

AZTLÁN

Essays on the Chicano Homeland

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as they journeyed southward to establish their empire and fulfill their destiny. They were seeking the power and authority that resides in that time-space interval that Mircea Eliade designates as *in illo tempore* or “in the beginning,” perhaps to sanctify their reign over Anáhuac “the land encircled by water.” A much different quest for Aztlán has been pursued by scientific investigators working throughout the past three centuries. This search for the “historical” Aztlán has been conducted by academics from various disciplines who approach myth from a more skeptical, interpretive context. Their perspective can be collectively referred to as Historicism. This approach assumes the ability to *de-mythologize* the myths of others, that is, to reduce myth to allegorical tales, proper to a prescientific worldview, but inadequate as a contemporary mode of understanding. The most recent search for Aztlán occurred within the decades of the nineteen sixties and seventies as Chicano nationalists sought Aztlán as a spiritual homeland and the object of nation-building. They romanticized their cultural connections to the primordial inhabitants of Aztlán and relied upon them as a metaphysical justification for their political program. They lived within the horizon of a mythicized history that identified Aztlán as a Chicano nation. These individuals believed Aztlán to exist as a spiritual reality, and it was their duty to establish it as a political-territorial entity.

These three hermeneutic approaches to the myth of Aztlán illustrate the difficulty involved in myth interpretation. Each approach attaches a different significance to the myth and offers competing assertions concerning its truth. Rather than attempting to discern the relative merit of these approaches this study will utilize them as an analytical framework with which to explore archaic, historical, and living dimensions of this myth. These approaches to the myth of Aztlán provide useful distinctions with which to engage in a thorough descriptive analysis of the myth. This analysis aims to contribute to a more insightful understanding of the myth of Aztlán, in particular, and the phenomena of myth in general.

Part I of this study will engage in an exegesis of the available historical documents in order to reconstruct the Aztec narrative of the myth of Aztlán. This effort will be guided by a methodological attitude known as structured empathy.² This attitude attempts to get “inside” Aztec experience of this myth through relying on knowledge of their cultural, historical, and religious contexts, the use of neutral descriptive categories and

The Archaic, Historical and Mythicized Dimensions of Aztlán

Michael Pina

According to Cecilio Robelo's *Diccionario de mitología náhuatl*, Aztlán is a synthesis or contraction of the Nahuatl word *Aztatlan*: *aztatl*, heron; *tlán*, together; close together: (place near/of the [white] herons) or place originally occupied by *los mexicanos*, from which came their name of *Aztecas*. Its location has been the object of innumerable investigations, and remains unknown even today. It is generally believed to have been north of the gulf of California.¹

Aztlán constitutes the primordial homeland of the Aztec people whose location and nature have been investigated over the past five-hundred years. Throughout this span, individuals from radically different temporal, ideological, and existential contexts have explored various dimensions of this myth. Most frequently their questions have focused on discovering the geographical location of Aztlán. First sought by religious emissaries dispatched by Moctezuma Ilhuicamina from Tenochtitlan in the mid-fifteenth century, the Aztec quest for Aztlán can be interpreted as an attempt to reconnect with their remote origins and the ancestors left behind

language, and the avoidance of evaluative bias through the suspension of judgment. The effort is to arrive at a narrative that resonates with the truth of the archaic believers, while expressing it in a language that communicates with the non-believer.

Tezozómoc's *Crónica Mexicáyotl* will serve as the main reference source in reconstructing this narrative, as it is representative of the information provided by other colonial-era chronicles. However, information from other documents contemporary to Tezozómoc's, such as the *Códice Aubin*, *Códice Ramirez*, *Anales de Tlatelolco* and *Historia Chichimeca* will be included. In addition to the chronicles there are the historical monographs composed mainly by Spanish ecclesiastics. Although these texts were written with the intention of stamping out any traces of indigenous spirituality, if approached from a critical perspective they can provide a wealth of information concerning indigenous thought and culture. The value of these texts stems from the fact that they relied extensively on indigenous informants with access to pre-Hispanic picturebooks most of which have long since disappeared. The texts that this study will draw from are: Fray Diego Durán's *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Isla de Tierra Firme* and Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia de las cosas de la Nueva España*. In addition to these previously mentioned texts, this study will consider historical works that were penned in a more contemporary era, such as the Jesuit Clavijero's *Historia antigua de México*, and Manuel Orozco y Berra's *Historia antigua de la conquista de México*, that was published in the early 1880's. This collection of texts provides ample information from which a descriptively accurate account of the Aztec narrative concerning the myth of Aztlán can be established.

Part II of this study will analyze the manner in which the myth of Aztlán has been interpreted from the perspective of historicism or what might be referred to as the "myth of history." This approach stands in contrast to the archaic consciousness from which the *sacred history* of Aztlán issued. This modern tradition of myth interpretation is implicit to the historical monographs patterned after the investigative methods of the European Enlightenment and their intellectual precursors. It is a perspective that is largely concerned with questions of an empirical nature which explains the emphasis that these types of studies place on discovering the "historical" location of Aztlán. This question involves utilizing scientific reasoning to

extract "historical" facts from the mass of myths inherent to a "primitive" consciousness. This approach operates from a worldview that remains phenomenologically "outside" of archaic mythologies such as Aztlán. The reconstruction of this type of historical analysis of the myth will work with the same documentary sources as in Part I, however, their contents will be interpreted in light of the critical attitude implicit to contemporary works such as volumes fourteen and fifteen of the *Handbook of Middle American Indians: A Guide to Ethnographic Sources*, and Benjamin Keen's *The Aztec Image In Western Thought*. These additional sources reveal the theoretical framework inherent to modern academic approaches to myth interpretation, as well as providing critiques of the main historiographies concerning the Aztecs and the myth of Aztlán.

Part III represents a radical departure from the empathetic reconstruction of the archaic myth of Aztlán and the antagonistic analytical study of its historical nature. The concern in this instance lies with exploring Aztlán as a *living myth* within the context of the Chicano nationalist movement. During the height of this movement Chicanos were existentially situated *inside* a mythic horizon that interpreted Aztlán as a vital element of their cultural heritage and political ideology. To understand the power that this myth held during this volatile period of Chicano history, this study will critique three distinct Chicano nationalist documents which illustrate the influence this myth exercised upon this movement: 1) the political program known as *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*; 2) poems from the Festival de Flor y Canto thematically concerned with the myth of Aztlán; 3) the novel by Rudolfo Anaya entitled *Heart of Aztlán*. These documentary sources reveal the depth of the Chicano commitment to the myth and symbol of Aztlán. It was embraced by a community in search of self-knowledge and self-determination and emerged as an undeniable inspiration that manifested itself in art, literature, and politics. The ubiquitous nature of Aztlán's hold upon Chicano nationalist thought and imagination reveals its vitality as a *living myth*.

Reconstructing the Archaic Myth of Aztlán

Describing the myth of Aztlán in a manner that reflects the archaic consciousness of the Aztec people requires an empathetic venture into a distant

worldview characterized by unfamiliar myths, doctrines, rituals, and experiences. It requires an awareness that the Aztec cosmos was dominated by supernatural forces which modern people have long since dismissed as "superstitious" or "mythological." In order to understand the Aztec relationship to the myth of Aztlan the modern attitude that assumes the ability to render judgment on the veracity of archaic myths must be suspended. The truth claims of the Aztec people must be taken seriously, as the intention of this reconstruction is to present the Aztec narrative of Aztlan as accurately as possible.

The discipline known as the History of Religions offers an approach well suited to the analysis of the structure and function of myth within archaic cultural settings. One of its foremost spokespersons, Mircea Eliade, offers the following definition which will serve as a frame of reference in the discussion of the myth of Aztlan in its archaic context:

In general it can be said that myth, as experienced by archaic societies, (1) constitutes the History of the acts of the Supernaturals; (2) that this History is considered to be absolutely *true* (because it is concerned with realities) and *sacred* (because it is the work of the Supernaturals); (3) that myth is always related to a "creation," it tells how something came into existence, or how a pattern of behavior, an institution, a manner of working were established; this is why myths constitute the paradigms for all significant human acts; (4) that by knowing the myth one knows the "origins" of things and hence can control and manipulate them at will; this is not "external," "abstract" knowledge but a knowledge that one "experiences" ritually, either by ceremonially recounting the myth or by performing the ritual for which it is the justification; (5) that in one way or another one "lives" the myth, in the sense that one is seized by the sacred, exalted power of the events recollected or re-enacted.³

Eliade's schema for defining myth provides descriptive categories well suited to reconstruction of the myth of Aztlan. This myth corresponds to the general morphology which he outlines as it is concerned with the acts of the Supernaturals. One of the main figures in the unfolding of this *sacred history* is the cultural hero Huitzilopochtli (Hummingbird of the south or left). This

figure is cast alternatively as an earthbound leader and all powerful deity as he guides the Aztecs on their peregrination from Aztlan to Tenochtitlan. The narrative surrounding this journey recalls how the ancient Aztecs acquired knowledge, technology, and sacred authority on their southward trek. Although centuries had passed between the time the Aztecs exited their primordial homeland and established themselves in the central valley of Mexico, they continued to have faith in the truth of this myth. The strength of this faith was demonstrated when Moctezuma Ilhuicamina dispatched priestly emissaries to retrace the route travelled by the ancients and locate Aztlan. This event marked the powerful role that myth played in the lives of archaic civilizations and the worldview that did not separate the natural and supernatural realms.

The narrative of Aztlan recounts the events of the peregrination of the Aztec people from a northern homeland of Aztlan to the founding of their empire of Tenochtitlan. Aztlan, which is also referred to as *Chicomoztoc*, place of the seven caves, is described as a place surrounded by water from which seven *calpulli* [clans/peoples] set out in a southerly direction in search of their destiny. During the course of their journey the Aztecs experienced important cultural transformations which prepared them to fulfill their divine calling. Upon their exit from Aztlan, roughly around the tenth century A.D., the Aztecs were considered lowly Chichimecas [literally "sons of dogs" or more figuratively "barbarians"], but by the time of their Mesoamerican conquests they had assimilated many of the cultural traditions of the much esteemed Toltecas. The arrival of the Aztecs on the fringes of the central valley of Mexico roughly coincides with the waning years of the Toltec empire at Tollan or Tula, which falls around 1168 A.D. Although they shared many cultural features with other nomadic tribes making their way into this territory, they differed from them in one significant respect, they spoke the Nahuatl language, which was common to both the Toltecs and many Teotihuacanos. By the time the Aztecs established their initial temple at Tenochtitlan in 1325 A.D., they had already acquired knowledge of calendrics, astronomy, architecture, agriculture and had assumed the ubiquitous deity/cultural hero, Quetzalcoatl, into their religious system.

Even with these great cultural adaptations the Aztecs remained unwelcomed immigrants into pre-Hispanic Mexico's central valley. The

area surrounding the Texcoco lake system was already densely populated by peoples with long established communities. There were a number of city-states, such as Culhuacan, that traced a direct descentance from the Toltecs. As the last group to enter this area the Aztecs were seen as intruders and were driven from place to place within the lake region. They finally established their complete independence after defeating the Tepenacas of Azcapotzalco in 1428. From that date on their imperial power grew until the arrival of the conquistadores and the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521.

One of the most indispensable documents in the reconstruction of the mythic narrative surrounding Aztlán is known as the *Códice Boturini*. This document is considered to reflect in style, content, and format the traditional pictorial manuscripts of pre-conquest times. Composed during the sixteenth century outside the accepted bounds of Spanish patronage, it is fortunate that it did not fall prey to the zealous flames of colonial proselytization. It became part of a collection of Mexican Indian documents gathered by Lorenzo Boturini Benaducci during the years 1736-1743. This codex portrays *la tira de la peregrinación de los Aztecs*, that is, their exit from Aztlán until their arrival at the hill of Chapultepec and subjugation by the Culhuacanos. A series of glyphs, ideographs, and phonetic symbols codices such as this one assisted the indigenous storytellers' memories. Although produced after the conquest, this text evidences the retention of a strong sense of historical consciousness and identity among the indigenous population.

Another excellent source in establishing the narrative of Aztlán is the *Crónica Mexicáyotl*, penned in 1609 by Don Fernando or Hernando Alvarado Tezozómoc. Tezozómoc was of indigenous ancestry and intended his work to demonstrate his status as a noble and thus preserve the privileges associated with this status. He was the son of Diego de Alvarado Huanitzin, who served as *tlatoani* or ruler of Tenochtitlan under the Spaniards, and of Francisca de Moctezuma, daughter of Moctezuma II. Much of his chronicle is an elaborate genealogy of Mexico nobility wherein he locates himself and his direct progenitors. Tezozómoc had access to a wide range of pictographical writings, oral informants, and prose narratives. From these diverse sources the author weaves an epic account of Mexico history, from their lowly beginnings as wandering *Chichimecas* to their triumph over Azcapotzalco and the establishment of their dominance over Anáhuac. He writes from a

particularly indigenous point of view, however, he is careful to avoid heaping too much praise upon the glories of the fallen empire:

Writing at the turn of the sixteenth century, Tezozómoc took care not to appear lukewarm in his Christian faith or in his loyalty to Spanish rule. He denounced the great devil and deceiver Huitzilopochtli; he expressed a proper horror at the cruelty of human sacrifice.⁴

Although Tezozómoc's version of history presents an interesting opportunity to study the influence of the colonial era's spiritual transculturation upon the indigenous consciousness, of particular interest to this study is the information he provides concerning the peregrination of the Mexica from Aztlán. His narrative is representative of the chronicles produced during this era; while discrepancies concerning dates, names, and minor events exist, the overall message of these accounts follows a consistent line.

According to the *Crónica Mexicáyotl*, the Aztecs began their long southward journey in the year 1069:

Cuando salieron los chichimecas, los aztecas, entonces de allá hacia acá salieron de Aztlán su morada en el Uno-Pedernal, 1069 años...permanecieron allá por mucho tiempo, cuando estaban allá, yacian allá los chichimecas, los aztecas en Aztlán: por mil y catorce años como viene apareciendo en la cuenta de años de los viejos; entonces hacia acá vinieron andando.⁵

This date is comparable to those found in other historical prose sources, such as the *Códice Chimalpopoca* and the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* which fix the date at 1090 A.D.; the *Anales de Tlatelolco* which places it at one *acatl* or 1155 A.D. and the *Códice Ramírez* at 902 A.D. According to the tradition Tezozómoc follows, the Aztecs had been long established in their homeland of Aztlán. This view is shared by other chroniclers and later historians who would concern themselves with Aztec antiquity. They believed Aztec origins to be rooted in the most remote past.

The idea that the Aztec possessed ancient origins is aptly if somewhat curiously, illustrated by the Dominican Diego Durán in his *Historia de las*

Indias de Nueva España e islas de Tierra Firme. In this work, published in the period from 1579-81, the good priest contends the Aztecs are one of the ten lost tribes of Israel who God had punished for their sins. Durán saw their life under the control of the devil and the Spanish conquest of their once grand empire as evidence of this view.⁶ In spite of Durán's Christian centric worldview, he does provide important details concerning Aztlán as his work reflects an abundance of indigenous sources both oral and written. He offers the following description which portrays the richness of the primordial Aztec homeland, as told to Moctezuma Ilhuicamina by the royal historian Cuauhcoatl:

...nuestros padres moraron en aquel felice y dichoso lugar que le llamaron Aztlán, que quiere decir blancura: en este lugar ay un grand cerro, en medio del agua, que llamaron *Culhuacan*, por que tiene al punta algo retuerta hacia abaxo, y a esta causa se llama *Culhuacan*, que quiere decir "cerro tuerto." En este cerro auia unas bocas o cuevas y concauidades donde auitaron nuestros padres y aguelos por muchos años: allí tuvieron mucho descanso, debaxo desde nombre *Mexitin* y *Azteca*: allí goçaron de mucha cantidad de patos de todo genero, de garzas, de cuervos marinos y gallinas de agua y de gallaretas; goçaron del canto y melodía de los paxaritos de las caueças coloradas y amarillas, goçaron de muchas diferencias de hermosos y grandes pescados; goçaron de gran frescura de arboledas que auia por aquellas riberas, y de fuentes cercadas de sauces y de sauinas, y de alisos grandes y hermosos: audauan en canoas y hacian camellones en que sembrauan maiz, chile, tomates, uauhtli, frisoles y de todo género de semillas de las que comemos y acá truxeron;⁷

In addition to this description of Aztlán, Durán and his informants introduce several synonyms or *segundo nombres* associated with Aztlán: *Culhuacan* "curved mountain;" *Chicomóztoc* "place/rock of the seven caves;" and *Quinehuayan* "the place from which one rises or sets out from." While Tezozómoc's text concurs with Durán's use of the place-name *Chicomóztoc* for Aztlán; he includes further details which indicate the possible locality of this distant land:

...Chicomóztoc se llama la roca, pues por siete partes hay agujeros, cuevas pegadas al cerro empinado, de donde vinieron a salir los mexicanos...en la población de Aztlán Aztátlan, lugar de las garzas, por eso se llama Aztlán; estaba alla en lo que ahora quizá esté muy junto, muy cercano de la muy grande margen, la muy grande ribera la que ahora llaman "Nuevo México" ellos los españoles, Aztlán Chicomóztoc.⁸

This view concerning the location of Aztlán is supported by the anonymous author of the *Códice Ramirez*, who citing the authority of ancient paintings and tradition, agrees with Tezozómoc's assessment that Aztlán is located in the territory then known as Nuevo México:

En esta tierra (Nuevo México) están dos provincias, la una llamada Aztlán, que quiere decir lugar de garzas, y la otra le dicen Teiculhuacan, que quiere decir tierra de los que tienen abuelos divinos, en cuyo distrito están siete cuevas de donde salieron siete caudillos de los Nahuatlaca, (gente que se explica y habla claro), que poblaron esta Nueva España, según por antigua tradición y pinturas.⁹

Based on the textual sources cited, Aztlán existed as a northern land encircled by water where the seven *Calpulli* lived in caves on a curved or twisted mountain. It was a paradisiacal place where the ancestral Aztecs lived in comfort and ease. Aztlán is referred to as the place of "whiteness" or herons, which indicates a lush setting teaming with flora and fauna. This land appears to have offered an environment capable of nurturing and sustaining a people without any difficulty. If this is the case, then what could possibly motivate or cause the Aztecs to leave its security and pleasant surroundings for the uncertainty of distant and unknown lands? This question leads to two distinct answers that do not necessarily contradict one another, but point to divergent streams within a wide ranging narrative.

Following the account of the *Crónica Mexicáyotl*, the Aztec exit from Aztlán is precipitated by a conflict in leadership between two male heirs that ensues upon the death of a primordial king Moctezuma. A son named *Chalchiuhtlatónac*, or called *Mexi* leads the *Mexica* out of Aztlán because

their *Acxoyates* or *acxoyatl* [a ritual tree used to adorn temples and to place the thorns used in auto-sacrifice or penance] were scattered by the followers of an older brother whose name is not known:

Y los mexicanos ya hacen penitencia allá en el lugar de su nombre Quinehuayan Tzotzompan; cuando acá depositaban sus 'acxoyates' o 'Acxoyatls' volvieron allá cuatro veces; vienen una vez cuando acá ve que están esparciéndose sus 'acxoyates' el acá los dispersa; luego allí dijo el Mexi, el Chal, 'amigos nuestros,' les dijo a los mexicanos, 'ya por eso reunimos, ya por eso salgamos hacia acá de nuestra morada Aztlán' y por eso luego le obedecieron los mexica.¹⁰

The event of desecrating or violating ritual objects within a cultural setting dominated by a religious consciousness is obviously a serious offense. In protest to this violation of ritual propriety the Aztecs decide to leave Aztlán. Yet, they were not leaving as a dejected or demoralized people, rather they left in pursuit of a destiny that was filled with promise and anticipated glory. The deity Huitzilopochtli instructed the Aztecs to leave Aztlán; under his guidance they would come to conquer new lands and rule over new peoples who would serve their needs and pay them tribute:

...fuertes mexicanos, ya que bien muy...numerosos, pues que muchos naturales, porque pues iremos, nos iremos a colocar, nos iremos a sentar, e iremos a conquistar a quienes están establecidos en el grande universo, a los naturales; y porque yo verdídicamente os digo, allá os iré a hacer vosotros reyes, vosotros seréis señores de todo cuanto hay por todas partes del mundo, y cuando seréis reyes, habrá allá, vosotros guardaréis nomás sin cuenta, sin término, sin fin serán los naturales que pagarán tributo.¹¹

Huitzilopochtli inspires the Aztecs to embark upon their epic journey.

This all-powerful deity promises them conquest and infuses them with the spirit to undertake this campaign without fear or doubt. They are a people who, according to the *Códice Ramírez* are in search of lands promised to

them by their idol. The intervention of Huitzilopochtli into Aztec history sharply contrasts the conflict laden incident involving the destruction of the *acxoyates* as the impetus behind their exit from Aztlán. It reflects the Aztec view of themselves as a people favored with divine guidance. Within this context the Aztec journey from Aztlán does not correspond to an escape from disgrace, nor a nomadic wandering, but rather assumes the sacred aura of a pilgrimage directed by a supernatural being:

...la nación mexicana, la cual como los demás salió de las tierras de Aztlán y Teuculhuacan, gente belicosa y animosa, que aprendió sin temor de grandes hechos y hazañas, política y cortesana, que salieron buscando tierras prometidos por su idolo Huitzilopochtli, por ese hicieron su peregrinación.¹²

The figure of Huitzilopochtli plays a prominent role in the series of events that lead the Aztecs from Aztlán to the founding of Tenochtitlan. While integral to the unfolding narrative of the Aztec's peregrination, he remains a rather enigmatic figure within its course. His status is never unambiguously fixed; at times he is portrayed as the high god who communicates his will through his priests; in other instances, he acts as a divine being who displays human qualities. Regardless of the guise he assumes, Huitzilopochtli functions as a cultural hero imparting vital knowledge as he intervenes into the collective experience of his people. This god-man motif runs throughout most of the chronicles concerned with this history. Tezozómoc, perhaps inadvertently, seems to capture a sense of Huitzilopochtli's dual nature as his descriptions [of Huitzilopochtli] move back and forth across the line that separates the natural and supernatural worlds. This metaphysical quality which is characteristic of archaic cultures is alien to modern cultures which stress the separation of these two realms. The following passage bears witness to Huitzilopochtli's supernatural identity, as the Aztecs carry a bundle with them that they adore and communicate with; it is identified as the god Tetzahuitl Huitzilopochtli:

Y cuando salieron de allá del mencionado, que se denomina Quinehuayan, Chicomóztoc, los que se llamaban teochichimecas, aztecas, mexi, algo traían que era depósito de ellos, bulto

de ellos al que adoraban, oían que hablaba, y le contestaban los aztecas, que les llamaba Tetzahuítl Huitzilopochtli.¹³

As a god Huitzilopochtli transforms and shapes the nature of Aztec identity, thought, and culture. Early in the course of their journey he instructs his people to change their name from *aztecas* to *mexicanos*. This illustrates his ultimate power as he possesses the authority to name things, in this instance an entire people, and thus can control their destiny. Huitzilopochtli also provides his people with technological innovations such as the deadly *atlatl* [spear thrower], bows and arrows, as well as nets for hunting and fishing.¹⁴ Although Huitzilopochtli clearly commands the power and authority of a god, he is often anthropomorphically depicted in human terms. For example, Tezozómoc records an event along the trek from Aztlan where Huitzilopochtli, in the guise of a priest, must abandon his sister named Malinalxoch due to the disruptive consequences of her malevolent ways.¹⁵ This event perhaps reveals the importance of preserving the community in Aztec life. In spite of the familial bond, Huitzilopochtli was willing to banish his sister in order to assure harmony within the community.

The abandonment of Malinalxoch, which on one level may indicate the Aztec's willingness to put the needs of the community before individual needs [an attitude essential for survival in a hostile environment], may also indicate a sort of religious schism between the followers of Huitzilopochtli and the members of a rival *calpulli*. While Huitzilopochtli is portrayed as leading the Aztec pilgrimage from its beginnings, there are at least three instances where his authority is challenged. The first is the abandonment of his sister; the second is pictographically represented in the *Códice Boturini* as a tree splitting and two groups going off in different directions;¹⁶ the third is conveyed in the story of Huitzilopochtli's birth. This third event undoubtedly confirms the dominance of Huitzilopochtli and his followers over the other *calpulli*.¹⁷

The myth of Huitzilopochtli's birth introduces two elements vital to Aztec religion and the development of their empire: 1) the identification of Huitzilopochtli with the sun and the belief that the daily astral struggle of the sun to push back the night is the "sun-god" battling his sister, *Coyol-xauhqui* [the moon], and his brothers, the four hundred stars of the south; and 2) the practice of taking of tribute, as the Aztecs follow the example of

their god who took possession of the insignias and attributes of his fallen brothers. These two events are integral to the development of the Aztec warrior psyche, which would prove an indispensable asset in the subjugation of Anáhuac.

With Huitzilopochtli firmly in control of the Aztec destiny they inauspiciously enter the central valley of Anáhuac which will soon become the heart of their empire. Following the *Crónica Mexicáyotl* in 1299 the Aztecs establish a settlement near Chapultepec [hill of grasshoppers]. However, they are soon driven from there by warriors from the city-states of Azcapotzalco, Xochimilco, and Culhuacan.¹⁸ Unable to resist their combined forces the Aztecs put themselves at the mercy of the king Coxcoxtli of Culhuacan. They plead with him to grant them "*un poquito de tu tierra allá en que iremos nosotros*."¹⁹ Coxcoxtli relents and decides to send the Aztecs to a place called Tizaapan, a rocky inhospitable place filled with scorpions and snakes. However, instead of faltering in this harsh environment, the Aztecs flourish and grow stronger. For this accomplishment, as well as their fierce abilities in warfare [as they were often called on to serve as mercenaries], they gained the admiration and fear of the region's other city-states.

Through sheer determination and perseverance, the Aztecs assure themselves of physical survival as they gradually establish themselves on the fringes of the lake region's cultural milieu. They soon realize that their lowly Chichimeca origins relegates them to an inferior status in relation to their Toltec descended neighbors. Desiring to rise above the social niche assigned to them by the surrounding people, in 1323 the Aztecs ask king Achitómetl for his daughter, that she might become the wife of their god. The king grants their wish, but to his horror discovers that his daughter has been flayed, and that her skin now ritually adorns the priest of Huitzilopochtli. Although the Aztecs believed this mode of sacrifice a great honor to bestow upon the maiden, it was too much for her father to bear as he amassed the necessary forces to drive the Aztecs from their settlement.²⁰ To escape the wrath of the vengeful father the Aztecs take to hiding among the reeds along the shores of Lake Tezoco. It was there among the reeds that the Aztecs discovered a small island upon which to take refuge. On this island they encountered the hierophany of an eagle perched upon the branches of a large cactus plant devouring a serpent. This sign informs them that they have indeed reached the "promised land." This is the place where they would establish

their city of Tenochtitlan, "lugar de tunal en la piedra." Here they would re-create the center of time and space and ritually serve their deity: that his power might radiate to the four corners of the world and preserve the life of the cosmos.

The Search for "Historical" Aztlan

The search for an historical Aztlan is guided by a critical consciousness that stands in sharp contrast to the archaic belief in a cosmos dominated by supernatural forces. The historical approach to Aztlan is marked by a skeptical attitude that considers itself outside the realm of metaphysics. Within this empirically based setting, myth is somewhat pejoratively identified as:

A purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena. Myth is properly distinguished from legend or allegory which implies a nucleus of fact.²¹

This modern conception of myth has been narrowly defined within the parameters of a tradition referred to as historicism. The attitudes implicit to this tradition have uncritically assumed a preeminence in our contemporary thinking and now lie at the foundational level of a modern consciousness. This consciousness believes that by virtue of reason, science, and above all history, it can rid itself of the "mythological" survivals of previous ages. It assumes the contemporary sources of knowledge and analysis as a standard against which the truth of a previous age can be discerned. The dominance of science, and by extension historicism, in contemporary Western consciousness has led to the emergence of a new myth. This is the myth of no myth; that "we" alone as rational beings have rid ourselves of the last vestiges of "mythological" thinking. This myth feeds a sense of superiority that has precipitated the emergence of a myopic sort of cultural imperialism that claims to be able to *de-mythologize* the myths of others. From this perspective the events of *in illo tempore* [in the beginning] appear as untenable fictions, non-realities, or as allegorical tales that no one is expected to believe.

This attitude reflects the widespread conception that only "primitive"

peoples have myths. This view has its roots in the hermeneutics of "Classical" Greece which sought to *de-mythologize* the myths of an earlier epoch. This tradition can be traced to Xenophanes' criticisms and rejection of Homer's and Hesiod's "mythological" expressions of divinity. The Greeks steadily continued to empty *mythos* of all religious and metaphysical value. Contrasted both with *logos* and, later, *historia*, *mythos* came in the end to denote "what cannot really exist."²² As Mircea Eliade states, "If in every European language the word "myth" denotes a 'fiction,' it is because the Greeks proclaimed it to be such twenty-five centuries ago."²³ This is the intellectual legacy that the West has inherited for analyzing myth. It is a particularly one-dimensional approach that has severely handicapped our attempts to come to grips with non-Western worldviews that retain a sense of their mythic past.

Armed with this perspective, investigators ranging from the colonial-era ecclesiastics to twentieth century historians have attempted to separate "fact" from "myth" concerning the myth of Aztlan. This archaic myth has proved a source of tremendous intrigue and interest as investigations seek to unveil the mystery that shrouds it in uncertainty. Their primary concern has focused on discovering the historical location of this primordial Aztec homeland, if in fact, it ever existed. The cautious stance which characterizes their efforts is perhaps conveyed in the following statement Frances Berdan makes concerning the nature of the Aztecs mythic journey: "Although numerous pictographic manuscripts and texts recorded the migration, it is now difficult to separate fact from myth, and to establish clearly many details."²⁴ While Berdan's statement concerning the Aztec pilgrimage reflects a normative academic stance toward myth, it takes on an added significance if viewed in light of what Sahagun's informants report concerning the nature of the Aztec historical record. It seems that in 1433, shortly after the Aztecs had consolidated their victory over the Tepanecas of Azcapotzalco and began their rise to power, they burned their picturebooks and rewrote their history:

Se guardaba su historia.
Pero, entonces fue quemada...
Los señores mexicas dijeron:
no conviene que toda la gente

conozca las pinturas.
 Los que están sujetos (el pueblo),
 se echan a perder
 y andará torcida la tierra,
 porque allí se guarda mucha mentira,
 y muchos en ellas han sido tenidos por dioses.²⁵

Under the direction of Tlaacélel, counselor to rulers of Tenochtitlan, both the Aztec and the Tepaneca books were destroyed.²⁶ A new history more fitting to the new imperial power of Anáhuac was composed.

This revelation implies that many documentary sources that have survived into the present-day contain embellished versions of the Aztec past. Modern investigators struggling to make sense of a distant cultural world must take this knowledge into consideration in their research. Their work with the documentary sources of the pre-Hispanic record must be guided by an attitude that explores them without rendering judgment. They must be open to what each particular source may have to offer. David Carrasco, in his study *Quezalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, classifies the sources available to investigators into seven major categories: 1) pre-Hispanic storybooks—pictorial manuscripts, largely sacred historical, genealogical, and ritual-calendrical manuscripts, dependent on oral tradition as final interpretive authority; 2) post-Hispanic storybooks—done in native style they primarily deal with pre-Hispanic historical and cosmological traditions, many were commissioned by Spaniards while others were produced independently; 3) transitional prose documents—early postconquest documents, written in Nahuatl, Spanish or French consist of ancient songs, storybook images and oral traditions woven into a single narrative; 4) mestizo sources—authored by the descendants of the preconquest royalty they tend to incorporate both the native and the European view; 5) Spanish letters and descriptions—valuable sources in that they represent eyewitness accounts of Aztec society and culture, however, between the seeing and telling various personal, political, and literary agendas are interjected; 6) priestly writings—these texts reveal a strong influence of a foreign worldview with its ideological requirements, although constantly riddled with Christian polemics that are an indispensable source of information; 7) archeological evidence—through the symbolism of the stela associated with Aztec

ceremonial centers much of their mythology, history, and genealogy can be reconstructed.

These textual and plastic sources inform modern investigators in their attempts to reconstruct, and at times unravel, the Aztec past. Their primary task when interpreting the various materials is to clarify the relationship of text to its context. The essential point is that the investigators suspend their interpretation until they have examined the historical and hermeneutical factors that have influenced the configurations that the surviving records of pre-Hispanic life have assumed. According to Carrasco in this situation the investigator needs to practice a special form of the “hermeneutics of suspicion.”

Hermeneutics of suspicion means that before we show a willingness to listen and try to make something meaningful out of the material available, we must first ask penetrating questions about the nature, reliability, and intentions of the material itself.²⁷

This methodological attitude attempts to balance a healthy skepticism with the need to work with the existent documentary sources, however dubious they may appear. It reflects a maturity—that has not always been characteristic of Western thought—in the way it approaches the problem of understanding archaic traditions. This approach runs counter to the past tendency to scrutinize myth from a predisposed stance that refuses to take its contents seriously. Operating from this limited stance the very questions investigators pose are circumscribed by the unexamined assumptions that inform their theoretical approaches. These questions tend to be framed in terms that the investigator believes to be empirically determinable. The relationship between the questions raised and the existent verifiable evidence to a large degree accounts for the fact that the search for “historical” Aztlán has been the focus of numerous studies throughout the past two hundred years. Investigators have displayed an unflagging confidence that they could separate “historical facts” from the “fictitious contents of myth” when attempting to determine the precise geographical location of Aztlán.

The first critical studies concerning Aztec antiquity appeared in the eighteenth century. These works tended toward literal interpretations of the

historical sources with which they were dealing. A prime example of this first effort at historical analysis, as opposed to the methods of the earlier chroniclers, is Francisco Clavijero's *Historia antigua de México*, published in 1789. Clavijero was a Jesuit priest who intended to write a "natural history," wherein supernatural powers did not intervene; however, given his Catholic worldview certain Christian interjections were unavoidable:

Clavijero's historical method represented a fusion of the providential interpretation of history with a cautious rationalism. His opening lines sounded like the characteristic Enlightenment note of skepticism. The history of the first peoples of Anáhuac was so obscure, distorted by so many fables, that it was impossible to ascertain the truth.²⁸

Concerning Aztlán Clavijero writes that the Aztecs:

...vivieron hasta más de la mitad del siglo XII en Aztlán, provincia situada en mucha distancia del Nuevo México hacia el noroeste, según se puede colegir del rumbo que siguieron en su peregrinación y de algunas noticias que adquirieron los españoles en las entradas que hicieron desde Nuevo México hacia aquellas partes.²⁹

Although Clavijero supports the idea that the Aztec habitation of Aztlán dates to the most remote past, his interpretation of why they left their homeland sharply contrasts with the views expressed by earlier chroniclers. He sees the Aztec abandonment of Aztlán as an indication that their northern territory experienced a period of barrenness. He also takes issue at the claims that the Aztecs were led out of this land under the direction of the "devil"—Huitzilopochtli. Rather, the Aztecs were led by a person of great authority named Huizton. Clavijero's view concerning the location of Aztlán is derived from the testimony of Torquemada, who bases his knowledge on native pictographs that were later destroyed. Working from the fact that the Aztecs first stop after leaving Aztlán was in Hueicolhuacan [present day Culiacan], he deduces that Aztlán's location must lie to the north of the Colorado river. However, he disputes the claims of Boturini that the large

body of water found in the ancient pictographs represents the Gulf of California, it is none other than the image of the "Great Flood" that occurred in Old Testament times.³⁰ [So much for "natural history."]

In contrast to Clavijero, the historian Manuel Orozco y Berra, found the question concerning the location of Aztlán as "inextricable." In his *Historia antigua y de la conquista de México*, published in 1880, he cites the difficulties in untangling the mass of conflicting evidence supporting various locations. He cites the conflicting testimony of the experts in the field as support for his non-position. Orozco y Berra contrasts José Fernando Ramírez's view that Aztlán is to be found in the region of lake Chalco in the valley of Mexico, to that of Alexander von Humbolt who concludes that Aztlán had to be located no further south than forty-two degrees of latitude somewhere in the present-day states of Oregon, Idaho, and Wyoming. The former interprets the enormous distances travelled by the Aztecs, as recorded in the pre-Hispanic storybooks and colonial documents in an allegorical sense, whereas the latter bases his conclusion concerning the great distances on an etymological analysis of the name-place glyphs in these same documents to arrive at a much different view.³¹

Depending on the methods and approaches employed to interpret the existent documents, investigators often discover shockingly dissimilar answers. Working in the late 1800's, Edward Selser, the noted German anthropologist, was of the opinion that Aztlán existed only as an Aztec fantasy.³² Selser's "mission" was to remove all hint of fantasy from the historical record concerning the civilizations of Mesoamerica. Based on his rigorous comparative study of Spanish and indigenous sources [mestizo prose manuscripts and pictographic writings], sculptures, and ceramics, his conclusion was that Aztlán existed as a "mythical" place where the dead went. According to Aztec beliefs, this place was situated somewhere to the northwest of Tenochtitlan. Selser's attitude toward the myth of Aztlán reveals the intransigence on the part of many scholars to approach the contents of archaic cultures with the credit they deserve.

Perhaps the most widely accepted conclusion concerning the location of "historical" Aztlán is offered by historian Alfredo Chavero in his 1887 monograph entitled *Historia antigua y de la conquista de México*. He proposes that by retracing the route of Nuño de Guzmán's 1530 expedition into the area of New Spain, then known as Nueva Galicia, the location of ancient

Aztlán would be discovered. The route that the conquistador followed inverted the order of the peregrination of the Aztec people as it was set down in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*.³³ Chavero traced this route north from the valley of Mexico identifying the various places the Aztecs had passed. This investigation led him to conclude that Aztlán was to be found on the Pacific coast of the present-day state of Nayarit. There an island named *Mexcaltitlan* or *Mexticacan* lies in the center of an extensive lagoon that connects to the ocean; he considers this place to be the primordial homeland of the Aztecs.

Although Chavero's view would later become adopted and supported by others in the field, the combination of philological and hieroglyphical evidence utilized to support his claim was somewhat erroneously constructed. For example, he points to the etymological coincidence that root *Mexi*, the name of a major Aztec deity, shared with *Mexticacan* and *Mexica*—the former being the island location pictured in such indigenous colonial documents as in the *Códice Aubin*, and the latter being the name given to them by their god Huitzilopochtli. This commonality serves as a key element in Chavero's assertion that a geographical coincidence exists between the island of *Mexcaltitlan* and the *Mexica*'s primordial homeland, Aztlán. This claim, while possessing a plausible connection, is refuted in Remi Simeon's *Diccionario de la lengua náhuatl*, as well as in Cecilio R. Robelo's *Diccionario de mitología náhuatl*. Robelo, citing inconsistencies in Chavero's philological argument, states that *Mexticacan* cannot signify, "en donde se oye Mexi," but rather, is an adulation of the word *Meziticacan*, that roughly might be translated to mean place of the people of the moon.³⁴ Simeon adds to this refutation by pointing out the diversity of meanings that can be attached to the roots *meztli* and *icacan* that Chavero uses to support his position. Chavero derives further evidence that would subsequently be refuted more by contemporary scholars from the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*. After conducting an examination of the place names set down in this indigenous style document, he accepts it as factual proof that the journey of Nuño de Guzmán did pass through Aztlán. Through tracing the progression of names from the central valley of Mexico northward, Chavero identifies *Mexticacan* on the Pacific coast in between the towns of *Xalizco* and *Chimetla* as Aztlán. However, as Cecilio Robelo points out, that Aztlán, meaning "place of the herons," is a common place-name for the marshy regions along the Pacific coast and could not exclusively be associated with the Aztec homeland.³⁵

Although some of the details in Chavero's investigation may be doubtful, his conclusion concerning the location of Aztlán has become a normative view accepted by most researchers involved in the study of pre-Hispanic culture. Much of the mystery surrounding the location and even existence has been cleared-up for many as a result of a series of "ethnohistoric" investigations conducted in the mid 1970s by Wigberto Jiménez Romero and Jorge Olvera. Relying on oral tradition recorded in Padre Antonio Tellos' *Libro segundo de la crónica*, they fix the span of the Aztec pilgrimage between the years 1111 and 1345 A.D. They follow Chavero's earlier view that Nuño de Guzmán did pass through Aztlán in 1530, but gave it little notice as it was devoid of the riches the conquistador had anticipated finding in the Aztec homeland. Given this information along with its corroboration by diverse sources, Jiménez Romero concludes that the *Mexcaltitlan* on the coast of Nayarit is the historic Aztlán:

La isla de Mexcaltitlan que Jiménez Morena ha identificado con la antigua Aztlán o Aztatlan, se localiza en una laguna del mismo nombre, en la costa norte del Estado de Nayarit, al noroeste de la actual población de Santiago Ixcuintla.³⁶

Although the prestigious nature of these studies has done much to resolve many of the questions surrounding the myth of Aztlán, given its elusive character, some would claim the location of "historical" Aztlán remains at issue.

The Search for the Mythicized Aztlán

Within a situation of political underrepresentation, economic disenfranchisement and cultural antagonism, Chicanos initiated their drive toward national recognition. While possessing many ideological and tactical weapons in its arsenal, myth, somewhat surprisingly, proved to be one of the most vital elements contributing to this movement's appeal and forcefulness. The mythic narrative of Chicano nationalism weaves two distinct strands of human understanding into a single fabric. It fuses the pre-Hispanic myth of Aztlán to the modern myth of history. On one level Chicano nationalism calls for the re-creation of an Aztec spiritual home-

land, 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 diachronical chasm that separates the archaic contents of cultural memory from the contemporary struggle for cultural survival. Chicanos interpreted their nationalist cause as more than a political movement; they were involved in the regeneration of sacred time and space, as the ultimate concern of Chicano nationalism sought to transcend the existent temporal and spatial barriers and establish a homeland patterned after the primordial homeland from which the Aztecs originated. This would be a spiritual nation rooted in a sacred landscape charged with the power of an indigenous spirituality and justified by the validity of their national liberation struggle.

During the brief period in which this movement flourishes, from the late 1960's until the mid-1970's, the myth of Aztlán constitutes a key element within the political consciousness that guides its course. Chicanos are inspired by a romantically charged nationalist vision that claims the territory designated as the southwest United States to be Aztlán. This region, north of the central valley of Mexico, is said to coincide with the primordial landscape of Aztlán. Chicanos, as the *mestizo* inhabitants of this area and by virtue of their Aztec ancestry—however distant and removed—claim this territory as a spiritual homeland. They aspire to politically establish, and spiritually reestablish the nation of Aztlán. Although this movement is short-lived and falls short of its most radical goal, its demands echo the powerful calling of a distant mythology.

The Chicano nationalist movement's relation to the myth of Aztlán represents a radical departure from the previously analyzed historical approach, and while it echoes aspects of an archaic mythic consciousness, it remains ideologically distinct. Many Chicanos embrace this myth as a living dimension of their existential belief system. The following observation offered by Raimundo Panikkar in his *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* clarifies Chicano nationalism's relationship to Aztlán as a "living myth:"

The myth you live is comprised of the ensemble of contexts you take for granted. Myth gives us a reference point that orients us into reality. The myth you live is never lived or seen as one lives

or sees somebody else's myth; it is always the accepted horizon within which we place our experience of truth. I am immersed in my myth like others are in their own. I am not critically aware of my own myth, just as others are not aware of their own. It is always the other who, to my ear, speaks with an accent. It is always the other whom I surprise speaking from unexamined presuppositions.³⁷

Myth, therefore, constitutes a transparent horizon against which these individuals view reality. Every cultural group, nation, or people exist within a particular mythic horizon that corresponds to their particular vision of truth. This is the myth they live. It contains those aspects of their worldview that go without saying, that are given without hesitation and assumed to be true. From within the myth, there is no doubt or question concerning the validity of its claims; from without, these claims appear utterly absurd and patently false. Chicanos living within the myth of Aztlán experience their claims to nationhood as an implicit part of their daily consciousness. In this respect the myth of Aztlán functions to provide identity, location, and meaning for a people who were previously directionless in their collective existential pilgrimage through earth. This myth became an essential dimension of their everyday experience in terms of how their experience is organized, interpreted, and "lived out."

A myth seen and lived from within is an ensemble of facts that forms the basic fabric where what is given stands out as if against a horizon. Myth thus serves as the ultimate reference point, the touchstone of truth by which facts are recognized as truths. Myth, when it is believed and lived from the inside, does not ask to be plumbed more deeply, i.e., to be transcended in the search for some ulterior ground; it asks only to be made more and more explicit, for it expresses the very foundation of our conviction of truth. Seen from the outside, however, the mythical appears a mass of legends, of 'myths' in which others believe, but which have nothing to do with 'factual' truth. Myth then recounts in its own way the ultimate ground of a particular belief: either of others' belief (myth seen from the outside), or of our own belief

(myth lived from the inside). In the latter case we believe the myth without believing *in* the myth, since it is transparent for us, self-evident, integrated into that ensemble of facts in which we believe and constitute the real.³⁸

The myth of Aztlán is self-evident to Chicano nationalists. It relates the sacred history of the Aztecs' peregrination from a northern homeland, Aztlán, to the founding of the empire of Tenochtitlan. This is a primordial time in the sense of *in illo tempore*, where the ancestors left all that was secure and certain in pursuit of their destiny. They were led by their fierce deity Huitzilopochtli, and the priests through whom he communicates his will. Although this myth is preserved for contemporary peoples in a number of primary sources that were composed early in Mexico's colonial period, among these *Crónica Mexicáyotl*, *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* and *Códice Ramírez*, most Chicanos are unaware of the narrative contents of these texts. However, an essential truth is gleaned from these texts: all that could be decisively stated concerning the geographical location of Aztlán was that it lay somewhere to the north of the central valley of Mexico.³⁹ The indeterminate situation of Aztlán ignites a mythic consciousness that seeks to regenerate an indigenous past through establishing a Chicano homeland on the same sacred landscape from which the Aztecs drew life. Chicano nationalists drew inspiration from the prehispanic myth of Aztlán:

Nationalism may be described as the myth of historical renovation. Rediscovering in the depths of the communal past a pristine state of true collective individuality, the nationalist strives to realize in strange and oppressive conditions the spirits and values of a Golden Age. The roots of the individual are buried in the history and ethos of his group, in its culture and institutions; and from these, and these alone, he can draw purpose and strength for the heroic deeds of the future.⁴⁰

Aztlán became synonymous with the territory of the southwest United States. This is a spiritual homeland whose realization lay within the grasp of a determined nationalist program. The Chicano destiny is intrinsically linked to the realization of this "mestizo nation," where the cultural ways would

flourish and brotherhood would be the guiding principle. This mythic narrative provides a spiritual grounding for one of the core elements of the national liberation struggle, that is, territorial acquisition as nationalism is an ideology and movement is very much concerned with the practical and symbolic uses of land; a nation without its 'homeland' is almost unthinkable.⁴¹ Chicanos were unaware of any historical contradictions within their interpretation of the myth of Aztlán and their subsequent struggle to politically control it. This myth is inseparable from the consciousness that confirmed nationhood upon the Chicano people. It was an integral aspect of the Chicano nationalist worldview whose destiny was founded on the realization of Aztlán as a nation.

One of the most striking documents supporting the cause of Chicano nationalism is *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*. This document, produced at the 1969 Denver "National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference," reflects a wide range of Chicano social, political, and cultural concerns for improved housing, education, employment, self-determination, and self-defense. However, more striking than the particular demands this plan issues is the ideological base from which they are launched. Chicanos claim these rights as the ancestors of the "Aztec civilizers of the northern territories of Aztlán." Although this claim, with the benefit of a dispassioned hindsight, appears as utterly naive and fantastic at the time of its assertion it quivers with the power of a self-evident truth. *El Plan* weaves both strands of the Chicano nationalism's mythic horizon into a comprehensive program that calls for the geographical and spiritual resurrection of Aztlán. The following passage excerpted from *El Plan* illustrates the depth of conviction that is involved in the articulation of this mythic narrative.

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, 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.⁴²

El Plan articulates many of the nationalists' most heartfelt goals. It

attempts to systematically address the most radical ambition of this social movement; the establishment of a Chicano nation: Aztlán. Even to Chicanos, largely unversed in the chronicles and histories concerned with this myth, Aztlán symbolizes a spiritual homeland that was rightfully theirs. Chicanos emphasize the indigenous side of their mestizo heritage while denying their European roots. This romanticism fuels their political aspirations which are not removed from their cultural, social, and economic concerns:

El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán, sets the theme that the Chicanos (La Raza de Bronze) must use their nationalism as the key or common denominator for mass mobilization and organization. Once we are committed to the idea and philosophy of the Plan de Aztlán, we can only conclude that social, economic, cultural, and political independence is the only road to total liberation from oppression, exploitation and racism.⁴³

A "cultural renaissance"⁴⁴ inspired by the powerful ideological thrust of cultural nationalism swept through the barrios of the Southwest. One of the central motifs of this "renaissance" is the Chicano identification with ancient cultures of Mesoamerica. Chicanos turned to pre-Hispanic myths and symbols as a source of spiritual inspiration in their struggle for national self-determination. These myths and symbols still pulsate with a living energy. They were revived by a people who sought to draw from them as a reservoir of strength within the course of their political struggles. The most outstanding example of this practice is illustrated by the vital role that the Aztec myth of Aztlán played in the development of Chicano nationalism. The following poem, which appears in the first edition of the Chicano journal *Aztlán*, illustrates the essential function of the arts in conveying a sense of a nationalist spirituality:

it is said
sent.....
that Moctecuhzoma Ilhuicamina
an expedition
looking for the northern
mythical land

where from the Aztecs came
la tierra
de
Aztlán
mythical land for those
who dream of roses
swallow thorns
or for those who swallow thorns
in powdered milk
feeling guilty about smelling flowers
about looking for Aztlán.⁴⁵

This poem links the pre-Hispanic mythology of Aztlán to the Chicano mythology of nation-building. The poet draws from a knowledge of Diego Durán's *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e islas de tierra firme* to relate the event of Moctecuhzoma sending an expedition in search of a distant homeland, and the Chicano search for that same homeland. The romanticism of this image is sharply contrasted to the powdered milk that symbolizes the government programs that hand out surplus commodities to the poor. The extended metaphorical meaning of this poem serves to drive home the point that in their own spiritual homeland Chicanos suffer pain inflicted by the thorns of deprivation.

The above poem, just as many other artistic creations produced during the height of the Movement, is intended to raise Chicano consciousness while inspiring them to political action. Chicano nationalism demanded that Chicano artists create works that reflected the cultural heritage and political situation that they found themselves immersed in. Chicano art had to have a social theme; it was not just art for art's sake. In 1976 Rudolfo Anaya published a novel entitled *Heart of Aztlán*. Although this novel appears in the waning days of the nationalist movement, it brings together themes concerning the Chicano political struggle for equality and their reliance on pre-Hispanic myths and symbols for inspiration.

The protagonist in this novel is a man of the New Mexican *llano*, Clemente Chávez, who is forced through economic necessity to move his family from the land into the *barrio* of Barelás in Albuquerque. He fears this

move as it will erode the cultural ways that nurtured and supported his family on the sacred landscape of the llano. He suffers the indignities of manual labor at the Santa Fe railroad yard under the control of corrupt union officials who contribute to the workers' exploitation. However, Clemente refuses to be pushed and is fired from his job. This is a tremendous blow to Clemente's pride as he no longer is able to fulfill his role as a head of household and support his family. Cut-off from the land that could sustain him, Clemente falls into the depths of drink. He alienates himself from his family, the men of the barrio and even becomes a stranger to himself. One night at a meeting of striking union members this all changes suddenly. Clemente hears the legend of Aztlán as it is told by a mystical figure, Crispin, a blind poet:

... We are the fruit of the people who wandered from the mythical land of Aztlán, the first people of this land who wandered south in search of a sign. ... It is a simple story, Crispin continued, 'a burning god fell from the sky and told the people to travel southward. The sign for which they were to watch was a giant bird in whose claws would be ensnared the poisonous snakes which threatened the people. In that place, under the protection of that plumed bird, the wanderers from Aztlán were to build their new civilization. There they would meet the second part of their destiny--But the important thing, Crispin leaned forward so that all could listen, 'is to know how to interpret the signs. The legend renews itself with each generation, and we must know how to unravel the meaning of the sign--'⁴⁶

Clemente is captivated by this legend of Aztlán as it awakens within him memories of stories about men who could fly that he had heard during his youth. He wants to know what this story has to do with the strike. Crispin draws analogies between the winding trains and the serpents that threatened the people. But the question arises, 'Where will a man find the power to melt the steel?' Crispin responds, "In his heart, in the heart of Aztlán." Clemente is disturbed by this event and can no longer find an escape in his drinking. He wants to know if he is the man to lead the workers in the strike. He is compelled to search for the heart of Aztlán.

In his efforts to discover the significance of the legend of Aztlán for himself and the workers of Barelás, Clemente embarks upon a mystical journey that nearly takes his life. Assisted by Crispin and an old woman versed in "witchcraft," he journeys to Aztlán and experiences the bond of a camaraderie with the suffering masses that he encounters in its waters. Clemente emerges from this experience knowing that the power that can defeat the railroad lies in a unity based in love. Rejecting violence, Clemente imparts the following message to the strikers at the novel's end:

There is a heat more intense than the fire of a torch! And it can be rekindled at a moment's notice! Wherever discrimination and injustice rear their ugly heads the fire can be called upon to burn them away! Wherever there is an honest man, a poor man, an oppressed man, the fire smolders within his heart ready to ignite and light his path! It is the fire of love that burns in each man and woman and child: it is the fire of the soul of the people which must serve us now!⁴⁷

This novel, although criticized in Marxist circles for its mystical vein, does illustrate the effort to link the still vibrant myths of an archaic consciousness to contemporary political events. It also embodies one of the cardinal requirements of the Chicano nationalist movement; that art should have a political content. But more than this, it demonstrates the extent to which the mythic consciousness of Aztlán has survived into the present-day and pervaded the depths of Chicanos' twentieth-century thinking.

Summarizing Three Approaches to Aztlán

Through analyzing the myth of Aztlán from three distinct vantage points: the archaic, the historic, and the living, a more complete view of the myth's various dimensions comes to light. The first approach corresponds to an empathic reconstruction of the narrative that seeks to recapture a sense of the primordial flavor of this myth as the touchstone of a people's identity. Aztlán, as sacred history, provided the Aztecs with a meaning for their existence and a knowledge of their origins in the age of the fifth sun. It constituted an indispensable dimension of a worldview which remains separated by

time, place, and being from the current age. The second perspective consists of a rationally verified interpretation of the myth which relies on the investigative methods of modern history as the arbiter of truth and meaning. This historical view of the myth represents a contemporary venture into a distant world which was predicated on a set of radically different assumptions concerning the nature of being and reality. The untranscended void between the categories and language of history and the unity and silence of myth testify to the existence of a narrative outside the limits of an academically derived comprehension. The third view reflects a modern attempt to flesh-out the meaning of the myth within the context of a search for spiritual identity and political self-determination. The myth of Aztlan was rediscovered by people of Mexican descent living within the United States in their struggle to understand themselves as Chicanos. This new identity reflected the cultural metamorphoses and nationalist aspirations which Aztlan came to symbolize. As a living myth Aztlan's truth stood as a horizon against which to interpret all thought and action. It was the source of a powerful, romantic vision that appealed more to the Chicano heart than mind as Aztlan became the focus of Chicano nationalism's plan to achieve self-determination.

These distinct interpretations of the myth of Aztlan emerge from very different existential relationships to the myth. The first corresponds to a theoretical attitude termed structured empathy, that is, a descriptive analysis that suspends evaluative judgments concerning the myth and its content while it attempts to reveal the "inner facts" of a given myth. Although this approach relies heavily on traditional academic sources it avoids their inherent bias and predisposition to impose Western categories of experience and thought over distinctly non-Western patterns of being. Structured empathy strives to respect the integrity of the myth by always couching its analysis in the historical context which gave it life. If this approach does have a bias it falls sharply on the side of non-bias. The second approach which has been identified as historicism exercises a tremendous influence over the way modern people understand and relate to myth. Historicism utilizes its "superior" knowledge and experience to explain away the myths of others while denying the existence of its own. What has happened is that history has become the supreme myth of the modern age. From this vantage point what was once sacred is emptied of its power and rendered mere superstition. The third view belongs to the province of myth as a living

phenomenon. It involves a process described as the passage from *mythos* to *logos*, that is, the mystery of myth is made more explicit through its articulation and revelation. The myth becomes part of daily life and in some sense loses the fascination and awe which fed the narrative in its original form. The myth, now transformed into the basis of an ideological system, is no longer the Aztec myth of Aztlan, nor the historical view of Aztlan, it emerges as a distinctly modern narrative. It reveals the beliefs, aspirations, and fears of a people who draw from a distant past in the creation of a new mythic consciousness. This *transmythification* represents the myth's most dynamic dimension as it retains a powerful core that continues to resonate with meaning for people struggling to come to grips with their destiny in the modern world.