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Aztlan: place of the heart, mind

Aztlan: Essays on the Chicano Homeland

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New

Aztlan became the homeland for Chicanos in 1969. It was then that the poet, Alurista, made it a rallying cry ("We are Aztlan") for the Chicano movement that flowered in the early 1970s.

"Aztlan: Essays on the Chicano Homeland" collects Alurista's original manifesto and 12 essays that try to put the subject into perspective.

According to tradition, the ancestors of the Aztecs left a land "somewhere to the north" and began a peregrination south that ended with the founding of Tenochtitlan (present-day Mexico City) in 1325.

After the conquest of Mexico in 1521, the Spaniards were intrigued by the possibility of enormous riches elsewhere in the New World. John R. Chavez, in his essay, "Aztlan, Cibola and Frontier New Spain," argues convincingly and with considerable wit that the Indians probably told the Spaniards just what the Spaniards wanted to hear: that indeed there were cities of gold to the north. Thus began the Spanish exploration of what is now the Southwestern United States.

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The Spaniards did not find very much gold, but they established outposts garrisoned by a small number of troops and large numbers of Indians from the central valley of Mexico. Thus, Chavez notes, the Indians of the north were reunited with the Indians of the south. The mixing that resulted, to include as well the European troops, produced the *mestizo*.

There are various estimates as to exactly where Aztlan is located. For the purposes of the Chicano movement, Aztlan became an amorphous territory roughly encompassing the states of California, Texas, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona. This coincides with the region in which the majority of Americans of Mexican descent live.

Aztlan, more than anything, was a spiritual or symbolic place. As a rallying cry, it was designed to foster unity and brotherhood among Chicanos by bringing us back our Indian origins. We were Mexicans living outside of Mexico, at the same time that we were rejected by the nation, the United States, in which we held citizenship.

Aztlan was a separate place, even if it existed only in our hearts; a place where we could live, if only metaphorically, as whole beings.

The essays in this collection are at their best when they collate research on Aztlan itself. They are less successful when they try to analyze the meaning of Aztlan for Chicanos. Finally, they are at their worst when some of the authors try to split hairs in their private definitions of myth and culture. Some of the distinctions they make are just too precious.

This anthology is important and useful for two reasons. For those who were involved in the Chicano movement, the essays provide an important summary of what Aztlan meant. They bring together and make explicit much that we knew intuitively. For everyone else, this collection of essays is an excellent starting point for understanding the changes in the social and political life of Mexican Americans.

Max Martinez of San Antonio has a new collection of fiction scheduled for 1990 publication.