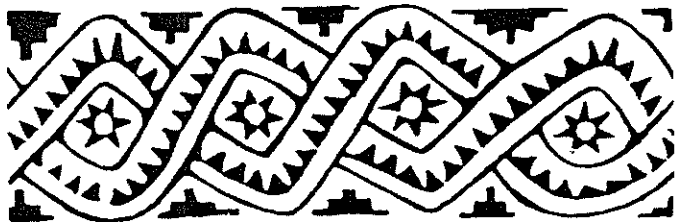
The Aztec Palimpsest



Mexico in the Modern Imagination

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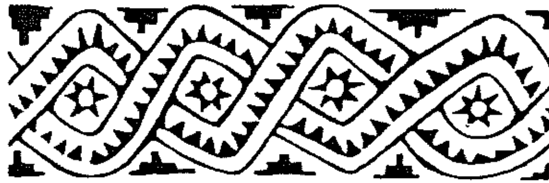
Part One



Chicano Nationalism and Mexicanness

Chapter One

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Toward a New Understanding of Aztlán and Chicano Cultural Identity

In this study, I have conceived of the palimpsest as a metaphor with three primary functions. First, it is used to understand constructions of Mexicanness as a series of interdependent erasures and superimpositions; second, it is used to underscore the complicated, transcultural nature of colonial discourse in order to insist on a new way of analyzing it, as well as to identify practices in opposition to it; and finally, the palimpsest is offered as a paradigm for Chicano cultural identity.[1] Those familiar with the concept of the palimpsest most likely encountered it within the disciplines of classical studies or archaeology, where it is used to describe a parchment or stone text that has been erased, defaced, or partially removed in order to make room for a new inscription. For example, in her study of Mesoamerican writing systems, Joyce Marcus notes that in pre-Columbian Mexico, the Mixtecs frequently created palimpsests to satisfy a ruler's demand that he be inserted into royal genealogies to which he didn't belong or to appropriate the accomplishments of earlier rulers as his own. Such historical revisions were carried out by covering the bark records with lime sizing and then repainting them with new text (149–50). Significantly, in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica the erasure of old text and its replacement with new was *always* politically motivated. Marcus observes that "Mesoamerican writing was both a tool and a by-product of this competition for prestige and leadership positions" (15). Above all, it was "*a tool of the state*" (xvii;

emphasis in original). Thus, modern scholars have studied palimpsests to gain a better understanding of the intricate relationship between language, writing, political power, and empire in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. It would be a mistake of major proportions, however, to assume—based on its association with older civilizations—that the palimpsest is solely an archaic concept. On the contrary, it holds the key to understanding the construction of Mexicanness and the domination and exploitation such construction has historically supported and that continues today. Such understanding, however, requires thinking of the palimpsest in a broader, metaphorical sense. If we remember that the definitive characteristic of the palimpsest is incomplete erasure and superimposition, and if we begin to look for this characteristic in uncharacteristic sites, we begin to locate the palimpsest as the nexus of power, empire, and discourse. The conquest and colonization of Mexico provide many instances of this characteristic process. The Spaniards strategically pursued a policy of *partial* cultural erasure because many indigenous institutions could be molded to fit their imperial design. It is no accident that Spanish cathedrals were built on top of razed Aztec temples or that indigenous historical accounts were rewritten under the supervision of Spanish missionaries. José Rabasa notes that the ruins of Tenochtitlán (the Aztec capital destroyed during the Spanish siege of 1521) assumed a crucial function, simultaneously symbolic and practical, for the nascent Spanish colony—namely, it acted as a blueprint for the capital of New Spain:

> On the ruins of the ancient city, Mexico City arises and retains indelible traces of the ancient order for the present. This transformation of reality may be likened to a palimpsest where the text of the conquered furnishes and retains its formal structure in the text of the conqueror. It is not the explorer's accidental and fortuitous mushrooming of colonial entrepôts on a landscape that murmurs an extraneous language. The *fuerat*, the had-been of Tenochtitlán, retains a ghostlike presence in a mnemonic deposit of information about the land despite the city's destruction. (*Inventing America* 101)

More important, Rabasa concludes that in this palimpsest, in the ghostlike original text, is a discourse that runs counter to and opposes colonization. Michel de Certeau makes a similar point and offers the syncretic practices of the Mesoamericans as a useful example:

> For instance, the ambiguity that subverted from within the Spanish colonizers' "success" in imposing their own culture on the indigenous Indians is well known. Submissive, and even consenting to their subjection,[2] the Indians nevertheless often *made of* the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept. They were *other* within the very colonization that outwardly assimilated them; their use of the dominant social order deflected its power, which they lacked the means to challenge; they escaped it without leaving it. The strength of their difference lay in procedures of "consumption." To a lesser degree, a similar ambiguity creeps into our societies through the usé made by the "common people" of the culture disseminated and imposed by the "elites" producing the language. (xiii)

Significantly, de Certeau uses the palimpsest as a metaphor for this kind of tactical, oppositional practice by a group confronted with the strategic productions of a dominating institution, and I propose to use it in a similar way, as both a tool that enables a critique of existing models of Chicano cultural identity and history, and as a trope that allows a deeper understanding of cultural identity and history. To demonstrate its potential, I will sketch out two main avenues of inquiry that necessarily overlap.

The first considers the Mesoamerican and colonial histories from which Chicano nationalists of the 1960s derived the political symbol Aztlán without fully realizing the complexity or intertextuality of the historical narratives the symbol invoked. Aztlán was celebrated by Aztec mythology as the Aztecs' ancient homeland, their utopic place of origin somewhere to the north of

Tenochtitlán. Michael Pina observes, "Although this myth is preserved for contemporary peoples in a number of primary sources that were composed early in Mexico's colonial period, . . . most Chicanos are unaware of the narrative contents of these texts" (38). As a result, Chicanos are at a crucial juncture vis-à-vis Mesoamerican history, one that appears to offer a choice between two paths only, both of them political cul-de-sacs. The first, as Genaro M. Padilla and Gloria Anzaldúa have noted separately, continues the Chicano and Mexican nationalist tendency to romanticize the past; the other choice, usually resulting from a negative reaction to such nostalgia, rejects the past, particularly the mythic past, as irrelevant to the concerns of the present.[3] Both approaches are flawed; we must approach the Mesoamerican past with interdisciplinary study that considers the diversity of Mesoamerican cultures and the implications of intracultural differences such as class, gender, and sexuality—especially as more and more scholars come to grips with the present-day diversity of Mexican and Chicano cultures.

As Alex M. Saragoza notes in his important assessment of Chicano historiography, the conceptualization of Chicano history for the most part has failed to take into account the diversity of the Chicano experience "from its beginnings," and instead has emphasized a collective Chicano experience that minimizes class, gender, and regional differences while romanticizing the past. While some recent interdisciplinary scholarship in this arena has made important strides,[4] much of the general perception of Mesoamerica, and even much historiography, continues to derive from a narrow, positivist, Eurocentric perspective that distorts and oversimplifies the Mesoamerican cultures, whose complexity we are only beginning to grasp.[5] The increasing recognition of Mesoamerican cultures as multilingual and multiethnic, and the consideration of Mexican culture as the product of a much more complicated *mestizaje* than a simple Spanish/Indian dichotomy, holds significant implications for discussions of Mexican and

Chicano identity and will require interdisciplinary consideration.[6] Just as Annette Kolodny has noted in regard to literary history, scholars of Mesoamerican cultures must break out of their tightly compartmentalized departments if they wish to deal with social issues and concerns that have no respect for academic boundaries. Thus, the palimpsest is offered here as a model of textual superimpositions and territorial remappings; its inherently shifting and overlapping boundaries make it a model well suited to interdisciplinary study. It is also a model capable of challenging attempts to draw clear boundaries between myth and history, a problem that has plagued Mesoamerican studies in particular. Furthermore, the palimpsest's structure of interlocking, competing narratives has the advantage of preventing a dominant voice from completely silencing other voices, thus encouraging scholars to recognize and consider diversity. In short, I believe that adopting the palimpsest as a conceptual and historical tool will allow scholars to move toward a more complicated and ultimately more valuable notion of Mesoamerican, Mexican, and Chicano history.

This chapter's second major area of critique centers on Aztlán and its changing relationship to Chicano communities. As a durable political symbol of Chicano cultural nationalism, Aztlán has been linked to and used to legitimate Chicano identity.[7] However, critics of el Movimiento have criticized the ideology symbolized by Aztlán as monolithic and unresponsive to many of the members it sought to encompass. Angie Chabram and Rosa Linda Fregoso, for example, argue that Chicano nationalism conceived of Chicano identity in "a static, fixed, and one-dimensional formulation" that "failed to acknowledge our historical differences in addition to the multiplicity of our cultural identities as a people" (205). Drawing on their work, Saragoza echoes their conclusion, saying that for too long the notion of a collective experience has dominated Chicano studies, fueled by the residue of the Chicano nationalist movement (7), a concept that requires rethink-

ing, particularly in regard to class and gender—and, I would add, to such other important cultural differences as sexuality, language use, and political and religious affiliations.

Saragoza's and Chabram and Fregoso's arguments are strengthened by the admitted failure of social scientists and historians to create models of Chicano ethnicity based on ethnic commonalities. Susan Keefe and Amado Padilla, for example, are forced to concede that "from our data we are not able to specify with precision the characteristics that describe Chicano culture, since even in the area of language use some Chicanos are fluent in Spanish while others are monolingual in English." They conclude that "a multidimensional model of cultural change and persistence is required in order to account for the variations within the ethnic minority group, in different spheres of social action, and for different cultural traits" (195).[8]

Building on the work of Saragoza, Fregoso and Chabram, and Norma Alarcón, I will argue here that Aztlán has been used to obscure and elide important issues surrounding Chicano identity, in particular the significance of intracultural differences. I will also argue, however, that Aztlán has the potential to be remade into the kind of multidimensional model that Keefe and Padilla call for, a model to examine precisely the issues that Aztlán has been used to evade in the past. Among the neglected issues related to Chicano identity are (1) the disturbing tendency to focus only on the relationship between Chicano communities and the dominant Anglo culture, at the expense of any discussion of the complex, diverse character of Chicanos and their relationships with other ethnic groups; (2) the tendency to focus on the Southwest, minimizing the attention paid to Chicanos who live in other geographic regions;[9] (3) competing claims to the Southwest—which Aztlán is often intended to be synonymous with—by Native Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans; (4) the ongoing dialectic between Chicano and Mexican culture(s) and the effects on those culture(s) of continued Mexican emigration to the United States; and, as the work of Norma Alarcón sug-

gests, (5) the complex interrelationship of subjectivity, agency, and privilege.[10]

How to respond to these issues is an important question. In her essay addressing internal differences in the women's movement, Chela Sandoval theorizes that the power of dominant groups stems from mobile networks, which require nondominant groups to develop an "oppositional consciousness which creates the opportunity for flexible, dynamic, tactical responses," and "a self-conscious flexibility of identity and political action" (66). I propose recognizing Aztlán as a palimpsest in order to make of it a more sophisticated model that can address the neglected issues outlined above and to create a paradigm for understanding Chicano identity that is at once fluid, overlapping, and inherently provisional, and thus one that moves toward the flexible, versatile model Sandoval calls for—one that may help us answer the difficult questions currently being raised about cultural identity. This chapter, then, is my initial attempt at using the palimpsest as such an interdisciplinary model.

The Second Departure from Aztlán

We did not, in fact, come to the United States at all. The United States came to us. We have been in America a long time. Somewhere in the twelfth century our Aztec ancestors left their homeland of Aztlán, and migrated south to Anahuac, "the place by the waters," where they built their great city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. . . . Aztlán was left far behind, somewhere "in the north," but it was never forgotten. Aztlán is now the name of our Mestizo nation, existing to the north of Mexico, within the borders of the United States. Chicano poets sing of it, and their *flor y canto* points toward a new yet very ancient way of life and social order, toward new yet very ancient gods.

—Luis Valdez, "La Plebe"

Even when the romanticizing of the past, as well as the present cultural identity, is exposed as a self-serving illusion and corrected by those social critics, historians, or political theorists whose view of social relations

> remains dispassionately fixed upon material forces in society, the mythic element that permeates the popular consciousness may not easily be exorcised as useless trivia since it has come to assume a life of its own in the group's imagination.
>
> —Genaro M. Padilla, "Myth and Comparative Cultural Nationalism"

*

erhaps the most enduring legacy of the Chicano movement, the gend of Aztlán has been an important rallying point for a people ho often feel dislocated, not only from Mexican and Anglo merican society, but from each other as well. In their critique of e movement, Chabram and Fregoso account for the symbol's itial appeal and longevity:

> Twenty years ago, the Chicano student movement created a space where an alternative cultural production and identity could flourish. . . . Aztlán, the legendary homeland of the Aztecs, claimed by Chicano cultural nationalism as the mythical place of the Chicano nation, gave this alternative space a cohesiveness. Chicano identity was framed in Aztlán. And, Aztlán provided a basis for a return to our roots, for a return to an identity before domination and subjugation—a voyage back to pre-Columbian times. In its most extreme cases, Aztlán was said to be located in the deepest layers of consciousness of every Chicano, an identification which thereby posted an essential Chicano subject for cultural identity. (204–5)

t this focus on Aztlán is now being questioned and scrutinized, th within and outside the academy. Stripped of its historical plications, quarantined in utopic myth, Aztlán increasingly pears to be an empty symbol to many Chicanos, one that does unite so much as divert those who do not wish to consider very real differences of region, gender, class, sexuality, lange, and *mestizaje* within Chicano communities. Fregoso and abram comment that

> ne shortsightedness of Chicano studies intellectuals was that they ssumed that the construction of their own self representations as ubjects was equivalent to that of the totality of the Chicano experience, and that this shared representation could be generalized in the interest of the entire group. . . . How else could we explain the fact that an ahistorical "Aztec" identity would fall on the deaf ears of an urban community versed in the rhythms of disco, *conjunto* music and *boleros*? By recuperating the mythic pre-Columbian past and formulating this as the basis of our shared identity, Chicano academic intellectuals of the post-colonial condition failed to see that cultural identities have histories, that they undergo constant transformation and that far from being etched in the past, cultural identities are constantly being constructed. (206)

Their point is well taken. As conceived by the Chicano nationalists of el Movimiento, Aztlán was posed as a monolithic narrative into which all Chicanos were to write themselves, regardless of their intracultural differences. Instead, as Chabram and Fregoso point out, a fluid, continuously changing narrative or model is needed, one that is adaptable to the myriad possibilities of Chicano identities, which are in constant flux. For these reasons, Chabram and Fregoso prepare to leave behind Aztlán as a symbol; but perhaps this second departure is premature. After all, Aztlán bears all of the characteristics that Chabram and Fregoso attribute to cultural identities: it has a complicated history, it has undergone repeated transformation, and, far from being etched in the past, Aztlán is continuously being remade. I believe that when understood as a palimpsest, Aztlán ceases to be ahistorical and insists upon an examination of the past, a study that will reveal not only the complexity of Aztlán, but of the Mesoamerican history that was used as a resource by Chicano nationalists. Not only must we recognize the decreasing value of the ahistorical symbol Aztlán for a changing, diversifying Chicano community, we must also consider why only this sliver of the mythic pre-Columbian past was recuperated and transformed into a modern-day rallying point. Aztlán as palimpsest immediately changes the way we look at the past and the sources from which we have derived our notions of the past, thus offering new resources and new avenues of investigation. To demonstrate, I turn to the Meso-

american past—that alternative space created by scholarship that has become so controversial—and trace some of the attempts to control it, in order to examine its significant implications for Chicanos today.

The Aztec Palimpsest

Between us and the pre-Columbian city and its symbols stand not just time and wear, distance and cultural diversity, and renewal within a tradition of wisdom, but also the conquest of Mexico and the invention of the American Indian . . . . [S]cholars encountering this fragmented situation and the enigmatic Quetzalcoatl have attempted to design and redesign the symbol's significance according to their theories of culture, religion, civilization, and Indians.

—Davíd Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*

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Any discussion of Mesoamerican history is complicated by the intricate nature of the early primary sources. The letters and chronicles of the Spanish conquistadors and colonizers view and represent Mesoamerica through a Western, Christian lens. As for the indigenous texts, Susan Gillespie points out that although strong oral and written traditions were practiced for many years, not many of the pre-Conquest Mesoamerican "books" survived the Conquest, and the existence of Aztec books from the pre-Conquest era remains controversial. The pre-Conquest texts that have proven most valuable to ethnohistorians have been the surviving architecture and artifacts (S. Gillespie xvii–xli).

The scarcity of indigenous books from the pre-Conquest eras is an indication of the scope of the Spaniards' colonial and missionary ambitions. Ironically, the Aztecs, like many Mesoamerican peoples, had a tradition of assimilating the religious practices of other cultures, and the delight with which the early Spanish missionaries claimed rapid and widespread conversion of the Meso-

americans to Catholicism quickly turned to frustration as the natives' syncretic tendencies surfaced. Furthermore, the similarity between certain indigenous religious practices (often closely associated with the culture hero Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl) and Christian beliefs and rites fascinated and confused the missionaries (S. Gillespie xxviii–xxxv). Two schools of thought developed to explain these parallels: either earlier missionaries had preceded the Spanish priests (Diego Durán believed it was no one less than Saint Thomas),[11] or it was the devil's handiwork. Both schools came to the same conclusion: Mesoamerican history needed to be recovered to solve the mystery and to more effectively convert the Mexicans.[12] The Catholic priests began the difficult process of finding survivors of the Mesoamerican elite who could re-create the historical records that, ironically, had been destroyed in the name of the true faith.

Although few in number, the written and pictographic documents, or codices, produced by these historical recovery efforts under the supervision of the Spanish clergy are a major source of information for Mesoamerican scholars. That said, it is important to note the special types of problems involved in working with the codices, for they are not so much individual texts as elaborate palimpsests, and the superimposed material is no small obstacle. As Davíd Carrasco puts it, "It is clear that a thick Spanish, colonial, Christian gloss has been brushed across the ideas, beliefs, symbols, and dramas of ancient Mexican culture." However, the gloss does not completely obscure the indigenous material: ". . . significant segments of authentic pre-Hispanic culture can be discerned and understood in an illuminating fashion. Through the gloss, indigenous images and patterns show themselves in an engaging manner" (12).

José Rabasa furthers Carrasco's observation by noting the subversive quality of the "indigenous images and patterns" in the following passage from book 12 of the *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, also known as the *Florentine Codex*, the

mpressive Aztec history dictated by older members of the Aztec
lite to younger Mesoamerican scholars under the supervision of
ray Bernardino de Sahagún:

> And Moctezuma thereupon sent [and] charged the noblemen, whom Tziuacpopocatzin led, and many others besides of his officials, to go to meet [Cortés] between Popocatepetl and Iztac tepetl, there in Quauhtechcac. They gave them golden banners, precious feather streamers, and golden necklaces.
>
> And when they had given them these, they appeared to smile; they were greatly contented, gladdened. As if they were monkeys they seized upon the gold. It was as if their hearts were satisfied, brightened, calmed. For in truth they thirsted mightily for gold; they stuffed themselves with it; they starved for it; they lusted for it like pigs.
>
> And they went about lifting on high the golden banners; they went moving them back and forth; they went taking them to themselves. It was as if they babbled. What they said was gibberish. (*Florentine Codex* 13:31)

abasa astutely cites this passage as an example of counterdis-
urse within a text supervised by a dominant colonizing cul-
re. It is what Mary Louise Pratt calls an autoethnographic text,
text in which a people undertake to describe themselves in
ays that engage with representations others have made of them.
. [T]hey involve a selective collaboration with and appropri-
ion of idioms of the metropolis or the conqueror. These are
erged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous idioms
create self-representations intended to intervene in metropoli-
n modes of understanding, and are addressed to both colonizer
d colonized" ("Contact Zone" 35). Drawing on the work of An-
María Garibay, Rabasa argues that the Aztec authors embed-
d indigenous literary conventions within the dominant genre
order to critique the Spaniards:

> rom all appearances the syntactical doubling of metaphors is a haracteristic trait of prehispanic poetry. Whereas the Franciscans

> would comply with the moral outrage expressed in this passage, they would not express it as such. The fixation on gold, as revealed in its monotonous repetition in the text, implies a native view wherein the Europeans are mocked ("like monkeys," "like pigs") and wherein gold is seen as a lowly object of desire. . . . [I]ts doubling of metaphors actually upturns and makes redundant any pursuit of a figurative meaning as it marks an insistence on expression over content. Paraphrasing Deleuze and Guattari, we might add that just as the Spaniards become pigs and monkeys, so the pigs and monkeys become Spaniards. Thus the characterization of the Spaniards as savages, *popolcas* (those who cannot speak Nahuatl), gains intensity with their animal behavior and the suggestion that they eat gold. The attributes *teule* [god] and *popolca* do not contradict each other but reinforce each other with the image of an uncouth god that brings about the destruction of culture; after all, the Spaniards melt down artifacts in order to devour gold. ("Dialogue as Conquest" 152–53)

Rabasa's interpretation suggests another important idea: not only are these early primary sources palimpsests because of the interwoven cultural expectations and literary traditions they contain, they are also written over each time a scholarly interpretation of them is attempted (including my own). Furthermore, the layers of dominant and subversive texts are not limited to those in which the indigenous, oppressed people are given some degree of direct input into the construction of history.[13] We can also use the palimpsest as a trope to identify competing histories within texts written by authors who do not intend to give the natives a voice. Consider the following passage from Bernal Díaz: "The lord of Tacuba said that in his house at Tacuba, about twelve miles away, he had some gold objects, and that if we would take him there he would tell us where they were buried and give them to us. Pedro de Alvarado and six soldiers, myself among them, took him there. But when we arrived he said he had only told us this story in the hopes of dying on the road, and invited us to kill him, for he possessed neither gold nor jewels. So we returned

empty-handed" (410). This is a brilliant example of the power of storytelling to open up a space for counterdiscourse. By creating a story that he knows will fascinate the Spaniards, the Lord of Tacuba is able to influence the shape of Díaz's narrative and become a participant in it, so that for the time it takes to travel twelve miles the power relationship has been slightly altered. When he can no longer sustain his narrative and reveals his position as author, the Lord of Tacuba literally disappears from Díaz's account. But although Díaz considers the ultimate fate of the prisoner too insignificant to share with his readers, he cannot conceal the power of an oppressed people to use storytelling as a means of entering, subverting, and even briefly controlling the dominant discourse, if only by leading it astray. While Díaz and other chroniclers failed to acknowledge or record the many such indigenous sources that shape their texts, we *must* assume the influence of such sources on the dominant discourse.

Beatriz Pastor Bodmer, Peter Hulme, and John Chávez are among the scholars who have theorized that storytelling was often used by indigenous Americans as a defense against European colonization. Pastor Bodmer comments that

> repression is never total, silence never absolute. And just as the voices of the marginalized, of the oppressed and the defeated seemed to be lost forever, we listen again to their echoes, in a different way and with a different sound. It is the sound of resistance, and it adopts all of the forms defined by the very vulnerability of the conquerors, while for more than a century, it shaped the discovery, defining objectives, tracing journeys, leading and misleading discoverers and conquerors anxious to materialize their dreams and personal utopias in the unexplored territories of the New World. I am speaking of the lying captives, the false guides and informants, the tireless weavers of fables, myths and lies that appear again and again in the Viceroyal courts and in the expeditions of exploration. ("Silence and Writing" 150)

Although it is now clear that the competing narratives of indigenous peoples and Spanish colonizers created layered myths and

histories, it is important to recognize that this narrative structure developed long before the Spanish invasion and predates the superimpositions of Spanish texts. Gillespie argues convincingly that the native authors continued a long tradition of altering history in order to explain the present, a tradition grounded in the Mesoamerican belief that time was cyclical. Current events were thought to be repetitions of earlier ones, and Mesoamerican historians were often faced with the task of scouring the past for an event corresponding to the present, one similar enough that it could be slightly altered or embellished to establish a precedent: "Consequently, the past cannot be considered immutable or irreversible. Instead, it has to be amenable to change as required by later events—it is the past that is altered to conform to, and to be continuous with, the present" (S. Gillespie xxiii–xxiv).

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the codices and the narratives they contain are marked by a strong class bias, as indicated by the work of Enrique Florescano: "Surpassing all of the other attributes that the Mesoamerican communities gave to the past is the utilization of historical memory as an instrument to legitimate power, sanction the order of established things and inculcate in the governed the values that oriented the action of the governors" (*Memoria mexicana* 84; my translation). Florescano emphasizes two important consequences of this tradition. First, the historical discourse that emerges from Mesoamerican texts does not represent a collective voice, but rather that of the governing elite; and, second, scholars trying to comprehend the concept of the Mesoamerican past and its different uses must consider all of its components, not just those texts that Western tradition has certified as historical (84–89). Thus, many of the discrepancies in different Mesoamerican texts relating the same pre-Conquest events may actually be commentaries on the culture shock of the sixteenth century or the ideology of the ruling classes, layered over centuries of similar historical revision and glossed over by Spanish missionaries and colonial authorities, all working to create a complex, multilayered palimpsest.

As Florescano suggests, some historians, when confronted by these traditions of historical revision, have pursued a misguided course and tried to separate "historical truth" from the "distortion" of myth and legend. Gillespie notes that "the idea of an opposition between history and myth is itself an artificial construct of Western culture," an idea that ignores "the reality that both [history and myth] are symbolic narratives" that are equally meaningful (S. Gillespie xxxviii–xxxix). Another disadvantage she sees in such an approach is that the points of contradiction in different versions of the same story are discarded in order to get at "historical truth": "[F]rom the perspective pursued here the contradictions take on greater significance than the consistencies. . . . The mutability of these points is an indication of the complexity of their multiple meanings, and understanding them provides the clues to the cultural categories and relationships that generated the different accounts" (S. Gillespie xxxvii–xxxviii).

There is no need to belabor the point of the impossibility of ever arriving at "historical truth," or of the problems raised by attributing a greater value to accounts that appear more historical than mythical. However, we cannot ignore the important, related point that scholarship has inscribed more layers to this complicated palimpsest, as suggested by Carrasco in the epigraph to this section and by Gillespie in the following passage: "Understanding the latest reworking of this story [Cortés as Quetzalcoatl] should help to illuminate the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reconstructions of the Aztec past, because archaeologists and ethnohistorians, like Aztecs and Spaniards before them, have manipulated various bits of data to compose a narrative of the past that conforms to their own expectations and organizational principles" (S. Gillespie 201–2).

To conclude this brief discussion of Mesoamerican texts, I want to emphasize that they need to be perceived as a complicated discursive network, a structure that has the advantage of allowing for new considerations of Mesoamerican cultures as ethnohistorians begin to view them as much more complex and diverse than

they were previously thought to be. For example, not only has Gillespie contributed greatly to our understanding of the complexity of Mesoamerican history, but her attention to the neglected issue of gender difference suggests that the Aztecs were not as enslaved to ritual as Tzvetan Todorov and others have proposed.[14] Other areas are being reconsidered as well. While both Mexican and Chicano nationalist discourses have had the effect of reinforcing the general perception that the Aztecs were the sole indigenous protagonists in Mesoamerican history, continued work by feminist scholars studying the complex intercultural history of Malintzin promises to undermine such a position.[15] And, as already noted, Florescano's consideration of intracultural class divisions problematizes the Mesoamerican narratives in provocative ways. These are just a few examples of how attention to diversity in the study of Mesoamerican (and Mexican and Chicano) history will increase our understanding of the cultures that produced them. To encourage this new approach, I propose considering the palimpsest as a conceptual tool that offers the following advantages for Mesoamerican historiography and Chicano studies:

1. When understood as a palimpsest, Aztlán ceases to be ahistorical and instead insists on an examination of the Mesoamerican narratives from which it was drawn.
2. Recognizing the multilayered trope underlying these narratives increases our understanding of the complexity of the cultures that produced them and enables us to better apprehend the subversive and contestatory discourse that inhabits most colonial discourse.
3. The palimpsest, because of its network of intricately linked narratives of different types, makes impossible any sort of devaluation of myth vis-à-vis history, nor does it allow one type of narrative to be considered in isolation from others.
4. The palimpsest model forces us to consider the points of divergence in the competing narratives and allows us to trace

cultural categories of thought as they change over time and compete with others for recognition or dominance.

5. Because it is always undergoing revision, the palimpsest can accommodate new information without privileging it.

Finally, this multilayered conceptualization of Mesoamerican history will complicate our understanding of Aztlán in a way that will be valuable for further discussion of Chicano cultural identity, as we will see in the next section.

Chicano Cultural Identity and the Paradoxical Nature of Aztlán

> Nonetheless, the appropriation from the elitelore of ancient Mexico of such a seminal emblematic device as Aztlán was the most brilliant political maneuver of the Chicano cultural nationalists. Nothing their critics have done has managed to surpass or equal this feat of organizational strategy. Under no other sign or concept, derived from the left, center, or right, were as many Chicanos mobilized and as much enthusiasm galvanized into political action—except for the concept of Chicanismo itself. For a movement hungry for symbols that could both distinguish it from other movements and unite it under one banner, Aztlán was perfect. So perfect, in fact, that almost two decades after it was unfurled it is still the single most distinguishing metaphor for Chicano activism. The term is ubiquitous: found in the strident political program called the *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* and in the name of the most sober, scholarly Chicano journal, and it adorns the title of scores of poems, novels, paintings, and organizations, all of which display it both as a sign of their content and as a mark of their political ideology. Why?
>
> —J. Jorge Klor de Alva, "Aztlán, Borinquen and Hispanic Nationalism in the United States"

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The concept of Aztlán, as formulated by Chicano nationalism and Chicano scholarship since 1969, presents an overwhelming number of apparent contradictions. Luis Leal maintains that it is both a physical and a spiritual entity, both geographically specific

and universal: "As a Chicano symbol, Aztlán has two meanings: first it represents the geographic region known as the Southwestern part of the United States, composed of the territory that Mexico ceded in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; second and more important, Aztlán symbolized the spiritual union of the Chicanos, something that is carried within the heart, no matter where they may live or where they may find themselves" ("In Search of Aztlán" 8). For Rudolfo Anaya and Francisco Lomelí, the nature of Aztlán is at once "historical, anthropological and symbolic," existing "at the level of symbol and archetype"; it is a legend both "anthropologically sound and historically reliable" (iii). It resides in both historical and mythic narratives, narratives that have continued to evolve and have been continuously revised over centuries (Pina 14–48; Chávez 7–22). Its proponents have claimed that as a symbol of cultural nationalism, Aztlán transcends "all religious, political, class and economic factors or boundaries" and is a "common denominator that all members of La Raza can agree upon," while critics have charged that the symbol ultimately divides more than it unifies.[16] It is said to promote both communal and individual interests, and, as a symbol of cultural nationalism, it is said both to have fostered the maintenance of cultural traditions and to have inadvertently promoted assimilation into the dominant Anglo culture (Barrera 4–5).

But these characteristics of Aztlán are not contradictions, in the sense that to admit the possibility of one is to negate the possibility of the other. Rather, they are paradoxes that have yet to be fully explored as a network with significant implications for Chicanos in terms of both intracultural and intercultural relationships. These paradoxes are most visible in texts written about Aztlán that, when examined closely, contain traces of the issues that Aztlán as a nationalist symbol has been used to elide, namely, those issues outlined in the first part of this chapter. Since it is my thesis that Aztlán is a multilayered textual construct or palimpsest, and since its textual layers include not only historical/mythic narratives but also historiography, scholarship, and polit-

cal documents, I have selected representative "master texts" rom each of those genres for analysis, an analysis that will center n the paradoxical nature of Aztlán. My purpose is not merely to rgue that Aztlán is a palimpsest, but also to demonstrate that in xamining its competing, interlocking narratives as a discursive etwork, we are forced to confront important issues surrounding hicano cultural identity—issues of difference, diversity, privi- ege, agency, and self-determination. In recognizing Aztlán as a alimpsest, we reconfigure it yet again, self-consciously adding nother layer in order to convert it into a structure that will fore- round those controversies—and the cultural categories and rela- onships they encode—as the very objects of study, rather than llow Aztlán to continue to function as a mechanism that dis- uises or diverts attention from them.

"El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" and the Paradox of Unity/Diversity

lthough Aztlán had been a powerful symbol for both Meso- merican and European peoples for centuries, most people today ssociate the term with the Chicano cultural nationalist move- ent that began in the mid-1960s and is generally agreed to have agmented into antagonistic splinter groups by 1975. By the twen- eth century the concept of Aztlán had all but disappeared from ublic discourse: "Few people in the United States were familiar ith the concept of Aztlán until Chicano Movement activists of e 1960s revived it and proclaimed it a central symbol of Chi- ano nationalist ideology. The rediscovery of Aztlán can be traced a specific event, the Chicano National Liberation Youth Con- rence that took place in Denver in 1969. There, Colorado polit- al activist Rodolfo 'Corky' Gonzales put forth a brief but influ- ntial political document entitled El Plan de Aztlán" (Barrera 3).[17] Despite Mario Barrera's claim, the precise moment of Aztlán's entry into contemporary public discourse is subject to debate, al attributing it to Alurista in 1968, and Jack D. Forbes claim-

ing that the term was first used to refer to a Chicano homeland in his mimeographed manuscript "The Mexican Heritage of Aztlán (the Southwest) to 1821"—circulated in 1962 by members of the Movimiento Nativo-Americano to Chicanos in the Southwest.[18] However, most scholars agree that the idea of Aztlán as a Chicano homeland was catapulted into the public domain by "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," and the plan's main points are worth noting here:

Chicanos staked their claim to the "northern land of Aztlán" by ancestral birthright and as inhabitants and "civilizers" of a territory that had been stolen from them by a "brutal 'gringo' invasion." They refused to recognize the "capricious frontiers" established by European invaders.

Unity was stressed and nationalism was the "key or common denominator" that transcended all internal differences within the Chicano community, uniting all Chicanos in their struggle against the dominant Anglo culture.

The plan committed Chicanos to "social, economic, cultural and political independence" as "the only road to total liberation from oppression, exploitation and racism." Self-determination was a major goal.

Art was to strengthen identity and maintain unity: "We must insure that our writers, poets, musicians, and artists produce literature and art that is appealing to our people and relates to our revolutionary culture."

Aztlán was proclaimed as a nation, a union of free pueblos, and the plan called for the establishment of an independent political party at local, regional, and national levels.

Ironically, Aztlán, in both its uses as an ancient utopic homeland and as a political symbol, has proven to be more durable than the movement that reappropriated and reconstructed it. Closer examination of "El Plan Espiritual" helps clarify this phenomenon and raises several important issues surrounding a Chicano home-

land and a unified Chicano community that have been repeatedly ignored or distorted in elaborations of Aztlán.

First, the plan justifies its goals on the basis of European and Anglo American colonization and oppression, yet does not grapple with mestizo colonization and appropriation of Native American lands in the Southwest during the Spanish colonial period. The colonization is instead transformed into a legitimation of Chicano territorial rights based on Chicanos' roles as "civilizers of the Northern land of Aztlán." To date, competing claims to the region by Native Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans, and the *mestizaje* of these different cultures have yet to be addressed in most discussions of Aztlán.

Second, nationalism could not override internal differences for very long, even when those divisions were attenuated by extreme racism on the part of the dominant culture (Saragoza 7). Marxist critics began to charge that the cultural nationalism represented by Aztlán blocked the achievement of the true class consciousness necessary for the workers' revolution. Chicanas began to question whether they should have to set aside internal issues of sexism in the name of unity and the movement.[19]

Finally, even Aztlán's link to a mythic past, thought by many of its proponents to be one of its most galvanizing features, provoked resistance (see Chabram and Fregoso).

Since the authors of "El Plan Espiritual" chose to locate the source of Chicano identity in Mesoamerican history/myth in order to provide a narrative they could reinvent for the movement's political aims, I now turn my attention to the historiography surrounding Aztlán—including one of the earliest versions—in the hope of demonstrating that the reconstruction of the myth of Aztlán for the purposes of cultural nationalism was not a new strategy and that, ironically, previous revisions of the myth had created yet another paradox: they made it appear so free floating that it was easy to appropriate; conversely, in not recognizing its intertextuality and multilayered dimensions (i.e., its palimpsestic structure), the Chicano architects of the movement reconstructed Aztlán as a monolithic narrative that would inevitably force marginalized Chicanos and Chicanas to break away, bringing about the movement's collapse. In other words, just as the attempt to anneal the many different Aztlán stories into a coherent, pristine narrative would ultimately lead many Chicanos to reject it, so too would attempts to pose Chicanos as a monolithic, unified community symbolized by Aztlán fragment under the weight of the diversity of those members who found their individuality, needs, and aspirations lost in Aztlán or not represented. Simply put, the unity offered by nationalism did not overcome intracultural differences, as Gonzales and the other authors of "El Plan Espiritual" claimed it would.[20]

Diego Durán and the Paradox of Mesoamerican Myth/European Myth

One of the earliest written sources to document Aztlán is the *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de Tierra Firme* (1581), by the Spanish missionary Diego Durán. Relying on Mesoamerican informants and texts, and motivated by a desire to more effectively convert the Mesoamericans to Catholicism, Durán compiled a history and catalogue of Mesoamerican culture that is surpassed only by the work of Sahagún. Durán mentions Aztlán early in the first chapter of his history: "The only knowledge of their origins that I have obtained from my Indian informants tells of the seven caves where their ancestors dwelt for so long and which they abandoned in order to seek this land, some coming first and others later until these caves were totally deserted. The caves are in Teocolhuacan, which is also called Aztlán, 'Land of Herons,' which we are told is found toward the north and near the region of La Florida" (*The Aztecs* 6). This early reference to Aztlán raises several interesting issues. Rather than locating Aztlán in the Southwest, Durán's informants lead him to believe it is located near La Florida. According to Doris Heyden and Fernando Horcasitas, in Durán's time La Florida referred not only to

what is now the peninsula of that name in the United States but also to the region north of Tampico, including northeastern Mexico and southeastern Texas (Durán, *The Aztecs* 330). Even given this large a region, Durán's Aztlán still is not easily placed in the southwestern United States. Also noteworthy is the reference to seven caves, a provocative, specific detail embedded within a description ambiguous enough to provoke a transformative dialogue between Mesoamericans and Europeans. Chávez argues that the Spaniards' interest would have been increased by the mention of the caves, their number coinciding with a European legend about the Seven Cities of Silver, kingdoms rich beyond imagination (7–22). Durán himself provides another example of this cultural synthesis. Puzzled by similarities between Mesoamerican religious rites and beliefs and Catholic ones, he comes to believe that the Aztecs are actually one of the ten lost tribes of Israel, and, as noted earlier, that Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl was Saint Thomas (*The Aztecs* 3–6). These examples demonstrate the pattern of Aztlán's changing history/myth: it would continue to be rewritten in a dialogic fashion, but without the older elements ever quite disappearing.

Chávez's Lost Land and the Paradox of Specificity/Indeterminacy

The transformative dialogic process is difficult to avoid. An examination of John Chávez's *The Lost Land* will demonstrate not only why the palimpsest is a particularly appropriate trope for understanding Aztlán and Chicano identity, but also why even a scholar fully aware of the transformative process that created Aztlán cannot help superimposing yet another layer on the palimpsest. It is a process we must acknowledge if we are to reconfigure Aztlán into a paradigm useful for studying cultural identity and history.

Chávez's focal point is not Aztlán, but rather the southwestern United States, and he provides a fascinating history of the images associated with that region. According to Chávez, the practice of

referring to the Southwest as Aztlán developed during the sixteenth century but disappeared in the seventeenth century when the first Spanish settlers in New Mexico sent back reports that caused a "new, much less glamorous image of the northern borderlands" to form in the Spanish mind (18–19). We have already noted how a transformative dialogue arose from the cultural clash between Spaniards and Mesoamericans when the two groups were each confronted with startling unknown phenomena. Both sides often turned to myths to explain these phenomena, but there is a misleading tendency to recognize this cultural response only on the part of the Mesoamericans; for example, in the popular but much contested theory that the Aztecs thought Cortés to be Quetzalcoatl. Yet, we have seen that Durán responded by turning to Judeo-Christian myth for his answers. One of the strengths of Chávez's work is that he insists quite convincingly that other Spaniards also frequently relied on myths for explanations:

> After taking Tenochtitlan in 1521, the Spanish looked to the north for new lands to conquer and projected their own myths onto the unknown region that was to become the Southwest. They imagined that to the north there was a rich land of warrior women, that in that direction there were silver cities, or that at the very least the unexplored region touched on a waterway that would link Europe to the wealth of the Orient. . . . While this image was the invention of the foreign Spaniards it soon influenced and was influenced by Indians both in the north and in central Mexico. The Indians on the northern frontier, probably to encourage the Spanish to move on to other areas, sometimes agreed with the invaders' conceptions of the region and elaborated on them. In this way the European legend of the Seven Cities of Silver, which led to Spain's exploration of the Southwest, became the native legends of the Seven Cities of Cíbola and the riches of Quivira. (8)

The interwoven narratives that arose from this dialogue soon became indistinguishable from each other, causing confusion for both indigenous and Spanish authors:

> In central Mexico the Spanish myth of the golden northern land aroused interest in the legend of Aztlán, the Edenic place of origin of the Mexica (the Aztecs). Aztlán, meaning either "land of the herons" or "land of whiteness," was an old name by Cortés's arrival. According to their own histories, the Aztecs had left that homeland, located somewhere in the north, in 1168 and journeyed to the lakes where in 1325 they founded Tenochtitlán. After the Spanish conquest Indian, Mestizo, and Spanish chroniclers, relying on native informants, recorded the legend of Aztlán along with the rest of the history of the Aztecs. However, in their histories the chroniclers, influenced by the myth of the golden north, placed Aztlán in the Southwest; in fact it was probably in Nayarit, only four hundred miles northwest of Mexico City. This error would later lead Chicanos to refer to the Southwest as Aztlán, an application of the name that would, nevertheless, be paradoxically appropriate. (8)

Chávez argues that the myth/history of the Spaniards merged with that of the Mesoamericans, and that "these superimposed images formed the guiding myth of the Spanish exploration of the Southwest" (15) and became a part of the palimpsest of Mesoamerican, Mexican, and Chicano history. But despite his excellent discussion of the layered myth/histories, Chávez believes that Aztlán may very well have been located relatively close to Mexico City, based on reports that, in 1530, Nuño de Guzman encountered a place called "Aztatlan" four hundred miles northwest of Mexico City, "whose name and environment resembled those of the legendary Aztlán. Though the evidence indicated (and still indicates) that Aztatlan and Aztlán were one and the same place, it must have seemed too mundane a location for a land that had been idealized to the point of a paradise on earth" (30).

This apparent discrepancy troubles Chávez, and he goes on to argue that although Aztlán may not have been located in the southwestern United States after all, Chicanos still have an ancient claim to the land by virtue of their Native American ancestors, the ancient Cochise people of what is now southern Arizona.

In a complicated series of maneuvers that draws on the work of Florence Hawley Ellis and James A. Goss, Chávez asserts that the Aztecs are descendants of the Cochise, as are the Ute, the Gabrielino, the Pima, the Pueblo, the Comanche, "and many other southwestern tribes." He concludes, "Thus, while Aztlán, the Aztecs' homeland of 1168 was relatively close to Mexico City, their more distant homeland in both time and space was in the Southwest" (9).

This last statement is revealing of the pervasive, misleading belief among scholars that there is a clear distinction between myth and history. Chávez's odd argument seems to arise out of a belief that the existence of a place called Aztatlan/Aztlán near Mexico City somehow threatens Chicano claims to the Southwest as a homeland that are based on a myth of Aztlán, a myth Chávez believes has been erroneously transposed to the Southwest. Thus he tries to shore up the Chicano claim to that region by rewriting Chicano genealogy and linking it to the ancient Cochise civilization. Here the validity of Chávez's argument does not interest me as much as his strategy, developed to protect Aztlán's borders. Chávez believes that Chicanos have an ancient claim to the Southwest, a claim asserted in 1969 through the myth of Aztlán, but his work appears to dispel that myth by locating Aztlán near Mexico City. Therefore Chávez needs another story to re-create the Chicano borders in the Southwest, and so he rewrites Chicano genealogy in order to legitimate Chicano presence there, in essence creating another myth.

Let me emphasize once again that I am not concerned with the truth of his claim, for, as Bruce Lincoln notes, a myth is just a different kind of authority, not a less convincing one (23–24). Instead, I want to point out that there is a pattern to suggest that whenever histories and genealogies are rewritten, whenever boundaries are redrawn to stake the claim of one group to a particular region, whether geographic or social, there is always another group that is disempowered as a result. Many Mesoamerican scholars, for example, believe that the Aztecs rewrote their

ancestral records in order to erase their nomadic past and legitimate their presence in the Valley of Mexico by claiming direct descent from the Toltecs.[21] Another Mesoamerican narrative that would serve Chicanos well as a cautionary tale is the story of the Aztec emperor Itzcoatl, who allegedly ordered the Aztecs' historical records burned and dictated a new version of history that promoted the interests of the military and ruling classes.[22] Ironically, the Aztlán that the members of the Chicano movement found so appealing because it harkened back to a time of freedom and equality may very well have been a similar construct of the Aztec elite, created to ensure their power over other social classes and to legitimate their privileged status, a point Chicanos should keep in mind when considering the other Aztláns presented to them:

> For all the interest the notion of Aztlán has generated among both nonworking-class ethnohistorians in Mexico and primarily working-class-origin Chicanos, who identified it with the Southwest of the U.S., most Aztecs by the sixteenth century, shortly before and after the arrival of the Europeans, seemed generally indifferent to it. It seems that whatever orthodoxy existed on the subject was maintained only among those for whom the idea had political utility. In effect, Aztlán was a "class"-based symbol useful to the ruling elite as a part of their founding myth and charter of legitimacy; the non-privileged sectors seemed to have derived little of value from this notion. (Klor de Alva, "Aztlán" 148–49)

We should also ask who is being excluded when Chicanos stake a claim to the Southwest based on Aztlán, whether that claim is legitimated through myth, history, or genealogy. Obviously Native Americans must be included in these debates, as must the Asian Americans and African Americans living in the region. Certainly genealogy can be used to establish a Chicano link to Native Americans and thus the Southwest, but it could just as easily be used to claim the region exclusively for Asian Americans, as the group whose ancestors initially came across the Bering Strait long ago. We need to move away from such cultural isolationism

and instead think in terms of cultural *mestizaje* and shared claims to different regions. As Saragoza says, "The commonalities in the Chicano experience have waned; historians cannot refashion the past to vindicate political purpose or need. For activists, the diversity among Chicanos—history argues—must be the linchpin of any political strategy or project" (52).

In fairness to Chávez, he does briefly acknowledge a Native American claim to the Southwest: "Both Indians and Chicanos see themselves as indigenous to and dispossessed of their homelands, which in the Southwest means they claim the same territory" (3). He adds, "Since Chicanos are racially 70 to 80 percent Indian, they do indeed have much in common with Native Americans, a fact that must be considered in discussions of claims to the Southwest" (4). While I question Chávez's generalization about Chicano racial makeup, I would also point out that despite this disclaimer, he does not include Native Americans in his discussion about the region, except when he requires their presence to legitimate Chicano claims to the Southwest. Any sort of productive discussion about regional claims requires the attention to diversity that Saragoza speaks of, both intracultural and intercultural, and it has been noticeably absent to date.

What we can take from Chávez is his astute observation that the various versions of the Aztlán story (or the layers of the palimpsest) caused the legendary region to shift as necessary to meet the demands of the dialogues between and within cultures. For example, he notes that the Spaniards' discovery of the Pueblo villages in New Mexico caused them to be identified in the Codex Ramirez as Aztlán because the villages contained houses, which to the Mesoamerican audience signified civilization. As a result, Aztlán came to appear in later versions as a highly civilized place. Paradoxically, this idealized vision would lead explorers who actually saw the Pueblo villages to reject the idea that they were Aztlán, because the reality of the villages did not—could not—match the utopic grandeur of the chronicles that had been inspired by their discovery. Chávez concludes, "Because accurate informa-

tion about California, New Mexico, and Florida was poorly disseminated, the chroniclers and their informants frequently confused those places with one another; with the result that Aztlán, even after being linked to the Pueblo villages, could be placed anywhere as long as it was to the north" (17).

This example is emblematic of the paradoxical qualities of Aztlán, and it helps us to understand why the Aztlán constructed by the Chicano movement held the coalition together for only a few years: the palimpsestic qualities of Aztlán make it fluid and unanchored and thus an easy myth to appropriate and invest with new meaning; however, the paradoxes embedded within the myth and its multilayered structure also make political claims based on the myth vulnerable (witness Chávez's attempt to shore it up), because its multiple renderings are not easily contained within the outermost narrative and surface in a chorus of competing voices. In restricting Aztlán to just one version, the leaders of the Chicano movement created a nationalist myth so narrow that the nation it offered suffocated many within, and excluded many without, causing them to reject it. The paradox is that Aztlán becomes so indeterminate that it can be located anywhere "to the north," but carries with it layers of competing narratives that are potentially disruptive. Bruce Lincoln notes that "[a]ny synthetic entity, having its origin in a prior dialectic confrontation, bears within it the tensions that existed between the thesis and antithesis involved in its formation, and this residual tension remains ever capable of undoing the synthesis" (11). This "residual tension" helps us to understand why the image of the Southwest as Aztlán was able to reappear after 350 years, and it explains why the Aztlán of the Chicano nationalists did not completely erase the earlier images of the Southwest onto which it was superimposed:

> Needless to say, not all Mexican Americans accepted the image of Aztlán. Among the masses the images of the Spanish Southwest and the American Southwest continued to predominate during the 1970s, and into the 1980s, largely because these were still promoted

> by the educational system and the mass media. Through bicultural and Chicano studies programs, Chicano intellectuals worked to change this situation. However, a small group of Mexican Americans conversant with the affairs of their ethnic group refused to abandon borrowed images of the Southwest, usually, because their lives had been formed within those images or because those views continued to help them accommodate themselves to the standards of Anglo society. (Chávez 148)

Borrowed indeed.

One last issue remains to be addressed in this discussion, and it is a significant one: the implications of attempting to fix Aztlán firmly in the Southwest while claiming its universality for Chicanos everywhere. Chávez, for example, claims that although "'Aztlán' came to refer in a concrete sense to the Southwest, it also applied to any place north of Mexico where Chicanos hoped to fulfill their collective aspirations" (130). He concludes that while the creation of an independent Chicano state of Aztlán is unlikely, continued migration of Mexicans to the region would allow "Chicanos to entrench themselves until revolutionary changes in the general society of the United States could allow true self-determination" (155).

This argument fails to consider Chicanos living outside the Southwest, or is at best overly optimistic in its assumption that Chicanos living in the Southwest can use political leverage to help Chicanos living elsewhere. As Juan Flores and George Yudice (drawing on the work of Nancy Fraser) point out, how a group's needs are defined and who gets to define them affect the type of remedy that will be applied. For instance, Flores and Yudice document that Latino demands for bilingual education are reinterpreted by the dominant culture as indicative of an obstacle to assimilation, and thus the remedy offered is not bilingual education but intensive English instruction. It seems to me that as long as Chicanos inhabit the Southwest in the mental geography of the dominant culture, it is there that Chicano needs will be addressed, and not in those Chicano communities that exist outside

Aztlán, spiritual universality notwithstanding. Gilberto Cardenas, one of the first scholars to address this issue, points out that "the Southwest regional approach [to Chicano studies] has also failed to incorporate an adequate perspective toward the Chicano experience outside (north of) its boundaries. Thus, apart from the numerous problems associated with the study of the Chicano and Chicano studies in the Southwest, the regional approach as a conceptual category has become a major limitation" (146). Despite the fact that Cardenas's call for a broader approach to Chicano studies was published in 1976 in a special issue of *Aztlán* devoted to Chicanos in the Midwest, the problem has failed to be adequately addressed by scholars. Thus, ten years later Sergio Elizondo would need to echo Cardenas's observations. Referring to the substantial Chicano presence in Chicago, he wrote, "[I]t should prompt us to ask for a new description of our actual physical presence, the extent of our cultural dimension, the atlas of our language use, and the limits of the Borderlands" (209). We begin to see that unless Aztlán is understood in all of its layers, in all of 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.

My final remarks are made in the context of the Chicanos who have rejected Aztlán as the movement leaders conceived of it and are searching for a better vehicle for understanding Chicano history and identity. I have argued that Aztlán is not without value, provided we recognize its multidimensionality as key to understanding a multidimensional people; and that in thinking of Aztlán as a palimpsest we can better understand the wide array of experiences, identities, and allegiances that constitute the complex Chicano culture. In addition to the advantages I have already enumerated, Aztlán as palimpsest would

1. enable us to track the remapping of a cultural territory, and thus political maneuvering, and discuss what is at stake in

each remapping; and have the capacity to accommodate new remappings
2. allow us to understand political and historical rewritings in relationship to each other
3. always acknowledge the *provisional* nature of cultural identity, and
4. force us to acknowledge and examine the exclusionary power of any model of cultural identity.

The last two qualities are especially valuable. Any reconsideration of cultural identity is strategic and provisional; that is, it responds to real and perceived pressures that are in constant flux. Therefore, it is important to realize that even a fluid, shifting model of cultural identity is potentially exclusionary—and it is this exclusionary power that must be acknowledged and examined if we are to move toward a more sophisticated understanding of how and why identities change. Conceiving of Aztlán as a palimpsest acknowledges both its exclusionary power and its provisional quality, and in that acknowledgment constitutes a major step toward further discussion and understanding of the interwoven and shifting nature of Chicano identity.