

PALOMAR COLLEGE
Association of Latinos and Allies for Student Success

ALASS



Latino/a/x Terminology Guide

Identity is a central conversation in our community. There are various categories that our population use to self-identify, and each one has a different meaning. Below is a list of the most common categories and their meanings. Read and familiarize yourself with these definitions; while they are very general, they are meant to improve your understanding of these identities and to create healthy discussion.

The *Casta* System under Spanish Colonialism

The Spanish colonial system was very specific and intentional on racializing the population for the purpose of giving certain people privilege and status (Spanish and colony born Spanish descendants), while denying these things to others (“mixed race and non-mixed people”) such as *mulato*, mestizo, native and black.

The issue of race and racial categories has been a salient topic for our community for more than five hundred years, and this is still present in most of the world where European colonialism took place (including the United States).

Identity Labels in the United States

Indigenous to the Americas - Are people who descend from the original First Nations; present in the Western Hemisphere at first contact with European colonizers.

Native American - This term is like Indigenous, however, in the United States this term is both a legal and political concept only applicable to members of a federally recognized tribe, nation or band. Native American tribes are considered sovereign nations based on their existence pre-contact, historical lineage, and the signing of treaties with the federal government. Native Americans are the only group in the United States that are required to prove their blood quantum or their percentage of blood that makes them native.

At the same time, this term also applies to people who are not from federally recognized tribes who self-identify as Native Americans. For example, the 2020 US census included Mayan and Aztec as Native American, which then means that the U.S. federal government understands that any of the 54 Mexican First Nations and people of Native descent from Central American and its descendants qualify as Native American within this definition. Within these definitions a significant number of the population of Mexicans, Chicanos, Mexican Americans, and Central Americans are Native American.

The Issue with this term - As mentioned above this term has legal implications, but it also creates major obstacles for the mental decolonization of descendants of Native people from outside the United States.

Mexican - A person can be Mexican based on two things: by nationality (country of birth) or by inheriting the Mexican culture. Therefore, a person born in Mexico is Mexican even if their parents are from Germany or the U.S. A person of Mexican born parents or grandparents who continues to practice the Mexican culture can be Mexican.

When the Mexican empire was born in 1821 and later the Mexican Republic in 1823-1824, in theory all people in Mexico in 1824 were considered Mexican. However, the people who first ruled Mexico were for the most part descendants of Spaniards or had a colonized mentality (therefore benefited the most from Mexican Independence) not the Indigenous people of Mexico.

The issue with this term - Most Mexican people think they are Mestizo, meaning “mixed race.” This idea was created to validate the birth of the nation state called Mexico. Most Mexican people who recognize their native heritage mistakenly identify with the Aztecs. There is another set of individuals who detest their native heritage and their own skin color.

A large percentage of the Mexican people are descendants of the 54 Native Nations of what Mexico is today. A smaller but significant percentage of the remaining people are descendants of African, Asian, European, Middle Eastern, and other people of the world.

The terms “Mexican” and “Mexico” are post-colonial inventions to benefit the nation state and all those who do not mind assimilation into Mexican culture. The Mexican state as the U.S. is a settler state, and until very recently, it has worked very little in favor of the original people of Mexico or Afro-Mexicans.

As we begin to focus our attention to the issues the Black population of the U.S. and the world face, we need to also continue to decolonize the way we think about other identities.

Mexican Americans - This term was born at the end of the U.S.-Mexican War in 1848. The people from Mexican descent left on the northern part of the new political border were the first Mexican Americans. A Mexican American is a person born in the U.S. with Mexican heritage.

The issue with this term - Assimilation is a huge issue in our community. It does not take too much time or too many generations for people to forget their Mexican heritage. The issue with this is that some Mexican Americans, as others on this list, (except Chicanos) may often work toward and support ideas that go against the interest of their own people.

Chicano - This term was born in the Chicano Movement which took place at the end of the 1960's and during the 1970's in the U.S. (mostly in the former Mexican territories). Chicano has political underpinnings in an active effort to embrace cultural and ethnic roots. A Chicano is a person who is typically a Mexican or Mexican American in the U.S.

The issue with this term - Some argue that this term excludes many other people who want to identify as Chicanos and are not Mexican American.

Hispanic - This term refers to a person of Iberian Peninsula (Spain) ancestry via a cultural or linguistic connection, in other words, people from Spain and its descendants. This concept is connected to a colonial experience. Hispanic is the official category used by the U.S. Federal Government to refer to all Spanish speaking people in the U.S. since 1980.

The issue with this term - This holds a connection to a European background, and it has been used as a racial supremacist reference and on intentional distinction from the mixed race or Native or African heritage. People who over generations colonized parts of what today is the American Southwest and Florida consider themselves Hispanic. They are people who claim to be of Spanish or European heritage and in many cases consider themselves better than mixed race people.

For example, some people of Mexican descent in New Mexico and Southern Colorado call themselves Spanish American not Chicano, Mexican, or Mexican American. While others call themselves *genizaros*, recognizing their native heritage.

Latino - This term derives from the concept of Latino America or Latino Americanos. This term also has a direct connection to a colonial experience. It connects all people of the Americas who speak Spanish as a group based on a common language and a common colonial experience under the Spanish. This term has also been used by the U.S. government since 1997 to refer to people of Latin American descent.

This term also refers to an ancestry going back to Central Italy or ancient Latium whose language was Latin. They were the first ones to call themselves Latinos.

Another definition refers to Latinos as the people of the cultures of the Romance languages. These languages include Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian. Therefore, all Italians, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Romanians, and Portuguese, as well as all those Latin Americans whose language is Spanish or Portuguese (an English-speaking person from Jamaica would not qualify) are **Latinos**. Before the 1990's Italian Americans called themselves Latinos.

The issue with this term - Again, this term is connected to language and colonialism. The Latino term describes a common colonial experience among various groups; however, the unique experiences may go unrecognized through generalizations. It is critical to seek understanding prior to defining oneself by these terms.

Latinx - This word is a continuation of the term **Latino** but goes a step further because it attempts to be gender neutral and more inclusive. The purpose behind this term is to acknowledge intersectionality within the Latinx community and to add a non-conforming noun to the grammatical gender system (feminine and masculine) in the Spanish language. Since 2010, new terminology has been developed to go further, replacing the x with various vowels.

The issue with this term - Most members of the community do not identify with Latinx. Many also feel that this term is further colonizing and ignoring indigenous roots and culture. On the other hand, Latinx has aligned with many community members who adhere to non-binary gender identities. As this term is mainly used in U.S. academia, many others oppose it because it changes the Spanish language.

Afro-Mexicano - People from African descent have been present in our community since the landing of Columbus of this continent in 1492. Settlers and founders of important pueblos like San Diego, Los Angeles, San Antonio, Santa Fe were black. Coastal Mexican states like Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Veracruz have a significant Afro-Mexicano population. The State of Coahuila neighboring Texas has an Afro-Mexicano community that came from the U.S. as well. The Underground Railroad was just one of the journeys escaped enslaved Africans took. Some enslaved Africans also escaped into Mexico via southern Texas mostly.

Spanish Caribbean/Afro-Caribbean/Afro-Latino - Islands of the Caribbean including Cuba, Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic, lands of the Taino of the Arawak indigenous people that became Spanish Colonies in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Later, Spaniards imported African slaves to keep exploiting the native islands. The blend of two people paved the way for the Afro Caribbean identity and culture.

This case would repeat itself over and over through the mainland of the American continent including the United States.

Conclusion

The importance of one's heritage, history, and journey can be complex, which makes it difficult to categorize a diverse group of people from different regions into one. As with other movements, people should be free to self-identify to the best of their knowledge.

The concept of race was socially constructed to create a system of privilege that would benefit the colonizer versus the colonized. This is the very system that took away vast amounts of land from native people, kept Africans into slavery, and today views brown people as foreigners in their own continent. A system that grants one group citizenship and rights while denying a status and rights to another. These colonial-like mentalities survived and are part of the very DNA of nation-states such as the United States.

Therefore, the color blindness or the "one race, the human race" mentality does not help in validating the experiences and journeys of non-privileged oppressed peoples.

Last year, the 2020 Census included Aztec and Mayan as two Native American categories, meaning that Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano, and Central American peoples can choose Native American for the racial category. The results will be interesting and will add to the conversation of identity in the future.

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