To me, you have to declare yourself a Chicano in order to be a Chicano. That makes a Chicano a Mexican-American with a defiant political attitude that centers on his or her right to self-definition. I’m a Chicano because I say I am.

But no Chicano will agree with me because one of the characteristics of being Chicano is you don’t agree with anybody, or anything. And certainly not another Chicano. We are the only tribe that has all chiefs and no Indians. But don’t ever insult a Chicano about being a Chicano because then all the other Chicanos will be on you with a vengeance. They will even fight each to be first in line to support you.

It’s not a category that appears on any U.S. Census survey. You can check White, African American, Native-American, Asian, Pacific Islander and even Hispanic (which Chicanos hate). But there is no little box you can check that says Chicano. However, you can get a Ph.D. in Chicano Studies from Harvard and a multitude of other universities. You can cash retirement checks from those same prestigious universities after having taught Chicano Studies for 20 years, but there still no official recognition from the government.

No wonder Chicanos are confused.

So where did the word Chicano come from? Again, no two Chicanos can agree, so here is my definition what I think. In true Chicano fashion, this should be the official version.

The word “Chicano” was originally a derisive term from Mexicans to other Mexicans living in the United States. The concept was that those Mexicans living in the U.S. were no longer truly Mexicanos because they had given up their country by living in Houston, Los Angeles, “Guada La Habra,” or some other city. They were now something else and something less. Little satellite Mexicans living in a foreign country. They were something small. They were chicos. They were now Chicanos.

If you lived near the U.S.-Mexican border, the term was more or less an insult, but always some kind of insult. In the early days, the connotation of calling someone a Chicano was that they were poor, illiterate, destitute people living in tin shacks along the border. As soon as they could get a car loan and could move farther away from the border, the term became less of an insult over the years. But the resentment still lingered.

Some ask “Why can’t you people just all be Hispanic?” Same reason that all white people can’t just be called English. Just because you speak English or Spanish does not mean that you are one group. Hispanic is a census term that some dildo in a government office made up to include all Spanish-speaking brown people. It is especially annoying to Chicanos because it is a catch-all term that includes
the Spanish conqueror. By definition, it favors European cultural invasion, not indigenous roots. It also includes all Latino groups, which brings us together because Hispanic annoys all Latino groups.

Why? Because they’re Latino and it’s part of their nature. (Aren’t you glad you asked?)

So what is a “Latino?” (It’s like opening Pandora’s box, huh?) “Latino” refers to all Spanish-speaking people in the “New World” – South Americans, Central Americans, Mexicans, and Brazilians (even though they speak Portuguese). All those groups and their descendants living in the United States want to be called Latinos to recognize their Indian roots.

Mexicans call it having the “Nopal” in their face, that prickly pear cactus with big flat leaves that Mexicans eat, revere, and think they look like. When you go to Mexico and walk down the street in Mexico City, it’s like walking through a Nopal cactus garden. Nopal is everywhere.

For Latinos who don’t want to be so “Nopalese,” there’s always “Mexican-American.” Or the dreaded “Hispanic” that should only be used when faced with complete befuddlement from the person asking what you are.

Because I am the only official version of what being Chicano is, I say Mexican-American is the politically correct middle ground between Hispanic and Chicano. Like in the song I wrote to be sung by a Chicano trying to be P.C. “Mexican-Americans; don’t like to just get into gang fights; they like flowers and music; and white girls named Debbie too.”

All those names made it confusing for me growing up. I lived in an all-black neighborhood, followed by an all-white one, and other kids always called me Mexican in both neighborhoods.

It never bothered me until one day I thought to myself “Hey, wait a minute, I’m not Mexican.” I’ve never even been to Mexico and I don’t speak Spanish. Sure, I eat Mexican food at family gatherings where all of the adults speak Spanish, but I eat Cheerios and pizza and hamburgers more. No, I’m definitely not a “Mexican.” Maybe I was “Mexican-ish,” just like some people were “Jew-ish.”

These thoughts all ran through my mind when I chased down an alley by five young African-American kids. “Yo, Messican!” they called out in their patois (slang). I stopped in my tracks and spun around. “I’m not a Mexican!” I shouted defiantly. They stopped too, then stared at me. The leader spoke, “Fool! What you talking ’bout? You Mexican as a taco. Look at you.”

“No,” I said. “To be a Mexican, you have to be from Mexico. You’re African-American. Are you from Africa?”

“N–. You crazy. I’m from South-Central, just like you.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about!” I said. “Did anybody knock on your door and ask you did you want to be African-American?”

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“Hell no! The social workers don’t even knock on our door, they too scared,” he said, cracking everyone up.

“Then why you letting people call you whatever they want? What do you want to be called?” I asked.

He looked at the others, thought about it for a few seconds and then said proudly, “I’m a Blood.”

“Ooo-kay,” I said making it up as I went along. “Then you’re a Blood-American.”

That seemed to go over well. They all nodded. “Yeah, we Blood-American.”

“Well, then go out and be the best Blood-Americans that you can be. Peace, brothers, I got to blow.” I walked away and so did they. Self-identification saved the day. Yet, I still was dissatisfied with what I wanted to call myself.

When I got home, there was a party going on. A bunch of relatives had come over for dinner and everybody was sitting around gabbing and drinking beer. My Uncle Rudy was in the middle of a story: “So, I took the car into the dealer and he said, ‘Yeah, the repairs gonna run you about $250.’ Two-fifty? Estas loco? Hell, just give me a pair of pliers and some tin foil. I’ll fix it – I’m a Chicano mechanic. Two-fifty, mis nalgas.”

And that was the defining epiphany. A Chicano was someone who could do anything. A Chicano was someone who wasn’t going to get ripped off. He was Uncle Rudy. He was industrious, inventive, and he wants another beer. So I got my Uncle Rudy another beer because, on that day, he showed me that I was a Chicano. Hispanic my ass, I’ve been a Chicano ever since.

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*Cheech Marin, Originally published in the Huffington Post. This is the first article in a three-part series on “What is a Chicano” by actor, director, and art advocate Cheech Marin.*