Creating Aztlán

CHICANO ART, INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY, AND LOWRIDING ACROSS TURTLE ISLAND

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FIRST PEOPLES
New Directions in Indigenous Studies

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In this book, we will be lowriding across Aztlán, an Indigenous Xicano territory, and into Anishinaabewaki, the traditional homelands of the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi. From this perspective, lowriding, a contemporary yet Indigenous practice, serves as the ideal metaphor to understand the structure of this book. For many participants in lowrider culture, the process of lowriding engages traditional migration patterns, yet employs late-capitalist machinery to traverse colonized landscapes. While our ancestors moved slowly from one place to another, establishing deep roots along the way, contemporaneity and coloniality presuppose that we must hurriedly rush from place to place. Instead of hastening from one place to another, lowriding, as an Indigenous ontology, actively engages the process of slow-movement. Through this intentional slowness, lowriding seamlessly repositions us between various temporalities, moving among multiple spaces and in and out of disparate social structures. Lowriding becomes methodology and framework as we investigate Aztlán and Chicano art, as well as migrate across Turtle Island or the Americas.

In a similar fashion, I wrote Creating Aztlán as an attempt to freely and intentionally migrate across multiple temporalities, engaging precocial indigeneities alongside colonial, modern, and contemporary Xicano responses to colonization. Although historical in orientation, my research disavows colonial notions of linear temporality and, instead, engages Chicano art from a perspective that is diachronic and couched in Indigenous notions of time. In this fashion, I engage colonial-era amoxíli, Chicano
Movement artworks, and contemporary Xicano artistic practices in a way that acknowledges historical change yet does not presuppose Western developmentalist linearity. As both an artist and intellectual, much of my writing employs creative approaches to structure, allowing connections to be made across time and space. Similar to Anishinaabe writer Jim Northrup, “I rely on the oral tradition to tell my story, so I move from one topic to another.” Unlike the work of a proper historian, I cover cultural and intellectual practices that span five centuries by migrating across time and space. Creating Aztlán, the book you hold in your hands as well as the process of affirming Xicano sovereignty, is itself a creative work.

Lowriding across Turtle Island—the Americas

During the process of writing this book, I built a few dozen lowrider bicycles in collaboration with Native youth in the United States and Canada. Through this ongoing project, known as Anishnaabensag Biimskowebshkigewag (Native Kids Ride Bikes) (figure 1), I imagine community collaboration and contemporary cultural practice as the locus to maintain Indigenous knowledge. Much like academic research, these artistic collaborations incorporate the help of community youth and elders and teach the significance of movement and migration (lowriding), as well as employ the centrality of storytelling to the development of Indigenous knowledge. Through our collaborations, we collectively built Indigenous bicycles, frequently riding them together. As we rode as a unit, and continue to individually ride, I was reminded of the importance of land within Indigenous communities, even within those urban detribalized and frequently diasporic communities where many find themselves (such as the Xicano community). Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Seneca) discusses the importance of land within Indigenous notions of place, territory, and sovereignty. She emphasizes “how the use of land is a resistance to a conception of fixed spaces; Indigenous artists, storytellers, word warriors, elders, youth, medicine men and women, and scholars utilize the word land differently with vital and various meanings.” In Creating Aztlán, I also see land differently than those in settler-colonial society. I utilize Aztlán in a way that moves through various Indigenous spaces, regardless of what colonial juridical power may say about Xicano indigeneity or sovereignty. As artists, youth, scholars, and elders, we are each crucial to Indigenous sovereignty as we “teach the future generations about their peoples’ intimate relationship to the land.”

Indigenous place, what many call land, is not isolated to the existence of reservations. Aztlán is land, but one tied to a colonized land across distinct Indigenous that my body remains in constant being via embodied practices and an act of bicycles, the youth and I collectively and Walter Mignolo name the soci relations. As practiced by Xicanos of Xicano indigeneity. By building in a profound way: we worked col

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existence of reservations. Aztlan is one of these enunciations of Indigenous land, but one tied to a colonized and detribalized people.

Cycling across distinct Indigenous and settler territories, I became aware that my body remains in constant cultural flux, yet persists as Indigenous. Across Turtle Island-the Americas, Native individuals and communities maintain their respective sense of who they are and what their history should be via embodied practices and artistic expressions. By building Indigenous bikes, the youth and I collectively confronted coloniality, as Anibal Quijano and Walter Mignolo name the social process of inequitable settler-Indigenous relations. As practiced by Xicano artists, Aztlan is about the reaffirmation of Xicano indigeneity. By building bikes, we upheld Indigenous sovereignty in a profound way; we worked collectively and, in turn, built community.

My interest in lowriders began during my youth in rural Michigan, where I was raised alongside Mexican and Xicano migrant workers. Con- structing lowrider bicycles as a child, I stopped building them as a teenager, not returning to them until an Indigenous Canadian curator invited me to

Figure 1. Dylan Miner, Anishnaabensag Biimiskwebshehigewag (Native Kids Ride Bikes), 2011. LookOut! Gallery, Michigan State University. Photo courtesy of the author.
participate in an exhibition for contemporary Indigenous artists working with the bicycle as artistic medium. For this exhibition, I decided to revisit the lowrider bicycle, commencing my own homeward migration by creating a lowrider based in contemporary Michif (Métis) aesthetic systems. From this initial moment of reclamation, I began envisaging the bicycle as a specter of anticolonial resistance intimately tied to sustainable transportation. The metaphor of the bicycle is multivalent and complex, one which led me toward Aztlan, the theme of this book. Moreover, lowriding across time, space, and sovereignty becomes the theoretical methodology to interrogate Aztlan and Xicano notions of time and space.

Throughout 2010 and 2011, I spent substantial time researching sustainable and Indigenous modes of transportation, particularly the ways that mobility was and is utilized by Indigenous peoples of the U.S.-Canada borderlands. Since this book is about migrations and Xicano relations to land, transportation seemed to always link my thoughts back to the ideas in this book. As part of this project, I was awarded an Artist Leadership fellowship from the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, DC. After spending time in NMAI archives, I subsequently returned to my home in Michigan to collaborate with Native youth and elders, building a series of lowrider bicycles based on the sacred Anishinaabeg teachings known as Niizhwaasi G’mishomisinaanig (Our Seven Grandfathers).

Although collective projects are always difficult, this ongoing collaboration taught me that community-based engagements offer significant challenges and considerable opportunities for collective intellectual development. The materials we employed in Anishnaabensag Biimiskwebshkigewag combined ancestral knowledge with contemporary technologies, concretizing Indigenous culture in the guise of lowrider bicycles. For my collaborators and me, these bikes materialized Indigenous knowledge in the present.

At first glance, however, one could argue that these lowrider bikes are simply hybrid or mestizo cultural artifacts. After all, they combine Indigenous and settler ways of knowing via Xicano popular culture. In dominant Chicano studies discourse, when Xicano artistic practices combine multiple signifying systems, they are inherently mestizo, and therefore, as many Chicano studies scholars maintain, not entirely Indigenous. In much of this scholarship, mestiza serves as a counter to Anglo-American essentialized authenticity, becoming canonical in the process. From this perspective, mestiza is the disavowal of purity, both colonial and Indigenous.

While I understand a need for this critical form of mestiza, this book materializes what in Latin America was known as indigenismo, a term that
Indigenizing

In this exhibition, I decided to revisit and expand my own homeward migration by creating new, intercultural, Indigenous aesthetics. I began envisaging the bicycle as an intimate tie to sustainable transformation and complex, one of the book. Moreover, lowriding frames the theoretical methodology of time and space.

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Critical form of mestizaje, this book is known as indigenismo, a term that contrasted with state-organized articulations of indigeneity (indigenismo) and mestizaje. Indianismo is an Indigenous formation that is community-centered. José Antonio Lucero notes that “despite their differences, both hispanidad and mestizaje reproduced and reinforced the homogenizing logic of the nation-state, which stigmatizes the ethnic differences of the present, even while it glorifies the Incan and Aztec civilizations of the past.” Xicano indigenism, breaking with Mexican indigenismo and the logics of mestizaje, develops more accurately as an extension of indianismo. These are ideas I have learned while working with community, not just from academic texts.

As you will see in this book, no matter how transcultural or hybrid Chicano art may appear, it nonetheless prolongs a mode of Indigenous artistic practice. These bikes, as art objects, operated in the same way. Indigeneity is not a stagnant cultural category; rather it represents the inextinguishable right of Indigenous peoples to self-determine who they are, how they govern themselves, and how they define their own knowledge and aesthetic systems. Neither Mexico, Spanish, Mexican, nor Anglo-American hegemony can exterminate Xicano indigeneity or sovereignty. At the same time, Xicano incorporations of Nahua or Mexica epistemologies are quite distinct from their top-down and colonizing usage by the Mexican nation-state and its ruling classes.

Much like my interventionist collaborations with Indigenous youth, Creating Aztlán is an indigenist intervention into settler ontologies and colonial political formations that attempt to render Xicano presence as immigrant (and therefore settler), as opposed to Indigenous in orientation. While mestiza consciousness has considerable merits, performing an undeniable role during the 1990s, it also serves to disenfranchise Xicanos as an Indigenous people. Inversely, this work is grounded in the claim that Chicano history must be understood as Indigenous history. Chicano art is a unique form of contemporary Indigenous visuality. Using a methodology described by LeAnne Howe (Choctaw), Creating Aztlán serves as a Xicano “tribalography,” an argument I extend in chapter 1.

This book is my attempt to demonstrate the ongoing importance of Aztlán for contemporary Xicano society, regardless of its epistemological changes throughout time. By investigating the way that artists engage Aztlán, I follow the Indigenous logic put forward by Michif (Métis) revolutionary leader and martyr Louis Riel who, on the eve of his state-sanctioned assassination, declared that “My people will sleep for one-hundred years, but when they awaken it will be the artists who give them back their spirit.” As homage to Riel and his ideas, this book is about the process of giving spirit back to an Indigenous people denied Indigenous sovereignty through
settlement-coloniality. The foundational story of Aztlan, as well as the work of the artists I discuss, serves to reclaim a Xicano Indigenous spirit.

I begin this book with the preceding stories about lowriding and Xicano indigeneity to situate my own narrative within the larger framework of the text. I do this because, as many Indigenous readers will recognize, Indigenous knowledge is located not solely in the writing of academic texts or stored away in museums and archives. Rather, Indigenous knowledge emerges from the quotidian experiences we share with one another, often coming from a first-person perspective. This knowledge is found in our reciprocal moments together and the ability to reconstruct these experiences as teaching stories. These stories are knowledge. They are teaching moments. Sto-lo educator Jo-ann Archibald (Q’um Q’um Xiiem) names this type of pedagogy as “Indigenous Storywork.”10 For Archibald, Native peoples do not only teach their children, they story them as well. To tell any story, such as this book, I must begin with my own, which is what I have done. This story is now yours to share and reshape. Once you know the story, it is your collective responsibility to tell it.

The origins of the story you are about to read, which masquerades as an academic manuscript, began over twenty-years ago when, as a teenager, I encountered Aztlan through my interest in lowrider bikes. During this period, my understanding of Aztlan came through my interaction with the Aztlan Bicycle Company, the preeminent distributor of lowrider bicycles and lowrider bicycle products during the 1990s and early 2000s.

Since that initial moment of recognition, I have built dozens of lowrider bikes, including many for gallery and museum exhibitions across Turtle Island. My recent NMAI-funded collaboration with Indigenous youth served to bring together the realities of transborder indigeneities, a concept that I investigate in this book. By making lowrider bikes, an aboriginal Xicano tradition, I have built strong connections across many Indigenous lands and territories.

Throughout all this, artists and activists, myself included, create Aztlan in our own individual and collective ways. In return, this book demonstrates why Aztlan is still relevant today and how Xicano artists have created Aztlan, an irreducible notion of Indigenous territoriality and sovereignty.

Origins and Movements

I arrive at this study as someone involved in Xicano, Native, and antiauthoritarian politics who came of age during the late 1990s. I see this project as
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reflective, extending the Chicano Movement into the present. I turn my intellectual gaze toward Aztlán in hopes of finding an emancipatory construct with enduring relevance today. By basing Creating Aztlán, the book you hold in your hands, in the “emerging” discipline of Indigenous studies, I position Xicanos not as “illegal” or undocumented immigrants but as an aboriginal people firmly situated in this hemisphere. This position has precedence in the work of Indigenous scholars like Jack D. Forbes (Powhatan-Renape and Delaware-Lenape), who wrote in 1973 (but publicly discussed in the early 1960s) that Xicanos are the largest Indigenous nation on Turtle Island. While this perspective is countered by other Indigenous scholars like Patricia Penn Hilden (Wallowa Nez Perce), the 2010 Census identifies “Mexican American Indians” as the fourth largest tribal group in the United States.11 While this only acknowledges self-identity, we cannot simply dismiss this large group of people and their stories. As such, this book is predicated on the idea that Xicanos are an Indigenous people. The indigenist and Indigenous perspective from which I write, one based in my own Michif ontology and experiences being raised in a Xicano community, is crucial in framing the book’s larger argument vis-à-vis Indigenous visibility and Xicano visual sovereignties.

Despite the fact that his ideas were not originally aimed at the particularities of the Chicano Movement, the Marxist writing of Mexican philosopher Alberto Híjar Serrano may be applied to fit my discussion of politically motivated Chicano art. When discussing the political imbalances in the life and work of muralist Diego Rivera, Híjar argues that

Those presently engaged in the complexities of socialist liberation do not have time to pause for reflection. . . . Rivera might have lacked theoretical consistency and partisan orientation, but neither is an ideological or practical defect when one contributes as many open-ended possibilities

as he did.12

What Híjar brings to this book (and to larger discussions of Chicano art) is that even with all the inconsistencies and troubles that haunt the Chicano Movement, its relationship to contemporary radical politics remains strong. Artists, in particular, are commonly inconsistent in their ideas, a stance that should not be viewed as wholly problematic.

As my present research with Aztlán attests, the Chicano Movement was not simply about “nationalist” exclusion; rather, it developed in a way that allowed for different factions engaged in anticlonal and anticapitalist insurrection to simultaneously envision Aztlán. While nationalists were often the most visible Movement participants, we must be cautious not to
reduce the various nationalisms of the Chicano Movement into a singular one of exclusion and heterosexist machismo. After all, Indigenous “nationalisms” or sovereignties are not linked to the same limitations as Western nation-states and capitalist economics. If we are to fulfill Aztlán’s vision, we must move beyond colonial thinking and structures.

As George Lipsitz argues in “Not Just Another Social Movement,” the Chicano Movement “was an effort to convince people to draw their identity from their politics rather than drawing their politics from their identity.” By turning away from hegemonic forms of identity politics, Lipsitz observes how the Movement produced previously unexplored identities and social structures, ones that contrast settler-colonial views and neoliberal governance. In fact, I feel that Lipsitz’s generativity still diverges greatly from dominant modes that historicize the Chicano Movement as exclusionary.

If we listen solely to hegemonic narrations of the Movement, especially its most significant epistemological artifact, Aztlán, the transformative and transgressive nature of Chicano art is replaced by an art history judged merely on artistic qualities or surface aesthetics. Regrettably, this is what often happens to the artistic work of revolutionary artists and intellectuals, as they are incorporated into the canon and stripped of their revolutionary potentialities. The works I discuss in Creating Aztlán are not simply conferred because of their artistic content, but more importantly because they also urge new political and social ontologies. Accordingly, Chicano art is a unique philosophical modality that proposes new ways of being in the world that is linked to older forms of indigeneity.

In response, the task of critically engaged intellectuals and artists is to point out the deficiencies of past movements without stripping these movements of their radical potential. This, of course, becomes increasingly difficult to do when we see ourselves as part of, or as the heirs to, certain emancipatory agendas. How, then, do we intimately explore the intricacies of historic events without either vilifying or heroicizing their participants and esteemed cultural workers? Unfortunately this dialectic is one that many activist-intellectuals have struggled with, as have I throughout the writing of this book. Hopefully, I have neither reduced art to polemic nor removed it from its larger emancipatory potential. Ultimately, the reader will decide.

Even though revisionist Chicano Movement intellectuals such as Emma Pérez, Dionne Espinoza, Elizabeth “Betita” Martínez, Gloria Anzaldúa, Dionicio Valdés, and Jorge Mariscal, among countless others, have been attentive to the sexism, homophobia, nationalism, and regional biases of the Movement, the shortcomings of the Chicano Movement and the literature addressing its historicity do not nullify the utopian desires of those
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individuals who collectively identified with it.15 As such, I continue the radical possibilities of the Chicano Movement and Aztlán, in particular, as theoretically expressed via a dense narration of Chicano art history and visual culture. This activist-oriented project develops through a variety of tactics, some coterminous, others tangential.

Most important to this emancipatory project is the analysis of Chicano art and culture, placing it in dialogue with lesser-known and emerging Xicano artistic and cultural work. By entering these differing voices in dialogue, and concurrently addressing the cultural history of the Chicano Movement, Creating Aztlán reveals the importance of Aztlán as an organizing principle but, more importantly, explicates how Xicanos reclaim and self-determine place, space, and utopian thought within the Xican o imaginary. Through this intervention I hope to demonstrate that the Chicano Movement continues to resonate today, particularly in the wake of the 2006 and 2007 Immigration Rights movement and, as I complete this book, Arizona’s apartheid-style policies, which criminalize the presence of Brown and Red bodies and their knowledge. Ongoing attacks on Indigenous and “immigrant” communities demonstrate that a project of this sort is needed, possibly more today than ever before.

Return to Aztlán

Allow me to briefly return to my biography and connect to the Chicano Movement and Xicano politics. Personally I am not Xicano; I am Michif or Métis, an Indigenous person of mixed ancestry with deep ancestral roots in Indigenous and settler communities of the U.S.-Canada borderlands (Michigan, Minnesota, Ontario, Alberta, and Manitoba). I was raised in a rural community alongside significant numbers of Xicanos, most of whom followed the South Texas–Michigan migrant stream. These shared experiences shape this project and my personal understanding of Xicanisma. As a Michif person, I see many similarities in our communities’ postcontact Indigenous lifeways and therefore seek sanctuary in the earth-based quotidian practices of Aztlán. Although a child of the so-called middle class, at seventeen I briefly labored alongside my future in-laws hoeing in the betabel and working in the fields. By learning to labor, to borrow from Paul Wil-lis’s famous study, I substantiated my commitment to both the Michif and Xicano communities, commitments that remain at the core of this project.16

Like the migratory (lowriding) experiences that precipitated Xicano northward migrations to fill agricultural and industrial labor demands in
the *norte*, my father’s family migrated as *voyageurs* across arctic, boreal, and woodland North America before permanently transgressing the illegitimate U.S.-Canada boundary line. Through this migration, my family left behind the aboriginal and migratory lifestyle of the backcountry for one in an expanding and industrial Detroit. Before our early-twentieth-century border crossings into the United States, my family was among a group of Michif and Anishinaabeg who, in response to the shifting U.S.-Canada border after the Treaty of Ghent, left Drummond Island (which had just become part of the United States) to reestablish their lives in Penetanguishine and Parry Sound, Ontario. Like our Xicano and Indigenous Mexican relations, my family was split by the geopolitical violence of the border.

Born and raised in rural Michigan, I occasionally crossed the U.S.-Canada border for family reunions and summartine holidays. Coming of age in the 1990s and politicized within the Chicano and antiglobalization movements, the chant “We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us” reminded me of my own familial experiences with borders and their painful slicing through Indigenous lifeways. These words evoked a profound and painful connection with the struggles of the Xicano community. After all, along *la otra frontera*, as I call the U.S.-Canada border, many Native peoples share the experience of being violated by geopolitical boundaries that circumscribe their abilities to visit family, travel without documentation, and harvest in traditional ways. During my formative years in Anishinaabewaki, the place I still call home, I migrated between various cultural contexts (Xicano-Anglo, rural-urban, Native-white, etc.), eventually wandering into the transformative politics of MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanx/De Aztlán) at a moment when Xicanos were experiencing a renewed Indigenous consciousness. *Creating Aztlán* is based in my own experiences as a Michif artist engaged in radical Xicano politics. It merges these intellectual and lived experiences in a way that situates Chicano art history within a series of radical potentialities and Indigenous ontologies.

This book situates my own complex and heterodox thinking about indigeneity within the confines of Xicano cultural practice. I do this by tracing the multiple strains of Aztlán, the legendary homeland of the Mexica, in hope of maintaining the global anticlonial trajectory of the late 1960s. By understanding the nuances of Aztlán, *Creating Aztlán* facilitates an awareness of the Chicano Movement by looking at the artistic and cultural utilization of Aztlán as a utopian and revolutionary gesture toward Indigenous sovereignty. My investigation simultaneously culminates and commences in March 1969, when Xicanos from across Turtle Island gathered in Denver to discuss the social, political, and economic demands facing
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from across Turtle Island gathered
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their respective communities. This meeting, known as the Chicano Youth
Liberation Conference, created an anticolonial and indigenist framework
for the Chicano Movement. It was at this particular gathering that young
Xicanos established a paradigmatic plan of action that synthesized local
Xicano experiences by collectively striving for national self-determination.

The author(s) of El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan, the main edict to emerge
from the conference, focused on the class-based oppression of Xicanos but
positioned their analysis and demands by applying Indigenous and Meso-
american tropes within a contemporary North American context. Although
poet Alurista is generally acknowledged as the draftsman, the Plan was
issued anonymously. In this document, Aztlan, the “mythical” place of or-
igin of the Mexica, became the metaphor used to refer to the collective and
autonomous sovereignty of Xicanos. Why did Xicanos desire to construct
their late-capitalist identities by converging on the imagery and mythology
of precontact, yet not precolonial, Indigenous history?

Commencing with this question, Creating Aztlan contends that Aztlan
performs a liberatory function for artists and activists while positing four
interrelated, although not entirely coterminal, arguments with Aztlan at
the core. For the most part, this text is a history of Chicano art and
visual culture that narrates radical Chicano politics, intellectual histories
of Aztlan, and utopian Indigenous thought. It declares Xicano sovereignty
throughout. By addressing Xicano activism and cultural practices, I attend
to the multivalent roles that Aztlan plays within the Xicano community
and the various ways that artists have articulated Aztlan within their own
visual art. Moreover, investigating how and why artists and activists invoked
Aztlan allows us to continue implementing the concept as a metaphor for
liberation and sovereignty.

Second, because of my anticapitalist perspective and indigenist read-
ing of Xicano artistic practices, I believe that the issues discussed in this
book are informed by Indigenous and anthierarchical political projects
that may likewise inform present and future antiauthoritarian and Indige-
nous movements. The Nehiyaw (Cree) name my community, the Michif or
Metis, as Otepemisiwak. In their language, which our ancestors also spoke,
Otepemisiwak translates as “the people without bosses,” in reference to our
nonhierarchical social relations. In the same way that clan identities inform
many Indigenous ontologies, this particular identity directly impacts my own
worldview and therefore immediately influences how I read Chicano art.

Additionally, following the work of Xicana and Native feminists, I pres-
ent a critique of the false binary between Chicano nationalism and Xicana
feminism, one based in Indigenous feminisms and queer epistemologies, as
a way to reframe Aztlán and Xicano sovereignty. Finally, as you will hopefully see, I have extensively incorporated Midwest Chicano history and cultural studies in dialogue with more widely known figures, images, and texts. In this fashion, I present a revised historical narrative that accepts the differences and nuances within the Xicano community, yet does not alienate these non-Southwestern voices and histories. Instead of foregrounding this argument, I integrate it throughout the book, including both a specific chapter about Michigan Chicano art history (chapter 4) and a section on an individual midwestern artist, Carlos Cortéz Koyokuikatl. In addition to these specificities, I likewise assimilate these Indigenous and Midwest stories throughout the writing, including the methodologies, epistemologies, and other modalities that influence the book itself.

Throughout Creating Aztlán, I infer that by building a space for themselves within the binary structure of U.S. racial politics, Xicanos destabilized “Indian” identity, but did so as an Indigenous people. In this way, Xicano nationalists asserted their “national” and Indigenous identities through the conglomeration of Indigenous and “mestizo” narratives. Accordingly, Alurista wrote in El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán:

With our heart in our hands and our hands in the soil, we declare the independence of our mestizo nation. We are a bronze people with a bronze culture. Before the world, before all of North America, before all of our brothers in the bronze continent, we are a nation, we are a union of free pueblos, we are Aztlán.18

However, as Sheila Contreras contends in Blood Lines, within a short period Alurista revised the preamble into a poem for Nationchild Plumaroaje.19 In its new iteration, Alurista moved away from its initial male-centeredness and further developed the plan’s assertion that Xicano sovereignty was an Indigenous project with socialist underpinnings. In the new text, bronze becomes red, a color that intimates an Indigenous phenotype and a socialist polity. Alurista has re-signified the settler-colonial logic of mestizaje.

The ambiguity of Alurista’s 1969 narrative reclamation of Aztlán, as well as its reference to nonhierarchical structures of power, appears obvious. However, while the plan’s author(s) invoked Aztlán for its permanent indeterminacy (able to deal with sexual difference, racial mixing and transculturation, and working-class oppression at the hands of capital), many within the Chicano Movement transformed Aztlán into a heterosexist and patriarchal site that proved unable to deal with the intricacies of contemporary Xicana and Xicano experience. Structural limitations and
Indigenizing

Chapter 4: Cortez Coyotkitl. In addition to these Indigenous and Midwest stono methodologies, epistemologies, the book itself.

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In contrast, in this book I contend that even during the so-called machista and nationalistic apex of the Chicano Movement (and believe me these were and are real issues), there were simultaneous counternarratives that articulated Aztlán as an inclusive site from which to speak and enunciate a revolutionary and Indigenous Xicano sovereignty. As such, Creating Aztlán uses Aztlán as the emergence site, both literally and metaphorically, from which to analyze Xicano histories and cultures from an Indigenous and antihierarchical perspective. By lowriding across Aztlán and into other Indigenous territories, Xicano artists reclaim a sense of self that colonial regimes have tried to destroy.

In turn, I utilize methodologies established by contemporary Native intellectuals including, but not limited to, Linda Tuhkai Smith (Maori), Robert Warrior (Osage), Andrea Smith (Tsulag), and Scott Lyons (Anishinaabe), as well as their Indigenous-identified Xicano peers. Creating Aztlán explores the ways that Aztlán is not applicable simply to the historical specificities of the Xicano community of the 1960s, but has ongoing implications today. I do this by covering five main areas: 1) the history and historiography of Aztlán; 2) a dialectical intervention in utopian thought; 3) the development of Xicano sovereignty that does not extinguish other Native sovereignties; 4) the trajectory of Chicano art history along the U.S.-Canada border; and 5) the pertinence of Midwest Chicano history and art to Chi cano studies.

As an engaged work of Indigenous art history, I turn to the practices of four Movement artists, as well as three of their contemporary descendents (what artists Melanie Cervantes and Jests Barraza call “future ancestors”). By critically writing about their art, I maintain that Aztlán unites Xicanos with other Third and Fourth World peoples in a radical act of opposition and solidarity. Throughout, Aztlán serves in more heterodox ways than usually identified. Within their respective corpora, these artists incite the aura of Aztlán as a site of resistance and affirmation, paraphrasing the title of the preeminent exhibition of Chicano art (CARA: Chicano Art, Resistance and Affirmation, 1995). By “creating” Aztlán, even if only in their artwork, artists transform this Indigenous concept from an elite Mesoamerican narrative to one that creates community and sovereignty for a
detribalized Indigenous people. Within the works of each respective artist, Aztlán embodies a unique and particular structure that allows for nuance and intricacy, instead of simplification and categorization. The decision to write about these particular artists speaks to my intention to include regional and aesthetic diversity, while also connecting a new generation of artists with their artistic ancestors. While different artists could be included, I have decided to keep the number limited to make the text both readable and accessible.

**Structure of Creating Aztlán**

Since time immemorial, artists have been at the forefront of radical social movements. Artistic articulations of sacred lands are common for many colonized and Indigenous people, particularly as they struggle to decolonize their respective societies. Routinely, visual culture, fused with literary and performance-based arts, has played a significant role in how various nations (although not necessarily nation-states) have articulated a particular sense of place and postcolonial sovereignty.

The way artists create Aztlán is paramount to understanding Xicano indigeneity. From its earliest extant utterances in the postcontact Mesoamerican codices through contemporary Xicano applications, cultural representation plays a central role in constituting and developing how we understand Aztlán. As such, an intervention like *Creating Aztlán* is crucial for better understanding pre-Cuauhtemoc, colonial, and contemporary Xicano cultural and artistic practices vis-à-vis Aztlán. By critically interrogating Aztlán, we begin to more thoroughly understand Xicano cultural history in relation to larger Indigenous and Latino narratives of oppression, resistance, resiliency, and survivance.

Turning to the artistic practices of the Chicano Movement (including those artists working today who see themselves as continuing its legacy), I initiate my research by asking: What was the Aztlán that the Chicano Movement spoke of and where did it originate? How do artists and activists invoke Aztlán through visual and textual means? In what different ways have artists used Aztlán to signify sovereignty? How does the Xicano Aztlán, as a recontextualized construct, differ from that evoked by the Mexica themselves? What radical possibilities does Aztlán hold? In what ways can Chicano and Indigenous studies speak to one another? And finally, can Aztlán be conceptualized in terms of a “socialist utopia,” as studied by Frederic Jameson and, if so, what interventions may Aztlán make?
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With these questions in mind, in Creating Aztlan I briefly flesh out the genealogy of Aztlan. The book maintains a bifurcated structure, with aspects of each section melding into the other. I have used the Nahua concept of tlilli tlapalli to structure this book. The first four chapters are conceptualized as Tlilli (Red); the next four are housed under the rubric Tlapalli (Black).

Those familiar with Indigenous Mesoamerican thought will recognize the way Nahua and other Indigenous cultures couple two ideas to create a dualistic singularity. Like the yin-yang of Eastern cosmology, Mesoamerican thought sees everything as having two opposing sides, an Indigenous dialectic, if you will. The most well-known application of this duality is found in the concept in xochitl in cuicatl, a practice that became the flor y canto (flower and song; events where poetry and music were performed) of the Chicano Movement. Tlilli Tlapalli, or better in tlilli in tlapalli, directly translates as “red and black,” but more specifically relates to the sacred knowledge embedded in the codices and other Indigenous texts. This red-black couplet, an Indigenous dialectic, serves as my device to partition Creating Aztlan into two sections: one historical and theoretical, the other primarily art historical, critical, and analytical.

Of course, the colors red and black are also theoretically woven into the narrative of Aztlan. Not only do these colors reference the sacred knowledge embedded in the codices (or Mesoamerican books), red and black are also the colors of anarchism and most revolutionary movements. This epistemological structure, based in two simple colors, becomes a larger metaphor for a radical and indigenous turn in Chicano studies.

I begin Creating Aztlan (chapter 1, “Remembering”) with a historical discussion of the role of Aztlan in Mesoamerican codices and expand this intellectual history into the late-colonial period with an analysis of postcontact chronicles and colonial documents. By investigating Indigenous and colonial manifestations, in addition to nineteenth and twentieth-century ones, I reveal how Aztlan, named as such, discursively recedes from popular history during the late-colonial period before reappearing within the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although Aztlan’s nomenclature diachronically shifts, an Indigenous utopia, one often read through Thomas More’s Utopia, remains firmly planted within Xicano imaginaries. From this discussion of Indigenous (yet colonial) chronicles, I turn to discussions of space and its colonization. Central to this chapter is also a retheorization of utopia, not as an idyllic and perfect society, but as a place for ongoing dialogue. It is this rereading of utopia that forms the intellectual backbone of the book.
Chapter 2 ("Naming") continues with the notion of utopias and how utopian thought relates to Aztlán within the Chicano Movement. Along these lines, Creating Aztlán addresses the way utopias also merge with European ideas of pre-Cuauhtémoc Mesoamerica and the fifteenth-century colonization of New Spain, before extending and expanding these utopian ideas into contemporary discourses. Central to chapter 2 is showing how Aztlán functions as a form of emergence place, an Indigenous story often tied to ethnogenesis, which appropriately names Xicano sovereignty. I demonstrate how, once Xicanos had emerged from Aztlán, as had their Mexica forebears, Aztlán reconfigures space as a mode of storytelling. Consequently, I unite Aztlán with new utopian ideals, ones linked with Indigenous and anticapitalist ontologies. I do this by interrogating how utopianism has played out in radical political contexts, particularly in the Chicano Movement. Evoking theorists such as Lefebvre, Baudrillard, and Jameson, this chapter engages existing discourses on utopia/dystopia as a mode of situating Aztlán in dialogue with larger and expansive intellectual traditions. Moreover, the chapter commences with a discussion on the ways that Indigenous feminists challenge patriarchal and nation-state readings of Indigenous "nationalism."

Using figures like Fanon, chapter 3 ("Claiming") attends to negative assumptions of nationalism and the reclamation of Xicano "intellectual sovereignty," as Robert Warrior calls this type of project. Paramount to this reclamation was an artistic and cultural movement intimately tied to emancipatory projects of the period, ones coupled with land-based struggles. Looking at murals and other forms of Xicano culture, I demonstrate how art functioned in the movement to help reclaim Xicano autonomy. This chapter likewise shows the very real linkages between Xicano and American Indian struggles during the 1960s and how these movements collectively reclaimed space, place, and cultural sovereignty. Embedded in this discussion is an engagement with Fanon's ruminations on violence, on top of a historiography of Chicano art. The first section "Tilili: Theorizing Aztlán" ends by looking at how historians and critics have written Chicano art.

Then we make a structural move, transitioning from the first section (Tilili) into the second (Tlapalli). While the first three chapters are primarily historical and theoretical, without significant visual examples, the second part of Creating Aztlán deals directly with individual artists, artworks, and specific regional expressions of Aztlán.

Chapters 4 ("Reframing"), 5 ("Creating"), and 6 ("Revitalizing") respectively resolve to explore particular artists and the manners that they encouraged Aztlán. In this fashion, Creating Aztlán demonstrates how Chicano
Movement participants used artworks and visual culture to envision Aztlán inside the omnipresent settler nation-state we call the United States. By analyzing the corpora of lesser-known artists, including Carlos Córtex Koyokuikatl and Nora Chapa Mendoza, as well as the Xicano Development Center, *Creating Aztlán* articulates how a multifaceted narrative of Aztlán emerged.

Chapter 4 looks directly at histories and practices in Detroit, Michigan, a city uniquely located along the U.S.-Canada border. Chapters 5 and 6 examine seven artists to parse out interesting ways that artists take up Aztlán.

Accordingly, a critical reading of a small number of images from each of these artists aids in understanding how they worked with (or as) activists to generate Aztlán as “the space of liberation so fondly yearned for.”20 In essence, these culminating chapters allude to how Aztlán functions not as an easily attainable future but rather as a constant “beyond” that enables the transgression of current late-capitalist hierarchies and imbalances. By turning to three younger artists (Favianna Rodríguez, Melanie Cervantes, and Jesús Barraza) in Chapter 6 (“Revitalizing”), we see the importance of expanding this discourse across time and space, as well as seeing Aztlán’s continued relevance today.

Through all of this, *Creating Aztlán* serves to document how Aztlán maintains a radical potentiality based in Xicano sovereignty and indigeneity. By attending to the preconquest past in hopes of redirecting a postcapitalist (yet Indigenous) future, I posit that Aztlán performs a utopian utility. Following Fredric Jameson’s writing on utopia, Aztlán “come[s] to us as barely audible messages from a future that may never come into being.”21 In the case of Aztlán, however, understanding where these messages come from is as important as the actual “audible messages” themselves. As such, it is imperative to inquire how the past shapes both our present and future, in addition to seeing how artists envision and create these particularities for the future.

While new archaeological or anthropological research into Aztlán’s geographic location may aid in the speculative research currently circulating, this book in no way argues for or against Aztlán as being located at any specified geographical coordinate. On the contrary, *Creating Aztlán* takes as its core how Aztlán is played out and why it continues to be performed during different historical moments to a multiplicity of peoples, looking closely at art and visual culture. Through this historical critique and analysis, I anticipate a more succinct understanding of the ambiguities and implications that each respective Aztlán has embodied.
The reader will notice that I have named each chapter using gerunds: indigenizing, remembering, naming, claiming, reframing, creating, revitalizing, and returning. All eight of these chapter titles are drawn directly from Maori intellectual Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s seminal book Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People. In this significant work, Smith lays the foundation for future Indigenous scholarship by advocating for a series of twenty-five Indigenous projects. Notwithstanding her employment of the concept testimonies, each of Smith’s twenty-five projects becomes an action-word aimed at countering dominant and colonial forms of knowledge and their hegemonic control of academic knowledge. By using Smith to frame the book’s chapters, I hope to show how the Chicano Movement and artists’ investigations of Aztlán were already doing what Smith intellectually advocates decades before she wrote these significant words. By establishing this book along these lines, I also hope to situate Creating Aztlán within the growing Indigenous studies community. By doing so, we continue to create Aztlán within the shell of the old world, to borrow from the ideologies employed by artist Carlos Cortéz Koyokuikatl.