



Geographies of race and ethnicity III: Settler colonialism and nonnative people of color

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journals.sagepub.com/home/phg**Laura Pulido**

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Abstract

In this third progress report I consider the politics of settler colonialism in relation to nonnative people of color. Settler colonialism has become an increasingly important concept over the past decade, and while geographers typically think about it from a white/native perspective, I explore how ethnic studies, specifically, Chicana/o studies, has responded to it. For different reasons both disciplines have hesitated to fully interrogate the significance of the concept. In the case of geography, the whiteness of the discipline has caused it to overlook vibrant debates within ethnic studies. Chicana/o studies has not directly engaged with settler colonialism because, I argue, it has the potential to disrupt core elements of Chicana/o political subjectivity. Specifically, it unsettles Chicanas/os' conception of themselves as colonized people by highlighting their role as colonizers. Acknowledging such a role is difficult not only because it challenges key dimensions of Chicana/o identity, as seen in Aztlán, Chicanas/os' mythical homeland, but also because of the precarious nature of Chicana/o indigeneity. Examining Chicana/o studies' muted response to settler colonialism illustrates the impoverished nature of geography's study of race.

Keywords

Chicana/o studies, indigenous, settler colonialism

I Introduction

In this progress report I consider the politics of settler colonialism in relation to nonnative people of color. Over the past decade the concept of settler colonialism, a distinct form of colonization, has become increasingly prominent (Trask, 2000; Wolfe, 2006). Rather than seeking to control land, resources, and labor, settler colonization eliminated native peoples in order to appropriate their land. The US, Canada, Israel, and Australia are all examples of settler states. Early theorizations focused on white settlers, but questions soon arose from ethnic studies scholars regarding the role of nonwhite peoples. Though these are global conversations

(Lawrence and Dua, 2005; Sharma and Wright, 2008/9), I focus on US ethnic and native studies debates (Byrd, 2011; Tuck and Yang, 2012), as I am concerned with Chicana/o studies' response. While both Asian American and Black studies scholars have contributed to this discussion, Chicana/o studies, the study of ethnic-Mexicans in the US, has been relatively silent. And, for very different reasons, so has geography.

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Chicana/o studies' ambivalence, I argue, is due to settler colonialism's potential to disrupt core elements of Chicana/o political subjectivity. Specifically, it unsettles Chicanas/os' conception of themselves as colonized people by highlighting their role as colonizers. Acknowledging such a role is difficult not only because it challenges key dimensions of Chicana/o identity, as seen in Aztlán, Chicanas/os' mythical homeland, but also because of the precarious nature of Chicana/o indigeneity.

Geography, with a few exceptions (Kobayashi and De Leeuw, 2010; Bauder, 2011), has only considered whites in relation to settler colonialism (Bonds and Inwood, 2015; Radcliffe, 2015). This reflects geography's larger anti-racist scholarship, which operates from a white/nonwhite binary which, in turn, reflects the overwhelming whiteness of the discipline. Geography simply lacks the racial diversity, scholarly expertise and comfort to explore such questions.

Despite being radically different, I wish to put these two disciplines in conversation. Besides being my two intellectual homes, geography must learn to wrestle with the complexities of racial and (de)colonial dynamics. Its contributions to the study of racism will always be limited if the fullness of the racial landscape is overlooked. Chicana/o studies' avoidance of settler colonialism illustrates how racial and political subjectivity is structured by colonization, contemporary nation-states, white supremacy, anti-racist struggle and decolonial projects. Deciphering the historical reasons why Chicana/o studies has failed to grapple with settler colonialism illuminates the deeply geographical nature of racial and political subjectivity. Ethnic-Mexicans, like all people of color, are diverse and multifaceted (contrary to the tidiness implied by 'Latina/o'), and it is only through exploring the spatialities of their historical experiences that we can understand this avoidance.

In this progress report I first introduce settler colonialism and ethnic studies' response to it.

Then, drawing primarily on cultural studies scholarship, I explore the precarious nature of Chicana/o indigeneity and the significance of Aztlán, both of which are deeply geographic. Chicana/o indigeneity is embedded in questions of scale, territory, boundaries, and empire, while Aztlán is an imagined place. Although I focus on US ethnic studies, these issues should resonate in all settler societies.

II Settler colonialism, native peoples and nonwhite others

What makes settler societies unique is their desire to *replace* indigenous peoples in order to take their land, rather than simply control resources and labor. While the US acknowledges that it is a settler country, it does so by evacuating the violence associated with this process. Huntington (2004), for instance, distinguishes settlers from immigrants. He states that settlers came to *build* a country, while immigrants come to *join* it. While settlers are routinely admired in US culture, their celebration requires imagining the process as nonviolent or, at best, involving justifiable violence (Blackhawk, 2006). Key to erasing this violence are transition narratives – discourses that serve to make the past more palatable. Foregrounding settler colonialism, however, forces us to recognize the whitewashing associated with hegemonic representations of colonization (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014) and re-centers native peoples.

Settler colonialism demands that the experience of indigenous peoples be taken seriously, which has profound implications for white settlers, immigrants, and various minoritized populations, which in the US includes African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinas/os, Muslims, and other racially-subordinated groups. As Moreton-Robinson notes, 'the question of how anyone came to be white or black in the United States is inextricably tied to the dispossession of the original owners' (2008: 84).

While many routinely collapse native and ethnic studies, there are important distinctions. First, many in native studies reject the category ‘minority’ and the larger politics of multiculturalism (Byrd, 2011; Kobayashi and De Leeuw, 2010). This is because US minority status usually results from racism, but indigenous peoples have been colonized. And while the US has been somewhat willing to acknowledge a racist past, it has refused to grapple with the violence of settler colonialism. Though settler colonization is a racial project (Wolfe, 2016), it cannot be reduced to racism. Indeed, the solution to racism is inclusion, but this does not address colonization (Coulthard, 2014). ‘When the remediation of the colonization of American Indians is framed through discourses of racialization that can be redressed by further inclusion into the nation-state, there is a significant failure to grapple with the fact that such discourses further reinscribe the original colonial injury’ (Byrd, 2011: xxiii).

Theorizing how minoritized groups participate in settler colonialism is challenging (Trask, 2000; Kobayashi and De Leeuw, 2010; Tuck and Yang, 2012; Byrd, 2011; Saranillo, 2013; Sharma and Wright, 2008/9). Though some conceptualize all nonnatives as settlers (Lawrence and Dua, 2005), ethnic studies generally rejects such simple equations. Terms like ‘arrivant’ and ‘subordinate settler’ describe various minoritized positions. Theorizing the roles of Black slaves, Asian immigrants, and Mexican settlers can be discomfiting, which, Tuck and Yang (2012) say, is entirely appropriate. They argue that since the US is both a settler colonial nation-state *and* an empire, it displaces native peoples and compels others onto indigenous lands through slavery, war, and economic dislocation (2012: 7). In an effort to overcome the seeming binary between colonization and racism, Sharma and Wright (2008/9) interpret colonization as the commons, which foregrounds capitalism rather than nationalism, and offers one way forward. Smith has sought to

unify these processes under white supremacy, arguing that it is underlain by three logics: slaveability, genocide, and orientalism. Each logic in turn enables a particular social relation: capitalism, colonization, and war, respectively. These logics preclude easy solidarity.

For example, all non-Native peoples are promised the ability to . . . settl[e] indigenous lands. All non-Black peoples are promised that . . . they will not be at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. And Black and Native peoples are promised that they will advance economically and politically if they join U.S. wars. (Smith, 2012: 70)

Black studies scholars have responded in diverse ways to these debates. Miles (2005) explored how Black and indigenous peoples intersected through white supremacy, slavery, and settler colonization, while challenging conventional ideas of temporality. Instead of assuming native dispossession was first and slavery second, she shows how they informed each other simultaneously. Other African American studies scholars, often associated with ‘Afro-pessimism’, have rejected relational interpretations and their concomitant politics (Wilderson, 2010; see also Kauanui, 2016).

Asian American studies has focused on immigrants’ role in colonizing Hawai’i, especially how Asian ‘success’ promotes multicultural harmony. ‘In their focus on racism, discrimination, and the exclusion of Asians . . . such studies tell the story of Asians’ civil rights as one of nation building in order to legitimate Asians’ claims to a place for themselves in Hawai’i’ (Fujikane and Okamura, 2008: 2). Saranillo (2013), among others, has argued that settler colonialism works *through* immigrants. Writing from a Canadian perspective, Day (2016) explores how the narrative of Asian labor’s hyper-efficiency has become associated with a negative form of capital. While this review is in no way comprehensive, it should be apparent that vibrant debates exist in which

scholars are struggling to understand how white supremacy and colonization intersect.

In contrast, Chicana/o studies has been peripheral to such discussions. Certainly Chicana/o studies is no stranger to colonization, given US conquest of Mexico (Acuña, 1972; Barrera, 1979; Almaguer, 1994; Rivera, 2006). Chicana studies scholars have challenged conventional historiography (Pérez, 1999), often including native women in their analyses (Castañeda, 1993; Chávez-García, 2004). Scholars have interrogated Chicana/o indigeneity (Saldaña-Portillo, 2001, 2016; Contreras, 2008; Hartley, 2012), and more recently indigenous Latina/o migration (Castellanos et al., 2012; Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004). Researchers have considered Chinese immigrants as settlers in the US southwest (Luna-Peña, 2015), and compared Chicanas/os and Palestinians in terms of settler-colonialism (Lloyd and Pulido, 2010). Sánchez and Pita (2015) have challenged claims of Chicanas/os as victims of US settler colonialism, insisting instead that American Indians are, while Cotera and Saldaña-Portillo (2015) have exposed the tensions underlying such claims.¹ In short, the discipline is dancing around settler colonization and its implications, but has not taken the plunge. Instead, Chicanas/os are still largely scripted as the colonized. Guidotti-Hernandez (2011) suggests that because Chicana/o studies is fixated on one conflict, the US conquest of Mexico, it has major blind spots. Indeed, the larger historiography of the US West is replete with Mexican violence towards indigenous peoples (Reséndez, 2016; Smith, 2013; González, 2005; Guidotti-Hernandez, 2011).

González, for example, documented Mexican dispossession of native peoples in Los Angeles. His analysis centers on a 1846 letter written by Mexicans to the Governor in which they complained about native people and requested that 'the Indians be placed under strict police surveillance or the persons for whom the Indians work give [them] quarter at the

employer's rancho' (2005: 19). González argues that Mexican Angelenos embraced hegemonic Mexican culture, including eliminating *el indio barbaro* (the savage Indian) (Saldaña-Portillo, 2016).

There is also evidence of Mexican complicity in US settler colonialism. Guidotti-Hernandez's (2011) study of Euro-American violence towards Mexicans and Mexico's genocide towards *indios barbaros* includes the Camp Grant Indian massacre of 1871. Both Mexico and the US fought the Apaches because they raided and refused a sedentary lifestyle. In 1871 the US promised a group of Apaches safety at Camp Grant, Arizona, but locals, including Mexican leadership, massacred 144, mostly women and children. In short, we have clear evidence of Mexicans and Chicanas/os participating in settler colonialism, but we are unable to frankly discuss it and consider its meanings.

III Chicana/o studies' ambivalence towards settler colonialism

An inability to acknowledge such violence and its corresponding subjectivities suggests deep anxieties. Indeed, there are parallels between the US's refusal to acknowledge settler colonialism (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014) and that of Chicana/o studies. Recognizing ethnic-Mexicans' role in settler colonization is threatening because it would force Chicana/o studies to recognize multiple subjectivities, which, in turn, would require rethinking the dominant narrative. This is similar to American Indian studies acknowledging, for example, that Cherokees owned slaves. But it's not just a desire to avoid uncomfortable work. There is significant confusion regarding Chicana/o indigeneity, which has been made almost illegible by colonization. Though both Indian and indigenous are constructed categories, Klopotek (2016) has argued that Indian functions as a racial term, while indigenous is a cultural and political one. While

ethnic-Mexicans are overwhelmingly Indian, indigeneity is different. Exactly what are Chicanas/os indigenous to? When, if at all, does indigeneity cease? How does indigeneity function within multiple national formations? Not only do Mexico and the US have radically different conceptions of and approaches to indigeneity (Contreras, 2008), but Chicanas/os, as transnational people, exist in the interstices of multiple national and regional racial formations (Saldaña-Portillo, 2016).

IV Chicanas/os: Indians or indigenous?

Before examining Chicana/o indigeneity more closely, I must distinguish between two distinct threads. One thread stems from the centuries-long history of the peoples and lands of North America. A second strand has recently emerged through indigenous immigration from Latin America to the US (Castellanos et al., 2012; Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004). While Chicana/o studies includes both, they embody different temporalities. Specifically, the second is usually *recognized* as indigenous, while the first is more contentious. I focus on the first, which is foundational to Chicana/o studies.

Chicana/o studies exists as both a scholarly enterprise and a nation-building project. And like any nation, it had to forge a new identity. Previous to 'Chicana/o', which became widespread in the 1960s, ethnic-Mexicans living in the US identified as Mexican-American. Chicana/o is an explicitly oppositional term that drew upon counter-hegemonic histories, meanings, and experiences. Central to this was reclaiming an indigenous heritage, which had been undermined by Mexico's ideology of mestizaje as well as US racism. Mestizaje, the idea of cultural and biological mixing, was a nation-building strategy that both assimilated and erased *lo indio* (Cotera and Saldaña-Portillo, 2015). Within Chicana/o studies, the idea of decolonial mestizaje has emerged

(Anzaldúa, 1987), which is an attempt to overcome the inherent racism of mestizaje (Hartley, 2012; Morgensen, 2011: 183–7; Saldaña-Portillo, 2001).

Debates around Chicana/o indigeneity must be located in larger discussions of indigeneity itself (Teves et al., 2015; Castellanos et al., 2012). According to one definition, the communities, clans, nations, and tribes we call 'indigenous peoples' are just that:

Indigenous to the lands they inhabit, in contrast to and in contention with colonial societies that have spread out from Europe and other centers of empire. It is this oppositional and place-based existence, along with the consciousness of being in struggle against... colonization by foreign peoples, that fundamentally distinguishes Indigenous peoples. (Alfred and Cornstassel, 2005: 597)

While seemingly straightforward, this definition hints at underlying complexities. For instance, locating indigeneity in relation to a specific place overlooks indigenous peoples' contemporary and historic mobility (Diaz, 2015). When does tenure begin? Despite having lived in a place for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, we know that native peoples were on the move. Moreover, US dispossession and the reservation system challenge any simple associations to land, boundary, or place.

Another key dimension suggested above is political awareness and struggle. But what about Indians who identify as assimilated and are not in struggle? Are they no longer indigenous? Perhaps not surprisingly, this requirement conflicts with the US government, which defines indigeneity by blood (see Simpson, 2014). Still others emphasize cultural practices and connections. This might include those who are part of native communities, but not blood members (Simpson, 2014). While American Indians have long debated these issues, they have been amplified by the growth in native studies, which has highlighted how indigeneity

is rooted in colonization and nation-state processes.

Chicana/o indigeneity, like all other forms, must be grounded in the state (Hartley, 2012). As noted earlier, Chicana/o subjectivities and identities have been forged in and through overlapping Mexican and US racial formations and nation-building projects (Saldaña-Portillo, 2016). These formations are both sequential and spatially and temporally overlapping. Here, we must draw on our most sophisticated understandings of place – how to understand a region as a palimpsest, a border zone, and a boundary simultaneously? While Mexico incorporated indigeneity into its nation-building efforts, *mestizaje* has been highly contradictory. In contrast, the US sought to obliterate native people physically and forged a white racial and national identity *exclusive* of them. Consequently, in the US, native peoples are seen as distinct from the larger nation and insist they are sovereign. Though indigenous Mexicans may oppose the state, like the Zapatistas, they do not necessarily see themselves as distinct nations (Saldaña-Portillo, 2001).

Chicana/o indigeneity is based on several claims (see Cotera and Saldaña-Portillo, 2015). First, it is based on Mexicans' long tenure in North America. This, however, raises the question of scale: does North American indigenous count as US indigenous? Some American Indians say 'no'. In response, Chicanas/os charge that American Indians are reifying the colonizers' borders. A second pillar of Chicana/o indigeneity is the belief that their ancestors originated in what is now the US southwest and migrated south. This supposed homeland, Aztlán, actually appears on several maps.² As Chicana/o activists began reclaiming their indigeneity, they drew heavily on an Aztec heritage: Nahuatl, Aztec art, dancing, and Day of the Dead celebrations. Aztlán is even the name of Chicana/o studies' foremost journal. Ironically, activists were actually celebrating an imperial power, since the Aztecs conquered many Indian nations (Contreras, 2008; Urrieta, 2012).

A third claim to Chicana/o indigeneity is colonization by Spain and US colonization of Mexico. Mexicans lost land, power, status, and rights through the Mexican-American War. The parallels between Indian and Mexican dispossession have long been noted (Horsman, 1981). 'That the Indian race of Mexico must recede before us, is quite as certain as . . . the destiny of our own Indians' (Thompson in Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014: 117). Mexico, as an indigenous and colonized country, continues to be subject to US domination.

A fourth and final pillar of Chicana/o indigeneity is mixing between American Indians and Mexicans, which has occurred for centuries under diverse circumstances, including pre-Columbian migrations, conquest, slavery, refuge, adoption, and everything in-between. There are more than a few Chicanas/os who claim, for example, Pueblo heritage. And though Pueblos, understandably, may not wish to claim Mexican ancestry, it is apparent in their names, language, religious practices, and such. Despite this reality, the US insists on neat boundaries, however fictitious. Indeed, the Choctaw-Apache Tribe of Louisiana was initially denied federal recognition because they speak Spanish (Klopotek, 2016).

While Chicanas/os identify as indigenous, they are not considered as such by the US, including many American Indians. This is due to the US's emphasis on blood, a specific relationship to land (Contreras, 2008: 6), and continuous existence as a polity (Klopotek, 2016). Moreover, as Miranda has noted, some American Indians refuse to recognize Chicana/o indigeneity because legitimating 'mestizos' could diminish their own status (in Hartley, 2012: 61). Others see Chicanas/os as simply another ethnic group desiring indigeneity (Cotera and Saldaña-Portillo, 2015). These denials of recognition make Chicana/o indigeneity precarious.

Complicating claims of indigeneity is the fact that Chicanas/os are categorized as white, although they have never been treated as such

(Lopez, 2003; Menchaca, 2001). White status is the result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Mexico insisted on classifying its people as white to shield them from US racism. The US conceded because of its unwillingness to tolerate racial ambiguity, which Mexicans epitomized, and because it sought to categorize all Indians in the newly acquired territory as 'savage', in order to justify continued dispossession and war, particularly against the Apache and Comanche (Saldaña-Portillo, 2016: 179).³ Chicanas/os' legal whiteness and the various attempts to erase their indigeneity illustrate the power of the state in shaping racial and political subjectivity.

It is because of such a tangled history that Chicanas/os desire to reclaim their past. Chicana/o indigeneity is rooted in a 'longing for a pre-colonial past that can never be known. The allure of Indigenous myth is strong as it may seem to provide a new grammar with which to challenge European and Euro-American domination of Native America' (Contreras, 2008: 165). But this reclaiming is not just about identity, it is also about grieving (Cotera and Saldaña-Portillo, 2015; Saldaña-Portillo, 2016; Contreras, 2008). Much has been lost through colonizations and conquest, and Aztlán addresses that grief.

V Aztlán: Colonization and decolonization

Aztlán, as Chicanas/os' mythical homeland, embodies a binational spatiality (Saldaña-Portillo, 2016). As a diasporic and transnational population, Chicanas/os must reconcile their relationship to two places. Their connection to Mexico (and indigeneity) is apparent in the Aztecs, while the need to fit somehow in the US is expressed through Aztlán.

As the ancient homeland of the Mexica, Aztlán is located in the US southwest. Chicana/o activists reappropriated the territory Mexico lost to the US and called it Aztlán. This

was very strategic. First, activists were fashioning a homeland for themselves.

For Chicanos the concept of Aztlán signaled a unifying point of cohesion through which they could define the foundations of an identity. Aztlán brought together a culture that had been somewhat disjointed and dispersed, allowing it, for the first time, a framework within which to understand itself. (Anaya and Lomeli, 1989: ii)

Aztlán not only performed internal work, but it also did important external work. Essentially, activists claimed land that had been 'stolen' from Mexico through the war, as their ancient homeland. This not only foregrounded an imperialist war fueled by manifest destiny (Horsman, 1981), but challenged their perceived status as foreigners and 'illegal immigrants'. Activists routinely reject imperialist boundaries with the refrain, 'We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us'.

While Aztlán is clearly a decolonial act, it is also true that other peoples were living on the territory when Chicanas/os claimed it – including the Navajo, Apache, Comanche, Pueblo, Tohono O'odham, Mojave, Paiute, the many native peoples of California, and binational tribes, such as the Yaqui. While many American Indians have engaged in political alliances with Chicanas/os, I see Aztlán as problematic. For over 45 years Chicana/o activists have imagined their homeland on the territories of dispossessed people. Certainly it is understandable why Chicanas/os would want to claim these lands, but at the very least such a decision must be handled with respect, honesty and in a spirit of solidarity. As far as I know, Chicanas/os never collaborated or consulted with American Indians on Aztlán. As such, Aztlán is simultaneously a decolonial and colonizing gesture.

American Indians are cognizant of this. While there have been moments of solidarity, and Chicanas/os have been granted membership in such organizations as the International Indian Treaty Council, some reject Chicanas/os as

indigenous, as noted earlier (Cotera and Saldaña-Portillo, 2015: 552). These tensions are readily apparent in New Mexico, which has the largest land-based Mexican population in the US. The land grant struggles of the 1960s were one of the rallying points of the Chicana/o movement and were emblematic of their colonized status. Hispanos have historically celebrated their long history in the region, but American Indian activists have begun challenging the dominant narrative of Spanish colonization. The Red Nation recently protested the historical re-enactment of La Entrada, which marks Spain's reconquest of Santa Fe in 1692. It was not well-received by Hispanos. One local responded, 'This is our town. You had your chance and you lost' (Chacón, 2016). Such sentiments cannot be dismissed. While it is understandable why Chicana/o studies is reluctant to acknowledge settler colonialism, both intellectual integrity and political commitment require recognizing Chicanas/os' multiple subjectivities.

VI Conclusion

By analyzing Chicana/o studies' muted response to settler colonialism I hope to not only encourage the discipline to acknowledge the multiple subjectivities of Chicanas/os, but also show geographers the importance of studying relations between minoritized populations. It should be apparent that studying the political and racial subjectivity of any group is a deeply spatial exercise. Increasingly, scholars of indigeneity are drawing on geography, both theoretically (Saldaña-Portillo, 2016; Goeman, 2013) and through popular education projects, such as Mapping Indigenous LA (<https://mila.ss.ucla.edu>). The question of indigeneity raises issues of land, place, borders, migrations, human-environment relations, and empire – questions that are central to geography. But it also raises questions that geography is less steeped in. I tread carefully here. I refuse to

issue the typical call, 'geographers should be studying this'. I do not think white geographers should rush to study the dynamics I have outlined. White people studying conflict between racially subordinated groups is ethically and politically loaded. This does not mean they should not do it, but it requires a particular set of experiences and commitments to do so in a way that does not negatively impact already marginalized groups. Rather, I simply wish to underscore how much geography is missing given our demographics and dominant approaches to studying race. Hopefully, one day when the discipline is more diverse, such a call could be made, but we are not there yet. Addressing settler colonialism is a long, painful, and difficult process, yet grasping its many manifestations is essential.

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Notes

1. I use the term American Indian because, while problematic, it is legible.
2. The Gemelli map of 1704 traces this migration and Aztlán appears on the Disturnell Map of 1847.
3. The Pueblo were the exception because they were sedentary.

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