

CHAPTER 1



Latina/o History and Latina/o Studies

Latina/o history traces its origins to the late 1960s and 1970s. During this era of social and political movements, the fields of Chicano Studies and Puerto Rican Studies took root, as student activists demanded access to institutions of higher learning and a curriculum that included their histories and experiences. Reflecting the regional dimensions of these communities, Chicano Studies emerged in the Southwest and Puerto Rican Studies in the Northeast. Both developed as interdisciplinary fields of study, as scholars challenged the disciplines that had too often rendered Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans invisible, inferior, and/or stereotyped, and as scholars sought new research methods and theoretical approaches to tell the histories and experiences of those long overlooked. The historical analysis of Chicanas/os and Puerto Ricans in the United States paralleled the emergence of other "new" histories that sought to uncover and tell of people's everyday lives, moving beyond historical accounts that focused exclusively on leaders, institutions, and major events like wars. Influenced by civil rights struggles and feminist movements in the United States, as well as decolonization movements in developing countries, Latina/o history sought to highlight the struggles of Latina/o workers, activists, and community organizers in the United States. Hence, Latina/o history emerged as a field in dialogue both with the new social histories and with the interdisciplinary fields of Chicano and Puerto Rican Studies.

As the diversity of Latina/o populations in the United States increased and geographic dispersion brought Latina/o populations to shared communities, more encompassing approaches to Latina/o history and Latina/o Studies took shape. Including peoples whose ancestry links them to the many countries of Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean, Latina/o history is necessarily comparative history, paying attention to the specificity of country of origin and national identities, while seeking overarching theoretical and thematic lenses. It is also often transnational history, looking to the causes of migration and the ongoing connections that people, institutions, and global dynamics create between countries of origin and Latinas/os in the United States. Latina/o history remains part of the broader interdisciplinary field of Latina/o Studies. Indeed, interdisciplinarity is often the only way to begin telling the histories of more recent arrivals to the United States.