Refiguring Aztlán

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One image central to Chicano/Chicana intellectual and social thought has been the figure of Aztlán. Too often, the name of this mythic homeland is either dismissed as part of an exclusionary nationalist agenda or uncritically affirmed as an element essential to Chicanismo. In refiguring Aztlán, we move toward a conceptual framework with which to explore the connections between land, identity, and experience. Significantly, these connections become centrally relevant as the political, social, and economic relationships between people and place grow ever more complicated and fluid. The problems posed by Aztlán as a site of home and dispossession represent the types of discursive engagements many different constituencies have, in their own idiom, undertaken. Beyond the dynamic issues posed by the questions of national origin—one in four people living in California today, for example, were born outside the U.S. national border—are the issues of shifting genders and sexualities, the interrogation of national identification, and the investigation of indigenous ancestry, all areas interrogating the relation between locality and identity.

Within a Chicana/o context, Aztlán as the mythic Aztec homeland has served as a metaphor of connection and unity. During the nearly thirty years of its modern incarnation, Aztlán has come to represent a nationalist homeland, the name of that place that will at some future point be the national home of a Chicano people reclaiming their territorial rights. It has also come to represent the land taken by the United States in its nineteenth-century drive to complete its manifest destiny. The current controversy over border control in the Southwest is then but the latest battle in the retaking of Aztlán, a retaking

represented by the migration and immigration of Latinos to the United States through both legal and extra-legal means. Aztlán also stands as an index within Chicana/o cultural production as the grounds of contested representations: a site of numerous resistances and affirmations. These multiple significances of Aztlán indicate its durability. Locating the source of this durability, naming that which energizes it, forms one of the central tropes in discussions of Aztlán. The present essay is no exception. It seeks to trace some of the historical, literary, and intellectual discourses on the meanings of Aztlán. The object is not to conclude that one of these discourses serves to better describe or locate Aztlán. Rather, I argue that at stake is less the worth of Aztlán as cultural/critical signifier so much as its role in shifting the horizon of signification as regards Chicano/a resistance, unity, and liberation. As the following discussion serves to illustrate, Aztlán remains significant precisely because it functions as an empty signifier. I briefly elaborate this point at the close of the essay.

To call Aztlán an empty signifier is not to say that the term is vacuous or meaningless. On the contrary, if anything, Aztlán is overly meaningful. From a historical perspective, for example, three moments of contestation are evoked in the naming of Aztlán: the Spanish invasion of the Aztec Empire, the appropriation of Mexican lands by the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the immigration to (or reconquest of) the U.S. Southwest by Mexicanos and Central Americans in the contemporary era. But, to be fair, for many in the Chicano "community," Aztlán signifies little; it is the political, social, and cultural Chicano/a elite of a particular stripe for whom Aztlán resonates as an icon imbued with some historical meaning. Five hundred years of European presence in the Americas is contested by an assertion of the indigenous, by an affirmation of native civilizations, by the recollection of Aztlán.

Even though it does not quite add up as a political or cultural metaphor, the lure of Aztlán seems irresistible to the Chicano intelligentsia. The term inevitably calls up difficulties in relation to its self, difficulties that lead the reclamation of Aztlán to take on numerous forms. From a literary and cultural critical position, Daniel Alarcón argues that Aztlán can best be understood as a palimpsest, as "a trope that allows a more complex understanding of cultural identity and history" (1992, 35) given that "Aztlán has been used to obscure and elide

important issues surrounding Chicano identity, in particular the significance of intracultural differences" (36). Cherrie Moraga has rearticulated the nationalist concerns associated with Aztlán, expanding its metaphorical qualities to reconnect it to different forms of social struggle. Thus Aztlán as a metaphor for land stands as an overdetermined signifier:

> For immigrant and native alike, land is . . . the factories where we work, the water our children drink, and the housing project where we live. For women, lesbians, and gay men, land is that physical mass called our bodies. Throughout Las Américas, all these "lands" remain under occupation by an Anglo-centric, patriarchal, imperialist United States. (1993, 173)

From a sociological position, Mario Barrera describes Aztlán as a locus of difficulty, the site of struggle for Chicano equality and community. This struggle forms the catalyst driving Chicano political activism and, consequently, the engine leading to an accelerated assimilation "seen most dramatically in the overwhelming loss of fluency in Spanish by the third generation [of Mexican immigrants, but also seen] in the trend toward residential dispersion and the rising rate of intermarriage" (1988, 5).[1] I, too, elsewhere have argued that Aztlán has shifted from signifying a homeland to signaling a complex of multiple subjectivities called the borderlands.[2]

Each of these positions regarding Aztlán is limited in its scope and can be contested at numerous turns. Viewing Aztlán as a place of *mestizaje*, of multiple and simultaneous subjectivities, elides the way in which notions of the borderlands change depending on their contextualization: whether from a historiographic, sociological, cultural, ethnographic position. Arguing that assimilation is the problematic result of political engagement erases the de-indigenization undergone historically by mestizos and overlooks the dynamic sociocultural contributions made by continuous migration and immigration to the United States. To recast Chicano nationalist concerns within a larger framework of indigenous rights does not fully address the historical and cultural specificities enacted within different localities of political struggle. Understanding Aztlán primarily as a trope does little to address the specificities of Aztlán as a contestation of power.

Aztlán and the Plan

In large part, the elusive and powerful quality of Aztlán as a signifier has to do with the history of its production. Aztlán was introduced to Chicana/o discourse with "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," drafted in March 1969 for the Chicano Youth Conference held in Denver, Colorado. The question in regard to "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" is how it enacted Chicano/a self-affirmation and determination. Aztlán marks a matrix where at least two seemingly contradictory strands of Chicano thought meet. On the one hand, the term "Chicano/a" signifies an identification with struggles for change within or the transformation of socioeconomic and political systems that have historically exploited Mexicans and people of Mexican ancestry. The focus along this trajectory is on the transformation of material conditions, on gains in a real economic and political sense.[3] On the other hand, the term "Chicano/a" identifies a subjectivity marked by a heritage and culture distinct from and devalued by Euro-American society. The interplay between these two meanings of the term Chicano/a is complex and not at all resolved. Although the claims for Chicano cultural agency have been to a greater or lesser degree effective, their translation into social empowerment has been largely unsuccessful. This tension between the social and cultural polarities within Chicana/o activism is made evident in the various articulations of the term Aztlán.

Aztlán as a signifier marking the completion or return of the Chicano to a homeland suggests both cultural and social signification.[4] As the representation of place, Aztlán makes claims to a political and economic self-determination not dissimilar to those asserted by indigenous populations throughout the world. As a symbol of unity, Aztlán indicates a type of cultural nationalism that is distinct from—though meant to work hand-in-hand with—social activism. The sense of a double signification resounds in "El Plan de Aztlán":

> Brotherhood unites us and love for our brothers makes us a people whose time has come and who struggle against the foreigner "Gabacho," who exploits our riches and destroys our culture. With our heart in our hands and our hands in the soil, We Declare the Independence of our Mestizo Nation. We are a Bronze People with a Bronze Culture. Before the world, before all of North America, before all our brothers in the Bronze Continent, We are a Nation, We are a Union of free pueblos. We are Aztlán. (1969, 403)

Against the Euro-American, the "Gabacho," the plan condemns he who "exploits our riches" and simultaneously "destroys our culture." These two spheres in which violence occurs are—within the logic of the plan—equitable but not identical. One represents the riches of land and labor, commodities within sociopolitical and economic systems of exchange. The other manifests self-identity and cultural independence. The tension between cultural and political autonomy makes itself felt in the image of the Chicano community as at once affirming culture ("With our heart in our hands") and nation ("and our hands in the soil"), both coming together in the formation of a "Mestizo Nation." What this nation consists of—beyond the essentializing and vague vision of a "Bronze People" with a "Bronze Culture" forming a "Union of free pueblos"—remains unspoken.

There are those who want to claim Aztlán as the embodiment of a successful unity between the cultural and political. As a student of both religious studies and legal discourse, Michael Pina argues that Aztlán represents the successful union of the spiritual and social:

> On one level Chicano nationalism calls for the re-creation of an Aztec spiritual homeland, Aztlán; on another, it expresses the desire to politically reconquer the northern territories wrested from Mexico in an imperialist war inspired by American "Manifest Destiny." These two mythic narratives merged to form the living myth of Chicano nationalism. This myth spanned the diachronic chasm that separates the archaic contents of cultural memory from the contemporary struggle for cultural survival. (1989, 36)

In effect, Pina argues that the evocation of Aztlán bridges "the diachronic chasm" between past indigenous identity and contemporary social activism as well as spanning the gap between cultural and political agency. Rather than evoke a bridge beyond history, I would argue that Aztlán reveals the discontinuities and ruptures that characterize the presence of Chicanos in history. Although it evokes a Chicano homeland, Aztlán also foregrounds the construction of history within a Chicano context. The difficult articulation of Chicano/a his-

tory—a history that speaks of dispossession and migration, immigration and diplomacy, resistance and negotiation, compromise and irony—remains ever unresolved.

Aztlán and the Diaspora

Aztlán can at times be articulated as a rather quaint dream, a fantastical delusion:

> Through Aztlán we come to better understand psychological time (identity), regional makeup (place), and evolution (historical time). Without any one of these ingredients, we would be contemporary displaced nomads, suffering the diaspora in our own land, and at the mercy of other social forces. Aztlán allows us to come full circle with our communal background as well as to maintain ourselves as fully integrated individuals" (Anaya and Lomelí 1989, iv).

Despite such assertions, in action Aztlán marks less a wholeness than a heterogeneity of the subject position Chicana/o in terms of identity, geography, history, psychology, spirituality, and nationality. It is impossible to ignore the nomadic role Chicanos and Mexicanos have played within a diasporic history of the United States.

While invoking the diasporic in relation to the Chicano/Mexicano, one might want to tread lightly. From a political scientific perspective, William Safran argues that the concept of diaspora should be expanded to include more than that segment of a people living outside their homeland. His focus is primarily on the contemporary diaspora of "third world" people into Europe. He suggests that the term be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share a memory of, concern with, and desire for a return to their homelands. As such, Safran notes—in a move that resonates with the conclusions drawn by Mario Barrera—the "Hispanic (or Latino) community in the United States has not generally been considered a diaspora. The Mexican Americans, the largest component of that community, [. . .] are assimilating at a steady pace" (1991, 90). More important, for the purposes of his argument, Safran argues that "Mexican Americans do not cultivate a homeland myth [. . .] perhaps because the homeland cannot be easily idealized. The poverty and political corruption of Mexico (which is easy enough to observe, given the proximity of that country) stand in too sharp a contrast with conditions

in the United States" (90). This is quite a reversal of that favorite Mexican saying: "Poor Mexico. So far from God and so close to the United States." Given the means of mass communication and relative ease of international travel, it is not clear how the physical closeness of Mexico to the United States significantly affects the comparative de-idealization of it as a homeland in the minds of its diasporic population. More centrally, Mexico —as a national or cultural icon—does at many levels remain significant for most individuals self-identified as Chicano or Mexicano or Mexican-American.

More to the point, the evocation of the diasporic or nomadic indicates that there is no one ideal Subject that encapsulates the multiplicity of Chicano/a subjectivities. One cannot assert the wholeness of a Chicano subject when the very discourses that go into its identity formation—be they discourses surrounding the mutability of gender identity, sexuality, class and cultural identification, linguistic and ethnic association—are incommensurably contradictory. It is illusory to deny the nomadic quality of the Chicano/Mexicano community, a community in flux that yet survives and—through survival—affirms its own self.

This is not to dismiss either the political significance of Aztlán or the social relevance of "El Plan Espiritual." The plan does—owing much to Frantz Fanon—articulate an ambitious (if ambiguous) nationalism suggesting that the spiritual longing and physical needs of the subaltern "native" are inexorably bound together. Although Fanon argues in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the immediate effects of a cultural nationalism are difficult to gauge—"I am ready to concede that on the plane of factual being the past existence of an Aztec civilization does not change anything very much in the diet of the Mexican peasant today" (1961, 209)—he goes on to argue that "this passionate search for a national culture which existed before the colonial era finds its legitimate reason in the anxiety shared by native intellectuals to shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped" (209). By Fanon's argument, the search for an "other" space proves not to be simply an escape from the present. On the contrary, since colonial processes wish to impose rule upon the past as well as the present and future of a colonized people, the quest for a past proves to be a great act of resistance and self-affirmation: "the native intellectuals, since they could not stand wonderstruck before the history of today's barbarity, decided

to go back further and to delve deeper down: and, let us make no mistake, it was with the greatest delight that they discovered that there was nothing to be ashamed of in the past, but rather dignity, glory, and solemnity" (210). The affirmation of a glorious past becomes the condemnation of a repressive present.

Evoking a similar sentiment, "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" declares:

> In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage, but also of the brutal "Gringo" invasion of our territories: We, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán, from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny. (1969, 402–3)

The plan hearkens back to the "forefathers" as a basis for reclamation, a tenuous position at best given the diverse indigenous past of actual Chicanos. The plan, though influenced by Fanon's thought, strikes wide of the mark in relation to Fanon's final point about national culture:

> A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence. (1961, 233)

In evoking the quaintly and faintly recalled past, the plan fails to clearly articulate that which has best served Chicanos and Chicanas in the preservation of self. It does, however, help highlight a sense of historical consciousness—"the brutal 'Gringo' invasion of our territories"—that forms a central trope in Chicano/a cultural criticism. History, after all, has proved to the Chicano that U.S. society has no patience or respect (when it has time to take notice at all) for people of Mexican ancestry, U.S. citizens or not. Employing Aztlán as signifier,

Chicano activists, artists, and critics constantly write and rewrite history.

The invocation of ancestry by the plan reclaims a position and a heritage that lays claim to integrity and agency. This claim suggests, through the "call of our blood," an essentialized and biologically determined nationalism that proves finally untenable. So problematic is this essentialization that, a decade after the plan, the poet Alurista felt compelled to defend it in his explanation of Chicano cultural nationalism. Alurista was—along with Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales—one of the plan's drafters and master minds. Luis Leal notes in "In Search of Aztlán" that

> before March, 1969, the date of the Denver Conference, no one talked about Aztlán. In fact, the first time that it was mentioned in a Chicano document was in 'El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,' which was presented in Denver at that time. Apparently, it owes its creation to the poet Alurista who already, during the Autumn of 1968, had spoken about Aztlán in a class for Chicanos held at San Diego State University. (1981, 20)

As a principle player in the articulation of Aztlán, Alurista in 1981 argues that the plan "clearly stated that 'Aztlán belonged to those who worked it' (not only Xicano workers) and that no capricious frontiers would be recognized – an important point which, in the fervor of an exclusivist narrow nationalism, was quickly overlooked" (1981, 25). Alurista disavows what could be interpreted as the most exclusivist elements of nationalism evident in the plan. At the same time, he insists upon a type of transnational "nationalism," a cultural nationalism distinct from the "exclusivist narrow nationalism" of strict political delineation.

This distinction helps explain the tension between two (ultimately contradictory) veins of Chicano "nationalism" strongly influential in subsequent movements of cultural and political identification. Aztlán variously seems to signal a rationally planned nationalist movement and a mythopoetic cultural essence. Although the drafters of the plan, after Fanon, seem to view a cultural nationalism as simultaneous with a political nationalism, Aztlán came to be the hotly disputed terrain on which either one or another type of nationalism was ostensibly founded. Elyette Labarthe, discussing the

development of Aztlán, notes the importance of these disputes in the early development of Chicano self-identity: "On one side an oracular voice crackled over that of reason, on the other side a dispassionate voice piped up above that of the inspired poet, but could not quite blot it out" (1990, 79). Militant factions in the Chicano Movement, Labarthe points out, viewed Alurista's nationalism as a hollow and romanticized vision that subverted real claims to Aztlan, real political-nationalist interests. The tensions between the locally political and the universally cultural form one series of the faultlines that run through the terrain of Chicano cultural articulations.

Aztlán and the Nation

Jorge Klor de Alva implies that this rupture between cultural and political nationalisms influenced the breakdown of leadership among Chicano communities. With the eye of an anthropologist, he notes:

> On one side are leaders with a humanist bent, often schooled in literature or fine arts, who tend to focus on cultural concerns while emphasizing the cultural autonomy of the individual. Their naive cultural nationalism is ultimately too chauvinistic to promote the unification efforts needed to overcome the divisive forces of monopoly capitalism and the seductiveness of modern fragmenting individualism. On the other side are those primarily trained in the social sciences, whose research is delimited by a preoccupation with economic and political issues, and whose eyes are fixed on social structures and the work force. The radicals among them disparage the importance of culture and nationalism while focusing primarily on the significance of class. (1989, 137)

Although Klor de Alva goes on to elaborate that this schema is "deceiving in its simplicity," it nevertheless reflects a distancing between "two valuable and necessary camps" (138). The schisms between "the political" and "the cultural" within Chicano discourses run deeply. They spread out over a larger historical and geographic terrain not divided neatly into camps like "political" versus "cultural," or "historical" as opposed to "mythical." The fissures involved in Chicano nationalist claims derive from a number of different historical sources: the nationalist movements—American Indian and Black—current in

the political climate of the late 1960s; the Third World struggles for national sovereignty of the 1950s; the "nationless" status of Chicanos who, after fighting in World War II, returned to a country where they were still considered foreigners in the 1940s; the institutionalization, following the Mexican Revolution, of Mexican national culture in the 1920s and 1930s; the usurpation of Mexican territorial rights in 1848; the continuous migrations of Mexicans before, during, and after the U.S.–Mexican War; the struggle for Mexican independence from Spain begun in 1810. All these form influential trajectories that cross at the matrix of Chicano nationalism.

The influence of the Mexican Revolution on Chicano thinking in particular cannot be minimized. As Leal and Barrón note, "Immigration from Mexico to the United States from 1848 to 1910 was negligible. After 1910, however, and especially during the critical years of the Mexican Revolution (1913–1915), which coincided with the outbreak of World War I and the consequent expansion of American industry and agriculture, large numbers of immigrants crossed the border" (1982, 20). The influences on the economic and social conditions of Chicano life in the United States certainly changed as a result of the revolution. Not the least of these changes was the backlash against Mexicans that came—among other times—in the 1920s.[5]

The indigenism so valued by Chicano cultural discourses clearly draws its influence from the construction of postrevolutionary Mexican nationalism. Thus events following the Mexican Revolution—especially the institutionalization of "revolutionary" ideology—have significantly influenced the articulation of Chicano/a identification. The affirmation of native roots in the cultural identification of the Mexican begins with José Vasconcelos's service as Minister of Education under President Alvaro Obregón (1920–24). Other movements toward Chicano empowerment are prefigured in the Mexican postrevolutionary world as well. In the politico-cultural realm, one finds a strong conflict between Mexican intelligentsia who wish to ally themselves with an international Marxism and those seeking to discover the true character of Mexico. Samuel Ramos undertook *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* (1934) as a personality study of Mexico, and Jorge Cuesta's anthology of modern Mexican poetry (1928) serves as an investigation into the meaning of Mexican cultural tradition. Octavio Paz notes: "They both reflect our profound desire for self-knowledge.

The former represents our search for the intimate particulars of our nature, a search that was the very essence of our Revolution, while the latter represents our anxiety to incorporate these particulars in a universal tradition" (1950, 162). Of course the work of Paz himself has been extraordinarily influential, both as an affirmative point of reference and a sore point of rejection. Of Mexico, Paz argues:

> Ever since World War II we have been aware that the self-creation demanded of us by our national realities is no different from that which similar realities are demanding of others. The past has left us orphans, as it has the rest of the planet, and we must join together in inventing our common future. World history has become everyone's task and our own labyrinth is the labyrinth of all mankind. (173)

The embrace and rejection of the type of universalism that so interests Paz in this passage (and throughout his writing) forms a strong trajectory in the movement of Chicano cultural construction.

These strong intellectual and cultural associations with Mexico, according to Genaro Padilla, arise from a profound sense of disconnection experienced by Chicana/o writers and thinkers. They have, Padilla argues:

> a nostalgia for the Mexican homeland, especially as it has been imagined in that mythical realm of Aztlán. This impulse has manifested itself intensely in the last two decades, a period during which the Chicano, feeling deeply alienated from the foster parent United States, wished to maintain a vital spiritual link with Mexico, the model of language, culture and social behavior. This explains, in part, why Chicano cultural nationalists not only appropriated the pre-Columbian mythology of Mexico, but also its Revolutionary heroes—Benito Juárez, Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa—and affected a kinship with Mexico's common people and their history. (1989, 126)

While the longing described in Padilla's discussion might best seem to apply within a New Mexican cultural context, the kinship his argument asserts as central does inform the construction of Chicano cultural nationalism across the nation, especially as regards a nationalist alliance to progressive economic, social, and political agendas. What specific course those

agendas should take—and the role that the culture should play in relation to those agendas—forms part of the discontinuity apparent in the realm of Aztlán.

Aztlán stands as that region where the diverse political, geographic, and cultural concerns gripping the Chicano imagination meet. Alurista, as we have seen, views Aztlán as a sign whose referent is unproblematically present. From Alurista's view, the conflation of a nation and a culture seems to provide no tension. Thus, he can assert that Chicano literature "is a national literature, and will have to reflect all the levels that our nation implies, all that IS our people" (Bruce-Novoa 1980, 284). Aztlán as a Chicano nation, from this perspective, stands as an ontological certainty. The literature that will emerge from it will reflect the same nationalist concerns as any other national literatures. There is a curious elision of nation, literature, and people in Alurista's configuration of Aztlán. The term comes to represent not just the fact of sovereignty, but the fact of existence, the very being that is the Chicano—a reflection of the essentializing moves manifested by this strain of Chicano cultural articulation, an essentialization that Alurista seems elsewhere to speak against.

In "In Search of Aztlán," Luís Leal looks upon the idea of Aztlán, and the Plan Espiritual specifically, from a more historical perspective. He traces the effects and traditions of Aztlán, most particularly by documenting "the rebirth of the myth in Chicano thought" (1981, 20). "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" forms an important document and turning point in the articulation of Chicano consciousness. Through the plan, Leal argues, the Chicano "recognizes his Aztec origins" as well as "establishes that Aztlán is the Mexican territory ceded to the United States in 1848" (20). The plan articulates the affirmation of origins, both indigenous (though reified in the form of the "Aztecs") and nationalist. He goes on to note that "following one of the basic ideas of the Mexican Revolution, it recognizes that the land belongs to those who work it," making explicit the connection between Aztlán and the cultural history that enables its articulation. Leal's comments thus point toward the historical loci and salient components that make up the discursive practices associated with Aztlán. This historical perspective quickly dissolves in his essay into something else.

Leal concludes with the admonition "whosoever wants to find Aztlán, let him look for it, not on the maps, but in the most intimate part of his being" (22). His discussion, which

begins as a historical project, turns into a rhetorical one. Aztlán ceases to exist except as a vague search for spiritual centering. Sylvia Gonzales makes a similar discursive move six years before Leal, eliding the historical ground of Aztlán with an essential and ultimately romantic notion of universal "culture." In her essay "National Character vs. Universality in Chicano Poetry," Gonzales begins by articulating a sociohistorically bound notion of Aztlán: "In recognition of our oppression, the Chicano people ... searched for identity and awareness as a group, as a nation within a nation. This became the cultural, psychological, philosophical and political nation of Aztlán" (1975, 15). Aztlán thus represents a contested, resistant site. Not specifically bound to a geographic reclamation, Aztlán in Gonzales's view is a discursive construction arising out of political necessity. However, her argument quickly moves from a project of political resistance to one of eschatological dimensions. Her vision of Aztlán leaves a messianic vision of cultural universality: "The world awaits the appearance of a disciple capable of propounding the message, interpreting the underlying language of their work, which has already been proscribed. That disciple will have to be a priest, a magician or a poet" (19). This articulation of Aztlán moves from issues of self-determination to a dream of cultural salvation.

Lines of Flight

In the end, the terrain termed Aztlán comes to represent both specific geographic locales and the means of a counterdiscursive engagement. In either case its efficacy in terms of political-institutional transformation remains questionable. When compared with the other plans marking El Movimiento, "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" does not leave as distinct a political legacy. Elyette Labarthe argues that the power of "Aztlán" lies in its imaginative conceptualization of Chicano unity:

> The socioeconomic debate was to be awarded a spiritual dimension and a dynamism that were sadly lacking. The symbol of Aztlán had the power to legitimize the struggles, to cement the claims. It was a compensatory symbolic mechanism, fusing poetico-symbolic unity to socio-cultural concerns. The Chicanos who were divided by history, found in it an ancestral territory and a common destiny.

> (1990, 80)

Its compensatory function served to make it a lasting image. But, as a compensatory strategy, its political effects proved less than prepossessing.

Finally, as the arguments by Gonzales and Leal indicate, the function of Aztlán was to pronounce a minority position that staked claims for legitimacy through a cultural and ancestral primacy. In immediate terms, however, as Juan Gómez-Quiñones argues, the plan

> was stripped of what radical element it possessed by stressing its alleged romantic idealism, reducing the concept of Aztlán to a psychological ploy, and limiting advocacy for self-determination to local community control—all of which became possible because of the plan's incomplete analysis which, in turn, allowed its language concerning issues to degenerate into reformism. (1990, 124)

The political vagueness of the plan allowed it to dissipate its energies along the small faultlines of numerous cultural discourses. And this dispersal, although causing tremors in the cultural terrain of Euro-American society, did little to shake the walls and bring down the structures of power as its rhetoric so firmly proclaimed.

Aztlán as a supposed "common denominator with the claims to the *vatos locos*, *pochos*, pachucos, cholos and other mestizos" (Labarthe 1990, 80) fails. Purportedly invoked as a politically unifying metaphor, Aztlán becomes something quite different. Although politically and ideologically vague, "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" does help establish the discursive habits by which Chicano culture asserts its autonomy. Aztlán thus forms not a national but a critical region for El Movimiento. At its most efficacious moments, it comes to represent a cultural site by which to express pride in origins and heritages. The investigation of the past, the reclamation of history, the pride of place embodied in Aztlán manifests itself in the idea of Chicanismo.

The poet José Montoya explains: "*Chicanismo* is a basic concept which embodies both the Indio and the Spanish aspects of our heritage. As Chicano people we now accept the Indio side of our heritage. We somehow never had too much of a problem with our Hispanitude one way or the other. But to

be considered an Indio!" (1986, 25). The mestizaje of Montoya's exclamations forms a nexus of cultural and personal identity that first gained currency in the nationalist movements of postrevolutionary Mexico. Although the impetus for the celebration of *indigenismo* emerges from the nationalist discourses of Mexico, hegemonic views on race and culture die long and agonized deaths. Despite the ideological valorization of mestizaje, the racism present in both U.S. and Mexican societies certainly circulate in the "Mexican-American" communities. In a North American context, this means that the members of these communities are under pressure to assimilate particular standards—of beauty, of identity, of aspiration. In a Mexican context, the pressure is to urbanize, modernize, and Europeanize. Which is to say that in order to belong to larger imagined communities of the nation—particularly in the United States—"Mexican-Americans" are expected to accept anti-indigenous discourses as their own.

In this respect, Aztlán has allowed for a subjectivity that reclaims the connection to indigenous peoples and cultures. Although it does not offer a viable political platform that would allow for a reclamation of a nation, it has in varied ways provided an alternate national consciousness. It has in problematic ways allowed for another way of aligning one's interests and concerns with community and with history. This may prove to be the most lasting legacy of Aztlán. In crystallizing a sense of rightful place and identity, it has sought to enable a newfound agency. Though hazy as to the precise means by which this agency will emerge, Aztlán has valorized a Chicanismo that reweaves into the present previously devalued lines of descent.

These lines of descent do not come to us without problematic implications. Reimaginings of the past—Mexican, indigenous, Aztec, pure—are understood as true. Their revivification can, however, only be enacted through their manifestation in a conflicted present. Aztlán thus becomes a terrain of discontinuity, of disjuncture. An infatuation with tradition and the "native" represents the type of fetishization of Aztec and Mayan themes and icons critiqued by Jorge Klor de Alva: Chicanos "have consistently emphasized the form over the content of native ideology and symbolism by oversimplifying both to the point of caricaturing the intricate and enigmatic codes that veil the meanings of the original texts" (1986, 24). While an infatuation with historical "accuracy" is of course

suspect, so, too, an easy manipulation of cultural iconography must be critiqued. In this regard, Daniel Alarcón's (1992) redeployment of Aztlán as a palimpsest is very instructive. Aztlán as a cultural/national symbol represents a paradox: it seeks to stand as a common denominator among Chicano populations, yet it divides rather than unifies; it maintains cultural traditions while promoting assimilation into Anglo-American culture; it affirms indigenous ancestry while simultaneously erasing the very historical, cultural, and geographic specificity of that ancestry. Consequently, Alarcón astutely maintains: "unless Aztlán is understood in all of its layers, all its complexity, it will never be an attractive model to the diverse culture its leaders seek to encompass within its borders, borders that have been and will continue to be fluid" (1992, 62). Aztlán represents not a singular homeland, but rather borderlands between sites of alliance.[6] The borderlands mark a site of profound discontinuity between regions delimiting racial, sexual, gender, and economic identities.

To think of Aztlán as a signifier of the borderlands does not negate its historical significance. It still reaches out to the geography of the American Southwest and attempts to represent its distinct material qualities. Yet, it is also true that conceptions of the borderlands refute Aztlán as a fixed entity. Partly, the refutation of the nationalist dreams of the Chicano Movement results from the conflicted message, in which revolutionary rhetoric articulated what quite quickly became reformist demands. These reformist positions ultimately offered neither genuine self-determination nor universal liberation. Partly, the refutation of nationalist demands is because Latinos, as the fastest growing minority in the United States, have, in a sense, already reclaimed the Southwest. Partly, there remains the unshakable belief that the Southwest was never lost. Thus Aztlán as borderlands marks a site that both belongs to and has never belonged to either the United States or Mexico.

The tumultuous histories informing constructions of the U.S. Southwest mark the impossible interstices between imagination and history. In its negative recollection of repressive social forms, Aztlán as signifier marks how historically grounded Chicano consciousness is. This historical perspective serves to acknowledge the fluid mending and blending, repression and destruction of disparate cultures making up Chicanismo. A tempestuous sense of motion

therefore marks that region termed the "borderlands." Neither a homeland, nor a perpetuation of origin, the borderlands allude to an illimitable terrain marked by dreams and ruptures, marked by history and the various hopes that history can exemplify. The borderlands represent the multiplicity and dynamism of Chicana/o experiences and cultures. It is a terrain in which Mexicans, Chicanos, and mestizos live among the various worlds comprising their cultural and political landscapes.

Sergio Elizondo, among others, seeks to give voice to the idea of the borderlands. He discusses a relationship to land that Chicano/a culture has often sought to express:

> We understand now the Border between the United States of America and the Estados Unidos Mexicanos; now we would do well to consider that Borderlands might be a more appropriate term to designate the entire area over which the Chicano people are spread in this country. In so doing, we would come also to understand that the mere physical extension between the U.S.–Mexico border and, let us say, Chicago, is a fact of human dispersion, and not a diaspora of the Chicano people. It is not static for us, but rather it has always been a dynamic and natural motion motivated by laws and processes common to all cultures. Our migrations north of the old historical border have extended the geography and social fabric of Aztlán northward in all directions; we have been able to expand our communal life and fantasies. (1986, 13)

Elizondo speaks to a number of the issues that emerge as central to the Chicano cultural imagination. The problematization of heritage and tradition, the relation between Chicano cultural and social experiences, the significance of land and nation, the expansion of "homeland" and "fantasies," all inform the various movements of contemporary Chicano culture. It is interesting that Elizondo suggests the movement of Chicanos through the United States is "motivated by laws and processes common to all cultures." The desire to make Chicana/o identity "universal" still finds a voice. Neverthe-less, Elizondo's statement indicates that the notion of Aztlán has given way to a broader and more diverse vision of Chicano cultural terrain. This cultural terrain expands the realm of desire for Chicanas/os, moving it as it does across the entire

face of the United States and beyond; but it also closes a chapter on Chicano cultural identity. No longer grounded exclusively in the Southwest or border region, the borderlands expand the territorial claims of Chicanos. Elizondo portrays this expansion as simply the extension of "the geography and social fabric of Aztlán." His conceptualization does not address at all what that sign "Aztlán" signifies.

As with the articulations of Chicano nationalism, Elizondo's view of Aztlán fails to perceive the multiplicity and discontinuity evident in the histories and geographies encompassed by the signifier "Aztlán." The discussion to this point should serve to indicate that as a place, or even as a unifying symbol or image, any fixed significance ascribed to Aztlán erases the vast differences that inform the terms "Chicana" and "Chicano." The histories of Mexicans in this country are marked by a series of tensions and ruptures—cultural, linguistic, political, sexual, economic, and racial—that cut across bounded terrains, that cut across ways in which one can and cannot call one's location "home." The interstitial becomes the liminal where the living between becomes a way of moving through such definitions as Other, native, foreign, gringo, pocho, etc. The performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña addresses the multiplicity that makes up identity in the borderlands:

> My "identity" now possesses multiple repertories: I am Mexican but I am also Chicano and Latin American. At the border they call me chilango or mexiquillo; in Mexico City its pocho or norteño; and in Europe it's sudaca. The Anglos call me "Hispanic" or "Latino," and the Germans have, on more than one occasion, confused me with Turks or Italians. My wife Emily is Anglo-Italian, but speaks Spanish with an Argentine accent, and together we walk amid the rubble of the Tower of Babel of our American postmodernity. (1988, 127–28)

The identities Gómez-Peña exposes lead to a decentering of subjectivity accompanied by loss—of country, of native language, of certainty. But this leads as well to gain: a multifocal and tolerant culture, cultural alliances, "a true political conscience (declassicization and consequent politicization) as well as new options in social, sexual, spiritual, and aesthetic behavior" (129–30).[7] The desire to rediscover a homeland within the current climate of Chicano culture coexists with a much

more complex and extensive reclamation. Demands for home
are made simultaneous with calls for a reclamation of all that
is cast between, all that is devalued by other nationalist iden-
tities. An interstitial Chicano culture traces "lines of flight,"
movements toward deterritorialization.[8] Chicana/o writers and
critics most powerfully enable this type of cultural configura-
tion as they have sought to articulate the deficiencies of a
nationalism that presumes the centrality of heterosexual male
subjectivity. Their experiences suggest a textured and multi-
faceted sense of self.

Hybrid Worlds

In this context, no Chicana author is associated with the bor-
derlands more than Gloria Anzaldúa. Caught between the
worlds of lesbian and straight, Mexican and American, First
World and Third World, Anzaldúa's writing seems to exem-
plify and reflect the condition of the interstitial and liminal—
of being simultaneously between and on the threshold. In the
poem "To Live in the Borderlands Means You," the speaker
visits the various characteristics of the borderlands. The title
reads as the first line of the poem, a device immediately sig-
naling a transgression of borders and marking the thematics
of the poem. The title also allows for a shifting in syntactical
meaning. Taken alone the title signals a conflation between
the "you" the title addresses and the borderlands of which it
speaks. Melding into the poem, the title also signals the
mestizaje inherent to the borderlands:

> To live in the Borderlands means you
> are neither hispana india negra española
> ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed
> caught in the crossfire between camps
> while carrying all five races on your back
> not knowing which side to turn to, run from.
> (1987, 194)

The borderlands in the poem become a zone of transition and
not-belonging. You are not Hispanic, Indian, black, Spanish,
or white, but mestiza. Identity emerges from the racial, cul-
tural, and sexual mixture. It is a land of betrayal where
"*mexicanas* call you *rajetas*" and "denying the Anglo inside
you / is as bad as having denied the Indian or Black." A
mestizaje of linguistic and sexual identity emerges in the bor-
derland as well: "Cuando vives en la frontera / people walk

through you, the wind steals your voice, / you're a *burra* [don-
key], *buey* [mule], scapegoat /. . . / both woman and man,
neither— / a new gender." The poem's interlingual expression
and evocation of interstitial spaces represents the power of
transgression. The borderlands do not represent merely a cul-
tural or national transgression. As the imagery evoked by the
poem suggests, sexual and gender identities give way before
the transformative forces of a true mestizaje. To live in the
borderlands means transgressing the rigid definitions of sexual
and racial, national and gender definitions.

The battles of the borderlands finally are fought on a ground
in which enemies are not without. In the borderlands "you are
the battleground / where enemies are kin to each other; / you
are at home, a stranger, / the border disputes have been settled
/ the volley of shots have shattered the truce." There is a
discontinuity inherent to the borderland. From this perspective,
Elizondo is right in conflating Aztlán with the borderland; they
meld one into the other as regions of rupture where self and
other perpetually dance around and through one another.

Although one enemy remains—the homogenizing elements
of society that seek to erase any trace of "race," the mill that
wants to "pound you pinch you roll you out / smelling like
white bread but dead"—these enemies do not stand wholly
without. These are the lessons internalized through the racism
and violence that mark the borderlands. The borderlands
represent a home that is not home, the place where all the
contradictions of living among and between worlds manifests
itself. Anzaldúa articulates the difficulties and problems
inherent to this realm of discontinuity. Not offering a vision of
another land as the utopian hope for peace or justice, all the
poem can offer is advice on how to negotiate through the
ruptured terrain of the borderlands: "To survive the
Borderlands / you must live *sin fronteras* / be a crossroads."
To live without borders means that the subjectivity to which
Anzaldúa's poetry points constantly stands at the intersection
of various discursive and historical trajectories. The crossroads
that subjectivity becomes allow as well for the self to venture
down various roads, follow trails that lead across numerous—
often discontinuous, often contradictory, often antithetical—
regions: European, Indian, Mexican, American, male, female,
homosexual, heterosexual. The quest suggested by Anzaldúa's
sense of the borderlands is not toward a fixed or rigid identity.
The Chicana/o becomes a fluid condition, a migratory self who

reclaims not merely the geographic realm of Aztlán. Instead, Chicanos/as come to be seen as transfiguring themselves—moving between the worlds of indigenous and European, of American and Mexican, of self and other.

Filling the Void

The transformation of the term "Aztlán" from homeland to borderlands signifies another turn within Chicano/a cultural discourse. It demarcates a shift from origin toward an engagement with the ever-elusive construction of cultural identity. As the U.S.–Mexican border represents a construction tied to histories of power and dispossession, the construction of personal and cultural identity entailed in any multicultural project comes to the fore in Chicana/o cultural production. The move represents at this point a liberating one that allows for the assumption of various subject positions. The refusal to be delimited, while simultaneously claiming numerous heritages and influences, allows for a rearticulation of the relationship between self and society, self and history, self and land. Aztlán as a realm of historical convergence and discontinuity becomes another source of significance embraced and employed in the borderlands that is Chicana/o culture.

The tendency in these figurations and refigurations of Aztlán recast it variously as an ontological reality or an epistemological construction. Aztlán thus is repositioned and refigured as a shifting, and thus ambiguous, signifier. Ambiguity suggests—problematically—a sense of equivalence. Rather than think of Aztlán as ambiguous signifier, we might consider it "empty," a signifier that points, as Ernesto Laclau argues, "from within the process of signification, to the discursive presence of its own limits" (1996, 36).[9] This shift does not help us fix the significance of the term "Aztlán." It does, I hope, help sketch some ideas that unravel the bind to which the continued discussions of Aztlán attest. There can be two explanations why we have not, so to speak, arrived at Aztlán. On the one hand, the plan to get to Aztlán—representing nation, unity, liberation—has not been adequately articulated as yet. (This implies that the proper configuration of Aztlán is still to be enacted at some future utopian date.) Or, on the other hand, all the different articulations of Aztlán are equally valid and so we each live our own little atomized Aztlán. The

first position is obfuscatory, the second hopeless. Both run counter to that which Aztlán seeks to name.

As an empty signifier, Aztlán names not that which is or has been, but that which is ever absent: nation, unity, liberation. The various articulations of Aztlán have sought to make these absences present in the face of oppressive power based on: racial grounds and the Chicano emergence from the indigenous; historico-political grounds and the struggles over land most clearly indexed by the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848; economic grounds represented by the exploitation of laborers and most specifically farm workers; sexual and gender grounds formed by the colonization of female and queer bodies; and cultural grounds invoked by references to indigenous, folk, and popular arts. Whatever its premise, the term "Aztlán" consistently has named that which refers to an absence, an unfulfilled reality in response to various forms of oppression.

This does not help us understand why the signifier Aztlán has so haunted Chicano/a critical thought. Perhaps the ways in which Aztlán has been used in contestations of power explains something of its sustained attraction. The discourses surrounding Aztlán present themselves as the incarnation of the term: the articulation of unity, of nation, of resistance to oppressive power. Each articulation offers its particular understanding of Aztlán as its fulfillment. This is precisely the reason that Aztlán never adds up. As a sign of liberation, it is ever emptied of meaning just as its meaning is asserted, its borders blurred by those constituencies engaged in liberating struggles named by Aztlán. This simultaneous process of arrival and evacuation does not mark a point of despair, nor in describing it do I mean to disparage Aztlán. On the contrary. We cannot abandon Aztlán, precisely because it serves to name that space of liberation so fondly yearned for. As such, it stands as a site of origin in the struggle to articulate, enact, and make present an absent unity. Aztlán is our start and end point of empowerment.

Notes

1. This argument of linguistic loss is complicated by the resurgence of interest in the learning and use of Spanish by second and third generation Mexicans. See Gonzales (1997).

2. See especially chapter three of my book *Movements in Chicano Poetry*, titled "From the Homeland to the Borderlands, the Reformation of Aztlán." There is an implied teleological argument in that discussion I now reject. Consequently, the present essay attempts to draw upon, elaborate, and clarify my previous analysis. The incisive comments offered by the readers of the journal *Aztlán* have helped me greatly in this venture and I thank them. All errors, misrepresentations, and slips of logic remain stubbornly mine.

3. Here one finds a dichotomy. As Juan Gómez-Quiñones notes, Chicano leaders of the 1960s were impeded by the contradictions between their assertive, often separatist, rhetoric and their conventional reformist demands involving educational reform and voter-registration drives (1990, 141–46).

4. Thus Douglas Massey and his associates (1987) draw upon the signifier to name their study of transnational Mexican migration *Return to Aztlán*.

5. See Acuña (1972, 130–43) as well Ralph Guzmán (1974, 21–22), for examples of Euro-American reactions and ensuent legislation to "stem the tide" of Mexican immigration.

6. In this respect we might think of Chela Sandoval's discussion of U.S. feminists of color in the 1970s. She notes that feminists of color began to identify common grounds upon which they formed coalitions across boundaries of cultural, racial, class, and gender differences. Their position in the borderlands of feminism enabled a crossing across difference, a recognition of sameness amid difference, a recognition of other countrywomen and countrymen living in a similar and sympathetic psychic terrain. The differences between these men and women—differences signifying struggle, conflict, asymmetry, differences implying dislocation, dispersal, disruption—were never erased. Rather, a fuller process of recognition occurred (1991, 11).

7. Of course, this articulation is complicated by Gómez-Peña's privileged position as a member of an international artistic elite capable, economically and politically, to cross borders with relative ease.

8. The term "line of flight" from Deleuze and Guattari is meant to suggest escape from binary choices. The line of flight is formed by ruptures within particular systems or orders. It allows for third possibilities—neither capitulation to regimes nor unconditional freedom from them. The line of flight is a way out, a means of changing the situation to something other (see 1975 and 1972).

9. Laclau's discussion of empty signifiers has helped me think through some of the thorny dilemmas set in motion by the various

articulations of Aztlán. While I sympathize with his political project, I do not fully ascribe to his view that modern democracy will begin as "different projects or wills will try to hegemonize the empty signifiers of the absent community" (1996, 46). His analysis of the empty signifier itself, however, I find insightful.

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