

What's Civic about Aztlán?

Reflections on the Chican@ Promised Land

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Remnants of an Imagined Homeland

Olvera Street, Plaza Mexico, and Boyle Heights's "El Mercadito" are Mexican American cultural centers in Los Angeles whose cultural products often reflect a playful hybridity that gives the city its distinct character. From T-shirts depicting Star Wars's Chewbacca as mustachioed Mexican revolutionary "El Chuy" to smartphone cases featuring Day of the Dead–inspired "calavera" Pokémon, the centers' artifacts fuse traditional Mexican culture with American (and international) popular culture. One artifact in particular stood out on a recent visit to *La Placita Olvera*—a gray Dodgers T-shirt with the word *Aztlán* spelled using the baseball team's logo standing in for the letters *L* and *A*. As a Chicano Angeleno, I am familiar with both the "Aztlán Dodgers" and the "Aztlán Raiders," the fandoms of Chicana/o¹ sports fans in Los Angeles. While the term *Aztlán* continues to be used to describe communities of Chican@s, people of Mexican descent living in the United States, it has come a long way since the Chicano movement popularized it in the late 1960s to describe both a nation and a homeland for Chican@ people.

This chapter examines the rise of the concept of Aztlán as an example of "civic imagination," the idea that collectively reimagining the world is the first step toward social change, with an emphasis on the role of cultural production. Looking specifically at the earliest years of the Chicano movement, three central questions guide and frame this work: (1) Why is Aztlán relevant to the civic imagination? (2) What was the role of cultural production in creating and cultivating the shared concept of Aztlán? (3) What can the potentials and limitations of Aztlán

teach us about utopias and dystopias? Although the concept of Aztlán has been the subject of various academic works (Chávez 1994; Gaspar de Alba 2004; Hidalgo 2016; Miner 2014; Pérez 2011; Pérez-Torres 2016), it's worth considering in the context of civic imagination for several reasons: Aztlán is a notable concept that can inform how people of color and social movements harness the imagination for social change; as a cautionary tale, the story of Aztlán shows both the potentials and pitfalls of imaginaries—the thin line between utopia and dystopia; and despite its deserved criticism for perpetuating regressive politics (mainly patriarchy and toxic masculinity), Aztlán as a concept continues to endure, for better or for worse.

The People of the Sun: The Citizens of Aztlán

Aztlán has been an important, although contested, “place” linked to Chicana@ imaginaries in the United States (Hidalgo 2016; Miner 2014), a representing physical space, an aspirational utopia, and an indigenous worldview. But what exactly is Aztlán?

Chicana@s, people of Mexican descent in the United States, have long voiced their sense of displacement from both the United States and Mexico alike, feeling they are “ni de aquí, ni de allá” (neither from here nor from there) amid discriminatory race politics at home and nostalgia for a “homeland” they knew only through a vibrant culture (LaWare 1998). This deep sense of homelessness, of not belonging, led many Chicana/o youths in the late 1960s to rediscover Mesoamerican culture and reimagine their place in US society through the Chicano movement, which began in the 1960s as a social movement for the liberation and empowerment of Chicana@s in the United States.

While its timeline and histories remain contested (Watts 2004), a central narrative of the Chicano movement concerns Aztlán, the mythical homeland of the once nomadic Aztec people. Myths aside, many Chicana@s considered Aztlán to be a physical place in the southwestern United States (Hidalgo 2016). According to indigenous-Mexican codices, a prophecy led the Aztec people away from Aztlán and south through the deserts of Northern Mexico for years in search of a promised land. The location of this promised land would be revealed by a divine apparition—an eagle, perched upon a cactus, devouring a snake (a symbol now

included on Mexico's national flag). This historical connection between indigenous Mexicans and the present-day United States inspired Chican@ activists to use the concept of Aztlán to lay claim to the Southwest as their long-lost homeland (Hidalgo 2016; Miner 2014). Reestablishing historical ties to the United States through land claims became particularly important for Chican@s who were regularly othered by xenophobia and nativism, and Aztlán reinforced indigenous migration patterns that opposed divisive national borders.

Making the Homeland: Imaginaries and Cultural Production

Aztlán, Aztlán
 a call for justice
 Aztlán, Aztlán
 a call for freedom
 Aztlán, Aztlán
 a call for nationhood
 dedicated to the humanization
 of man and woman
 dedicated to the preservation
 of earth and sun
 rooted in brotherhood and sisterhood
 rooted in collective labor and self-sacrifice.
 —Alurista, “The History of Aztlán” (Miner 2014, 66)

While Aztlán has been historically used by Chican@ activists as a concept linked to geographic space, it has also informed Chican@ imaginaries as a means to reclaim indigeneity, affirm collective identity, and imagine a new homeland—especially through cultural production.

Since the 1960s, Chican@ activist groups, organizations, artists, public intellectuals, and poets have conjured the idea of Aztlán to imagine a place of belonging amid a hostile and discriminatory world. The rise of the Chicano movement coincided with a widespread rediscovery of Mesoamerican, pre-Columbian culture and philosophy (Gómez-Quiñones and Vásquez 2014), which inspired poets like Alurista to link the struggles of US-based Chican@ people to the historic indigenous struggles across the American continents (Gómez 2016). In “The History of

Aztlán,” Alurista moves beyond Aztlán as a physical place and outlines how the concept can forge community and identity through shared commitments and priorities, such as justice, freedom, humanization, and a relationship to the earth (Miner 2014).

The concepts of nationhood and nationalism have also been linked to Aztlán (Chávez 1994; Hidalgo 2016; Miner 2014). Some scholars (Miner 2014) consider Aztlán to follow an indigenous rather than a Western concept of nationhood, emphasizing the affirmation of identity and culture in the tribal sense. Others note a type of nationalism that often accompanied Aztlán called “chicanismo,” which focused on a reclamation of indigenous places, cultures, and identities and served as the basis for community building, empowerment, and political consciousness (Chávez 1994). In either sense, Aztlán named and identified a “Chicano Nation,” one composed of people of color at a time when Mexican Americans were legally considered Anglo despite their racial othering and status as second-class citizens. Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’s influential poem “I Am Joaquin” is often cited as laying the foundations for both Aztlán and a wider Chicano community. The Chicano movement’s founding manifesto, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (The Spiritual Plan of Aztlán), written in 1969, notably asserts Aztlán as a new nation and homeland and Chicanos as its people (Chávez 1994). This manifesto was widely read by Chican@s across the United States, forging an imagined community based on citizenship in the aspirational homeland of Aztlán (C. Anderson 2016).

The Chicano art movement, composed of activist-artists inspired to create art based on the ideals of the Chicano movement (Gaspar de Alba 1998), became particularly important for translating Aztlán from the realm of the imagination into physical space. Miner (2014) discusses how Chican@ art came to reflect not only Aztlán but its priorities and values, especially through Mesoamerican iconography. Murals depicting Mesoamerican architecture, indigenous faces and patterns, Aztec deities, Nahuatl script, and the cultivation of maize became the visual vernacular of Chican@ barrios from Los Angeles to Chicago (Gaspar de Alba 2004; Miner 2014). Aztlán used elements of the past to reimagine both the present and the future. LaWare’s (1998) study of the community art center “Casa Aztlán” in Chicago documents how Chican@ murals often depicted Aztlán as a place of hybridity, a homeland that mirrored Chican@s’ sense of “mestizaje,” or racial and cultural blending, by

mixing indigenous, Spanish, Mexican, and American elements visually. The murals of Chicano Park in San Diego, California, similarly emphasize hybridity by depicting Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec deity of knowledge and creation, alongside Frida Kahlo, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, and Cesar Chavez. In this sense, Aztlán was less about depicting a specific “place” and more about reclaiming history to create an aspirational vision for the present and future when juxtaposed with contemporary barrio life.

From Outcasts to Cocreators of the World

Aztlán stands as a notable example of how social movements harness the imagination to reenvision the world and inform action. However, as far as the civic imagination is concerned, a key question remains: *What's civic about Aztlán?* The following section attempts to uncover the “civic” dimensions of Aztlán, mainly (1) its use to reconceptualize belonging, (2) its cultivation of identity as empowerment, and (3) its potential to facilitate various types of civic processes.

First, vital to healthy civics is a strong sense of community and belonging and a shared commitment to a common good—whether through formal or alternative channels (Boyte 2011; Putnam 2003). Historically, formal politics prevented many Chican@s from reaching this civic potential. Prior to the Chicano movement, people of Mexican descent in the United States were relegated to second-class citizenship: exploited for cheap labor (Ganz 2010), segregated to subpar neighborhoods and schools (Gonzalez 2013), and politically disenfranchised (Chávez 1994). As a geographically and sociopolitically displaced people, Chicanos turned to activism to become empowered and to Aztlán to imagine a place to belong—often through art.

Public-oriented art, from murals to street art, played a key role in reclaiming space and spreading the priorities of *El Movimiento* in an accessible visual format (LaWare 1998). Many Chican@ murals reflected what Aztlán could be: a place for hybridity and cultural blending; a fluid mash-up of past, present, and future; and a space to represent people of color in dignified and empowered ways (LaWare 1998; Miner 2014). Through this type of “people’s art,” the symbolism of Aztlán countered exclusion and displacement by publicly embracing and celebrating difference, giving Chican@s a sense of both home and pride. Boyle Heights’s low-income

housing project “Estrada Heights” became such a place to reimagine belonging with murals, with one in particular depicting Che Guevara in an Uncle Sam pose accompanied by the phrase “We are NOT a minority!” Because mainstream US (and Mexican) society had discarded them for being Chican@, these murals became the signposts for a new nation where they could belong. In short, the concept of Aztlán—especially the conjuring of its symbolism through art—allows us to consider the importance of place and belonging to civics and the civic imagination.

Second, identity and a sense of self are also important to the civic imagination. The ability to see oneself as an “agent of change,” with a sense of civic efficacy to enact influence and social change, often accompanies the exercise of reenvisioning the world (Jenkins et al. 2016). This idea echoes Paulo Freire’s (2018) notion of “conscientization,” the idea that a combination of reflection and action, or “praxis,” can lead marginalized groups to critically understand the social order and see their capacity to meaningfully intervene in the creation of the world. While Aztlán cannot take full credit for this transformation of self, its emergence is linked to the development of an empowered “Chicano consciousness” (Gómez-Quíñones and Vásquez 2014). The Brown Berets, a Chicano group modeled after the Black Panther Party, used symbolic occupations of space as a means to raise and develop political consciousness with the March through Aztlán in 1971 (Gómez-Quíñones and Vásquez 2014). Media texts from the movement also reflected elements of Aztlán while raising consciousness, such as the struggle to reconcile cultural and racial hybridity in Gonzales’s “I Am Joaquin.” If Aztlán was the answer to “Where are you from?,” then Chican@ became the answer to “Who are you?” Much like place and belonging, this affirmation of an empowered identity encouraged countless Chican@s to see themselves as agents of change. In this sense, Chican@s developed their own sense of citizenship wherein their duties and sense of belonging were tied to the empowerment of Chican@s and to Aztlán.

Third, many of Aztlán’s associated ideas and priorities seemed to facilitate civic processes, such as activism, shared knowledge production, and community work. I define civic processes as various actions and activities that promote, cultivate, or sustain civic engagement, such as democratic decision-making, the managing of pooled resources, community building, and a commitment to a common good. Not only were

Chican@s urged to define their homeland and themselves, but Aztlán also called for an active part in cocreating a new world. In particular, key movement texts like *El Plan de Santa Bárbara* moved Aztlán into the realm of knowledge, learning, and education. Much like the Chicano movement manifesto before it (*El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*), *El Plan de Santa Bárbara* addressed the displacement of Chican@s in educational institutions and academia (González 2002). Through scholarship, ethnic studies departments, and the student group MEChA in particular, the discourse of Aztlán became key to interpreting belonging, hybrid culture, and identity (Gómez-Quíñones and Vásquez 2014).

MEChA, an acronym for Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán, was one of the outcomes of the Santa Barbara plan, and its purpose was to empower young Chicanos through education and activism (Gómez-Quíñones and Vásquez 2014). To this day, the symbols of Aztlán can be found on many MEChA emblems, such as the black eagle holding an Aztec *macuahuitl* on the UCLA group's banner. For decades, MEChA cultivated consciousness in countless students through cultural awareness, community mentorship and volunteering, and educational attainment (Gómez-Quíñones and Vásquez 2014; Valle 1996). In essence, Aztlán became a kind of rallying cry used to bring Chican@s together and enact change through action, bridging elements of the imagination with grassroots social change.

The Dark Side of Aztlán: From Chicano Utopia to Chicanx Dystopia?

While Aztlán offered a radical vision for society centered on the inclusion and empowerment of a racial and ethnic group, some early versions prioritized racial politics over gender and sexuality, alienating women and queer Chicanxs along the way. In this sense, Aztlán became dystopian for some by perpetuating hostile and exclusionary gender and heteronormative politics (Gaspar de Alba 2004; Pérez 2011). The civic imagination potential of these early versions of Aztlán may have been held back by regressive and arguably “anticivic” elements—namely, a gendered and heteronormative vision of the world.

Although Aztlán offered an alternative vision for what the world could be, this vision was predominantly created by men of the movement—and its priorities were often male- and hetero-centric (Gaspar de Alba 2004).

From the very beginning, the Chicano movement's manifesto, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, framed the liberation of men through a gendered use of language: the male variation of "Chicano," an emphasis on indigenous "forefathers," and even the designation "People of the Sun"—in reference to the male Aztec sun god of war (Gaspar de Alba 2004). Furthermore, pockets of the Chicano art movement often depicted Aztlán as a utopia for men, where they could express their masculinity as conquering Aztec warriors worthy of both land and women as trophies. The Aztec "sleeping woman" myth of the princess Ixtaccíhuatl and the warrior Popocatepetl has become a ubiquitous visual story in Chican@ communities. According to Garber (1995), "This image epitomizes woman as sex object, woman as tied to man, and because Popocatepetl is usually depicted as holding the dead Ixtaccíhuatl in a Pieta arrangement, the passive woman protected by active man" (221). Across barrios in the United States, the visual depiction of Aztlán coincided with a nostalgia for male Aztec warrior culture (Gaspar de Alba 2004). This vision was translated from texts and art into the political formations of the movement, as men regularly held visible leadership roles, taking credit for its accomplishments, while women were relegated to the heavy lifting in the shadows (Blackwell 2011). Women who spoke out against patriarchy and sexism in the movement were often considered traitors to the cause.

Aztlán continues to be a compelling and powerful concept for many young Chicanxs developing their political consciousness. While this chapter tracks the "rise and fall" of an early "version" of Aztlán tied to the rise of the Chicano movement, there are many versions that have come since. Notably, Gloria Anzaldúa's groundbreaking Chicana feminist text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* offered displaced Chicanas and Chicana people a new metaphor for home and belonging in the *borderlands*—which some scholars (Watts 2004) consider as a reclamation and expansion of Aztlán into a more inclusive transnational feminist project.

Note

- 1 As a Spanish word, the use of the letter *o* to end a pronoun designates a male/masculine role. As a more inclusive signifier, activists prefer the use of the term with gender-inclusive variations, such as those ending in *a/o*, *@*, *e*, or *x*.

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Abstract

This chapter provides a discussion of how Chicana youth in the 1960s-70s used cultural production to conjure the concept of "Aztlán," the place believed to be the original homeland of the Aztec people, to imagine a place where hybrid identities can belong. From movement manifestos, to poetry, to peoples' street art, chicana activists of the Chicano Movement reclaimed their Mesoamerican roots by embedding pre-columbian culture into their cultural products and media — becoming signposts for those proclaiming to be citizens of Aztlán. Now a highly contested concept due its association with nationalism and regressive gender politics, this chapter takes a look at Aztlán's earliest days to ask the question: What's civic about Aztlán? As an example of civic imagination, part of Aztlán's early appeal seems to be linked to its use to reconceptualize belonging, its cultivation of identity as empowerment, and its potential to facilitate various types of civic processes.

Keywords: Aztlán, Chicana, Social Movements, Cultural Production, Civics

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