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Albuquerque author Rudolfo Anaya is a panelist in a discussion of "Aztlán: Approaches to the Chicano Homeland" at the National Association for Chicano Studies conference.

Chicanos called the Southwest

AZTLÁN

"AZTLÁN: ESSAYS ON THE CHICANO HOMELAND"

Edited By Rudolfo A. Anaya and Francisco A. Lomeli
Albuquerque: Academia/El Norte Publications, \$9.95, 248 pp.

Review By Enrique R. LaMadrid

By the early 1970's tidings of a new "Promised Land" had spread throughout the "Hispanic" (then Mexican-American) Southwest. This land was ancient yet intimately familiar, for it was already there beneath our feet; Aztlán, the Aztec name for the mythical northlands, place of emergence and revelation, place of whiteness, gathering place of herons and cranes, now called the American Southwest.

What was new were the changing and more militant attitudes towards the land, history, and towards cultural identity. The promise was that age-old human yearning for cultural and political self determination, so severely repressed during the American occupation of the Southwest. The sign of defiance and complicity with the dynamic cultural revival at hand was a new term of ethnic self definition: Chicano!

In what Albuquerque writer Rudolfo Anaya calls "a spontaneous ceremony of naming," the myth of Aztlan was rekindled in Denver in March 1969 with El Plan de Aztlán, a nationalistic manifesto which outlines the total liberation of the Chicano. By November 1969, New Mexican cultural activists led by social philosopher Tomas Atencio had founded La Academia de Aztlán (later known as La Academia de la Nueva Raza), a group whose name and vision still guide El Norte Publications, who under the able editorship of Anaya and critic Francisco Lomeli, has collected the documents and reflections of that collision of mythic and historical energy known as Aztlán.

Like the explosion of a supernova, the sudden genesis of a such a compelling and unifying myth is a rare event indeed. Much longer in the making were two more inimical myths that dictate our experience of the Southwest: the Jacksonian Myth of the Frontier which helped turn the imperialist dream of Manifest Destiny into a political reality; and the Myth of Traditional Culture, a construct of Anglo-American social scientists who perpetrated the stereotypical notion of the Mexican Americans as a fatalistic and passive underclass. True, the psychic ravages of conquest, racism, generations of poverty and oppression are crippling, and the false hope of assimilation finally shatters the sacred circle of cultural identity. The simple healing power of the myth of Aztlan is that it restores the circle; what was marginalized again becomes central. The Southwest is not a border or fringe area, but rather a heartland. The redefined, reclaimed time/space of Aztlán thus set the stage for

They were reclaiming a cultural heritage going back to the Aztecs.

the prodigious Chicano Renaissance of art, literature, and activism which followed. As Anaya reports, "A spirit of liberation swept over our people, releasing a chain reaction of new energy, initiative and originality."

This anthology includes a wide range of responses to the concept of Aztlán from the literary chronicles of Luis Leal, founder of Chicano literary criticism, to the historical research of Michael Pina and John Chavez, the literary mythography of Alurista, and the poetic essay of Gloria Anzaldúa, the only woman. Historians and anthropologists using Aztec codices and ethnohistorical data speculate as to the exact geographical location of Aztlán. Possibilities include the coast of Nayarit, the region north of the Gulf of California, and the Rio Grande valley, which is, after all full of herons and cranes.

Poets are more certain in their knowledge that Aztlán can be found within or wherever there are Chicanos. Jorge Klor de Alva contrasts Aztlán with Borinquen, the mythic Puerto Rican homeland, which involves a necessary pilgrimage to the island to be experienced. Ramon Gutiérrez comments on the curious case of a promotional book entitled Aztlán: The History, Resources and Attractions of New Mexico, published in 1885 by the state's Bureau of Immigration, which subverts the myth in a campaign to attract Anglo settlers. The most notable omission in an otherwise comprehensive collection is a very early essay by E. A. Mares in 1972 which introduced the concept of Aztlán to New Mexican readers, placed it in relationship to other Southwest myths and made accurate predictions about the magnitude of the approaching Chicano Renaissance.

Genaro Padilla's essay entitled "Myth and Comparative Cultural Nationalism: The Ideological Uses of Aztlán" is the keystone of the collection and provides a much needed bridge to place Chicano cultural activism in an international context. Many parallels can be drawn between the

Chicano experience and the struggles in Quebec and the emerging African republics for cultural and political autonomy. Padilla is the first Chicano critic to compare the myth making of the 19th century nationalist poets of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland to the more familiar Chicano case. The demands of politics on esthetics is another dilemma which Chicano writers share with the likes of W. B. Yeats and his passionate yet ambivalent relationship with the Irish republican cause.

With Chicanos as with cultural nationalists all over the world, myth has long held its indisputable place alongside history. Although they often contradict each other, both converge in the concept of homeland. To find Aztlán, a homeland without borders, is to understand Chicanos, "La Raza Cósmica (the Cosmic Race)" as they also call themselves, a pluralistic mestizo people whose life and culture is a celebration of their own diversity.

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