citizenship after conquest. The result was not a simple transition from Mexican to U.S. governance but a contested process of racial and economic subordination.

Viewing expansion from the perspective of conquered communities changes the meaning of "Manifest Destiny." What appeared in dominant narratives as national growth involved war, displacement, and the construction of a racialized border.

Labor, Migration, and Unequal Inclusion

U.S. industries repeatedly recruited Latin American labor for agriculture, railroads, mining, manufacturing, domestic service, and urban development. Employers benefited from workers who were essential to production but often denied equal wages, secure status, housing, or political power.

During periods of economic crisis, Mexican-origin communities became targets of removal campaigns. In the 1930s, people of Mexican descent—including U.S. citizens—were pressured or forced to leave. The Bracero Program later brought Mexican men to work temporarily in U.S. agriculture and railroads while limiting their rights and family settlement.

This pattern of recruitment and exclusion contradicts narratives that explain migration only through individual choice. Migration has been shaped by labor demand, foreign policy, trade, political intervention, violence, and family networks.

School Segregation and Civil Rights

Mexican American children were often placed in separate schools or classrooms on the basis of language, surname, or racial assumptions. These institutions frequently offered inferior facilities and curricula oriented toward manual labor.

Communities challenged segregation through litigation and organizing. *Mendez v. Westminster* addressed the segregation of Mexican American children in California before the Supreme Court's decision in Brown v. Board of Education. The case illustrates that the struggle for educational equality

was broader than a binary Black–White framework, even though anti-Black racism and the distinct history of slavery remained foundational to U.S. segregation.

The Chicano Movement

The Chicano Movement connected civil rights, labor, education, antiwar activism, land claims, cultural nationalism, and political representation. Farmworkers organized for wages and dignity. Students walked out of schools to protest unequal education. Activists created community organizations, newspapers, clinics, arts programs, and political parties.

The movement reclaimed terms and symbols that dominant culture had devalued. “Chicano” became an assertion of political consciousness and Indigenous connection. Murals, poetry, theatre, and music turned public space into a historical archive.

Movement history also requires internal critique. Women frequently confronted sexism within organizations while challenging racism in mainstream feminism. Chicana feminists argued that gender, race, class, sexuality, and colonialism were interconnected. Anzaldúa’s (1987) concept of the borderlands presented the border not only as a geographic line but also as a cultural and psychological condition.

Puerto Rican and Caribbean Histories

Puerto Rican history cannot be understood solely through immigration. The United States acquired Puerto Rico after the Spanish-American War, and Puerto Ricans later received U.S. citizenship while the island remained an unincorporated territory. Migration to the mainland therefore occurred within an unequal imperial relationship.

Puerto Rican communities built political, cultural, and labor institutions in cities such as New York and Philadelphia. They confronted discrimination in housing, employment, education, and language policy while influencing music, literature, urban politics, and social movements.

Cuban and Dominican migrations developed through different political contexts, including revolution, dictatorship, U.S. policy, and racial stratification. Treating all Caribbean Latinx histories as one experience erases these differences.

Central American Migration and U.S. Foreign Policy

Central American migration is often discussed without examining the wars, authoritarian governments, economic disruption, and foreign interventions that shaped displacement. During the late twentieth century, conflicts in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua produced refugees and

migrants whose reception was influenced by U.S. geopolitical priorities.

Communities created sanctuary networks, hometown associations, religious organizations, and advocacy groups. Their histories demonstrate that migration cannot be separated from international relations. A border-centered narrative that begins only when migrants arrive omits the forces that made departure necessary.

Race, Gender, and Intersectionality

Latinx identity does not eliminate racial hierarchy. Latin American and U.S. societies have classified people through skin color, Indigenous identity, African ancestry, language, and national origin. Afro-Latinx experiences expose the inadequacy of treating “Latino” as a race separate from Blackness.

Gender and sexuality also shape labor, migration, and citizenship. Women’s work in agriculture, factories, households, caregiving, and community organization has often been undervalued or excluded from formal archives. Queer and transgender Latinx activists have challenged both external discrimination and restrictive ideas within their communities.

Intersectional analysis asks how these systems operate together. It does not simply add categories; it studies how specific institutions produce distinct experiences.

Archives, Oral History, and Public Memory

Traditional archives often preserve records created by governments, employers, police, and elite organizations. These sources are important but may describe marginalized communities primarily as problems to be managed. Oral histories, family photographs, newspapers, music, murals, meeting minutes, and community collections can reveal experiences excluded from official records.

Oral history does not provide an unfiltered past. Memory is selective and shaped by the present. Yet official documents are also constructed. Comparing sources allows historians to identify conflict, silence, and perspective.

Public monuments and school curricula influence who appears to belong to the nation. Including Chicanx and Latinx history is not an act of generosity toward a minority; it is necessary for an accurate account of U.S. development.

Moving Beyond an Assimilation Framework

Assimilation narratives measure success according to movement toward an imagined Anglo-American norm. They may treat Spanish language, transnational family ties, or cultural difference as temporary obstacles. A broader framework recognizes cultural transformation as multidirectional. Latinx

communities have changed cities, religion, politics, food, music, labor, and language while also adapting to U.S. institutions.

Citizenship is likewise more than legal status. Communities may possess formal citizenship yet experience unequal schools, policing, voting access, or employment. Historical analysis must examine substantive belonging as well as legal classification.

A Framework for Inclusive Historical Study

Eurocentric assumption	Broader historical question
U.S. history begins with English settlement	What Indigenous and colonial societies existed across the continent?
National borders are fixed	How did war, conquest, and treaties create borders?
Latinx people are recent immigrants	Which communities predate U.S. control, and how do migration histories differ?
Progress is produced by elite leaders	How did workers, women, students, artists, and mutual-aid groups create change?
Archives neutrally record the past	Who created the records, and whose voices are missing?

Conclusion

Chicanx and Latinx history cannot be accurately understood as a minor branch of a primarily European American story. It is embedded in Indigenous history, Spanish colonialism, Mexican sovereignty, U.S. conquest, imperialism, labor systems, migration, and movements for rights and cultural self-determination.

Moving beyond Eurocentrism changes both content and method. It centers changing borders, examines racial and gendered power, distinguishes among national and regional histories, and uses community sources alongside official archives. It also recognizes that Latinx communities have not simply entered the United States; they have repeatedly helped create it.

An inclusive history does not replace one simplistic narrative with another. It preserves conflict, difference, and internal debate. By doing so, it produces a more truthful understanding of how

territory, citizenship, culture, and national identity have been constructed.

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