

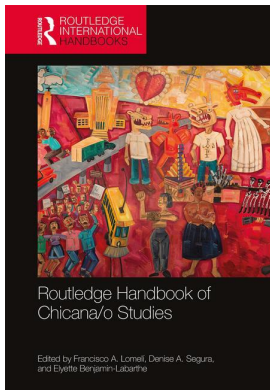
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What is Aztlán?

Homeland, quest, female place

David Carrasco

A significant part of writing and public attention on Aztlán especially since the proclamation of *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* has been concerned with where Aztlán was. Was it in a specific geographical location in northern Mexico or somewhere in the Southwestern part of the United States or lodged in the hearts and minds of our Mexica (generally known as Aztecs) forbears and now Mexican Americans? Even when Aztlán is viewed more broadly in terms of art, migratory space or cultural contact a preoccupation with the geographical location of the Aztec place of origins is evident. For instance in the landmark book *The Road to Aztlán: Art from a Mythic Homeland* (2001) that accompanied a stunning art exhibition of the same name at LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art 2001), the editors achieved a near magic trick by both ‘deteritorializing’ and ‘reterritorializing’ Aztlán. On the one hand, they included essays and art that encompassed the American Southwest and portions of Mexico showing that Aztlán is not a specific historical location at all but refers to a huge geographical area where people, objects, ideas, and meanings traveled and were exchanged over enormous distances and punishing terrain. On the other hand, in the last section of the book we see Aztlán “re-territorialized” in a series of specific Chicano locations where artworks in exhibitions and public walls in various Chicano and other communities show that multiple but specific Mexican American homelands, Aztláns all, exist. As one cultural critic says Aztlán refers “to all those places where there is a strong Mexican and Chicano/a cultural presence” (Fields & Zamudio-Taylor 2001, p. 42).

What is clear is that Aztlán is a very Mexican story. Mexican in the pre-Hispanic sense, Mexican in the colonial sense and Mexican in the Mexican American sense. The power of Aztlán to reach across centuries and cultures came clearer when I met Eduardo Matos Moteuczoma¹ in 1979, the director of the Templo Mayor excavation in the Zócalo of Mexico City:

I want you to help me understand something that is strange to me. Since the excavation started to get press in the United States, I get calls every week from Chicanos who claim they feel some deep connection to the Templo Mayor. They call from Houston and San Antonio, even Chicago, talking about Aztlán and Moteuczoma, Cuauhtémoc, and I’m not sure what to tell them.

(Carrasco 2003, p. 177)

Matos Moteuczoma was incredulous and said,

Some claim that the Aztec place of origin Aztlán, is in New Mexico, but we in Mexico know that Aztlán was much closer to Tenochtitlan. As you know, most Mexicans who migrate to the United States do not come from the territory of the Aztec empire. Can you help me understand this and get in touch with Chicanos who think this way?

(Carrasco 2003, p. 177)

Much less work has focused on what is an even more important question. WHAT was Aztlán? What kind of place was it? Did its power arise from its prestige at the 'center' of a cultural narrative? Or was it significant for the opposite reason – that is, it was located on the periphery of an ancient civilization and produced iconoclastic and new cultural powers? What was the social, political and spiritual source of Aztlán's significance for the Mexica? What were its magical powers? What deeper motivations in us have led to it becoming a major and enduring symbol of our place and identity in North American society? If the places we come from shape our memories, families, identities and even destinies, then knowing the powers and significance of Aztlán is as important as pinpointing it on a map. As the very extensive bibliography of Aztlán shows, it is an example of *topophilia* (Tuan 1974, p. 76), a powerful emotional and social bond between a people and their sacred place. Many Chicanos display affection, fascination and a mental orientation for Aztlán as a mythic place and as local places they name Aztlán or compare to Aztlán. Over time this supremely Mexican American place has become mixed with a sense of origins, ethnic identity and, in some cases, cultural destiny. Exploring this question of "What was/is Aztlán?" will help us understand better the secret meaning in Rafael Pérez-Torres' claim about Mexican Americans that "Aztlán is our start and end point of empowerment" (Pérez-Torres 2001, p. 235).

Aztlán and human needs

In its heart, Aztlán is about three human needs. The need for place, the need for journey and the need for female presence. First, Aztlán is about 'orientation', a sacred homeland; that is, the need to know you came from a place where your ancestors cared for each other amid stability and crisis. For our Mexica ancestors, that place was an enchanted cave, sometimes divided by seven, eight or nine internal niches surrounded by a garden/lake world. The second need, evident in most of us when we are teenagers or young adults, is the need to take a journey away from home to map a wider world and establish a new identity beyond our family home. This need to confront what Octavio Paz calls "the infinite richness of the world" (Paz 1985, p. 9) results, as in the Aztlán story, in pilgrimages across wondrous and hazardous landscapes. Paz is here celebrating the possibilities of the journey, the quest at the heart of human yearnings for life heading towards the horizons which is part of the Aztlán archetype. The surviving texts show us that for some Aztlán is the starting place. For others it is the home at the end of the rugged road. Third, the Aztlán story, at least in the two versions recounted here, is about the powers and prestige of females who occupy the center of the world in different ways as mothers or warriors. They lead the ancestors on a journey outward and call them home again. Yet, for decades this feminine aspect of the Aztlán narrative has been largely unnoticed. Perhaps this aspect of the ancient Aztlán story contributes to and reflects the deep communion Mexicans seek with their mothers and motherland

In the Chicano movement, females were often relegated to the periphery of the political action, restricted in opportunities to lead and seldom given credit for their ingenuity, courage

and strength. Aztlán was often proclaimed and dreamed of in those days as a male-oriented story, spoken of in a masculine voice, led by males who felt the need to dominate the Chicano hunger for social justice and search for political vindication. Yet, as we shall see, these two Chicomóztoc/Aztlán stories, reported and painted by Indigenous Mexicans during the early decades of the colonial period, show us that female figures with the qualities of caring, prophecy, courage and the ability to fight back are key parts of the answer to the question, “What is Aztlán?”²

Simply stated, Aztlán is one version of a native Mexican archetype of origins – a patterned, mythical way of thinking about the emergence of ancestors from an original, precious homeland in the forms of caves/grottoes within an enchanted hill (Carrasco 2014). The more widely shared name for this archetypal hill was “The Place of Seven Caves” or Chicomóztoc (Image 1.1). Some ethnographic texts tell of six or eight or even nine caves. But this variety is less significant than the hypnotic imagery of courageous ancestors first dwelling productively within the natural architecture of the hill/lake or mountain of water and then emerging under the spell of a divine message to journey to a new homeland. This is the pattern that, in spite of regional variations and historical disruptions, was chosen by Native storytellers and painters to shape the story of epic ancestral journeys. The Náhuatl term for this kind of place is *altepetl* or mountain

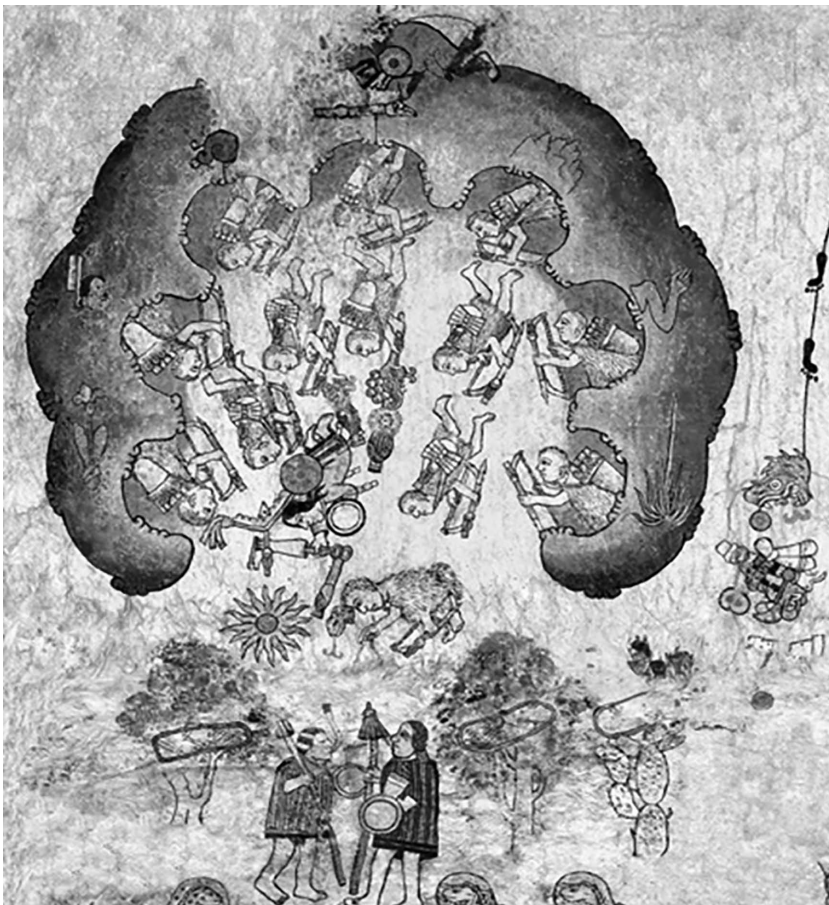


Image 1.1 Chicomóztoc (“The Place of Seven Caves”)

of water. The fuller meaning of *altepetl* is place of nourishment, protection, inspiration and support. It is the archetype of original sustenance and protection of the Place of Seven Caves that is most profoundly registered in the two versions to be examined here. And it is this protection, sustenance and female support that Mexican Americans have sought (consciously and unconsciously) and celebrated through their fascination with Aztlán.

Aztlán stories and images survive the fires

That the Aztlán story and imagery survived Catholic inquisitional attacks against Indigenous libraries and storytelling is something of a tragic literary miracle. Of the thousands of Mesoamerican codices, maps and other pictorial documents extant at the time of the Iberian-Indigenous encounter of the 1520s, only 15 pre-Hispanic documents have survived and perhaps only one is from the Aztec tradition. The famed art historian Elizabeth H. Boone tells us of the uniqueness of this pictorial tradition:

Mesoamerica is unique [in] the Western Hemisphere. . . . In Aztec Mexico the manuscript painter was the *tlacuilo*, a term translated as both ‘painter’ and ‘scribe’. Those who determined the intellectual content of the more esteemed codices – the authors of the histories and religious books – went by the term *tlatimini* (sage).

(Boone 2001, pp. 454–456)

Catholic priests hunted down rumors of Native manuscripts and destroyed them whenever possible, sometimes in fiery public displays meant to humiliate and intimidate the Indigenous populace and put an end to knowledge of pre-Hispanic religious and cultural practices. In effect, the Catholic purpose was to destroy the Indigenous models of thinking and rites of passage. Their goal was to obliterate the Native archetypes of world creation, world order, divinities and cosmology. Nonetheless, surviving Native storytellers, painters and sages in the colonial period continued to narrate, draw and paint pre-Hispanic epics and local accounts of world creations and destructions, migrations, epiphanies and histories. Fortunately, two of the early colonial documents, one written by a Dominican priest and the other by anonymous Indigenous painters, have survived to tell the Aztlán/Chicomóztoc story with its three human needs in remarkable imagery and diversity. In what follows will be the summary and interpretation of these Aztlán stories and imagery found in: 1) chapter 27 of Diego Durán’s *History of the Indies of New Spain*; and 2) in the opening hieroglyphs of the beautiful and recently rediscovered *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan* #2. These two documents provide insights into “what” Aztlán actually was and why its paradigmatic power has been influential to Indigenous identity and worldview from the pre-Hispanic periods up until today when Mexican American cultural practices include nostalgia for migrations to and from a paradisiacal place where powerful women beckon.

Diego Durán’s Aztlán and the divine mother at the sacred hill

It took the persistent, long-distance walking of Diego Durán, a Dominican missionary and historian, to recover the single most elaborate Indigenous version of the Aztlán story. Durán came to New Spain from Seville around 1543 at the age of 7 and he grew up bilingually, speaking Náhuatl and Spanish. His ministry among Náhuatl-speaking peoples, mestizos and Spaniards showed that he was “interested in the activities and beliefs of everyone he met: the market people, the Indians who cut wood in the forest, or the women who served as family domestics and who had once been branded as slaves” (Heyden 2001, pp. 81–110). Believing that the successful

evangelization of the Natives in New Spain depended, in part, on gaining “more knowledge of the language, customs and weaknesses of these peoples” (Ibid., p. 95), he sought out local surviving Native historians and especially those suspected of guarding pictorial manuscripts (including those produced in secret during the early colonial period). His research and interviewing of elders in different communities in the Valley of Mexico resulted in three invaluable books, one of which included the most elaborate Aztlán story of all, *The History of the Indies of New Spain* published in 1581. Chapter 27 of this invaluable book begins: “King Moteuczoma the First, now reigning in glory and majesty, sought the place of origin of his ancestors, the Seven Caves in which they had dwelt. With a description of the splendid presents he sent to be given to those who might be found there” (Durán 1994, p. 212).³

We are told that Moteuczoma the First (Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina and not Moteuczoma a Xocoyotzin who ruled at the time of the Spanish invasion), who ruled from 1440–1468, planned to send warriors with gifts to the ancestral lands of Chicomóztoc, the Place of Seven Caves, to communicate with the still-living “mother of our god Huitzilopochtli.” But Moteuczoma’s second in command, Tlacaelel, intervenes, saying to substitute wizards, sorcerers and magicians in place of warriors because the former have enchantments and spells to help them “find that place . . . where our god Huitzilopochtli was born” (Durán 1994, p. 213) in a delightful marshy lagoon where ancestors never grew old or tired or lacked for anything. Hearing this story of natural abundance, Moteuczoma calls upon his royal historian Cuauhcóatl (Eagle Serpent) to provide knowledge “hidden in your books about the Seven Caves where our fathers and grandfathers came forth . . . wherein dwelt our god Huitzilopochtli and out of which he led our forefathers” (Durán 1994, p. 213).

The royal historian consults the pictorial manuscripts and describes for the ruler the true nature of Aztlán with crucial details. He reports that the ancestors dwelt in a blissful happy place called Aztlán, which means ‘Whiteness’. In that place there is a great hill in the midst of the waters, and it is called Colhuacan because its summit is twisted. In this hill were caves or grottoes where our fathers and grandfathers lived for many years. There they lived in leisure, when they were called Mexitin (or Mexicas) or Aztecs. They had at their disposal great flocks of ducks of different kinds, herons, cormorants, cranes and other waterfowl. Our ancestors enjoyed the song and melody of the little birds with red and yellow heads. They also possessed many kinds of large beautiful fish. They had the freshness of groves of trees along the edge of the waters. Our ancestors went about in canoes and made plots on which they sowed maize, chiles, tomatoes, amaranth, beans and all kinds of seeds that we now eat and that were brought here from that place (Durán 1994, p. 213).

Note that this text identifies Chicomóztoc and Aztlán as the same place. The King gathers 60 sorcerers and charges them to find Aztlán, “the land that has given birth to the Aztec people,” in order to discover if it is still inhabited and “if the mother of our god Huitzilopochtli still lives.” Gifts for the divine mother are collected to be sent, including “women’s clothing, precious stones . . . quantities of cacao and teonacaztli [‘divine ear,’ a flower added to a cacao beverage], cotton, black vanilla flowers in large numbers, and beautiful feathers, the finest that could be found” (Durán 1994, p. 214).

The troop of sorcerers sets off from the capital, passing Coatépec in the province of Tula where they trace magic symbols on the ground, smear themselves with ointments, and call on a deity to show them the “home of their ancestors”. They are turned into jaguars, birds, ocelots, jackals, and wildcats and are transported together with their gifts until they arrive on the “shores of a large lake, from the midst of which emerged the hill called Colhuacan”, and are turned back into human forms. They encounter people going about in canoes, fishing, and farming, and are asked three crucial questions by the natives. The first is “What do you want?” Then they are

asked “Where do you come from?” The Mexica answer, “We come from Mexico-Tenochtitlan to seek the homeland of our ancestors.” The natives of Aztlán then ask, “What God do you adore?” The answer is, “The great Huitzilopochtli,” and add that the ruler Moteuczoma sent them to find Huitzilopochtli’s mother, Coatlicue, for whom they have brought gifts (Durán 1994, p. 215).

The Mexica are then taken across the lake to the hill of Colhuacan where Coatlicue’s custodian, an elder, asks the new arrivals if the ancestors who left Aztlán long ago with Huitzilopochtli are still alive and who is the guardian of Huitzilopochtli now. The answer is that the ancestors are dead but their descendants Moteuczoma and Tlacaelel are alive, and a great priest named Cuauhcoatl speaks with Huitzilopochtli.

As the Mexica follow the elder up the hill to deliver the gifts to Coatlicue, they sink into the soft sand up to their waists while the elder climbs without tiring or sinking. The elder tells them that the food and chocolate they have eaten will “make it difficult for you to reach the place of your ancestors. Those foods will bring you death” (Durán 1994, p. 217).

He takes the load of gifts and carries it up the hill as if it were straw. Then an ancient weeping woman appears who says she has been waiting and weeping since her son, Huitzilopochtli, departed (with four pairs of huaraches she made for him – two for the journey away and two for the journey home) and that her sadness will continue until he returns. The Aztec magicians, frightened and humbled, announce that Tenochtitlan, where Huitzilopochtli lives, “is now the mistress, the princess, the leader and queen of all the cities, all of which pay obedience to her” due to its rich gold and silver mines, abundance and feather working (Durán 1994, p. 218).⁴ They give her the gifts and message, “Huehue Moteuczoma is at your service.” She responds by giving them gifts of a mantle and breechcloth of maguey fiber for her son Huitzilopochtli to wear and the message that “his time is up, he must return now” to his mother. Prized foodstuffs are added to the bundle of gifts.

As they descend the hill she demonstrates the power of Aztlán – what the text calls “the virtue of the hill” as a place of eternal life: “I will show you how men never grow old in this country.” She sends an old manservant down the hill, and by the time he reaches the bottom he has been transformed into a young man of 20 years. When he ascends, he ages into an old man: “Behold, my sons, the virtue of this hill: the old person who seeks youth can climb to the point of the hill that he wishes and there he will acquire the age he seeks. Here in Aztlán we become rejuvenated whenever we so desire” (Durán 1994, p. 220).

The wizards return to Tenochtitlan and tells Moteuczoma that they “have seen that land called Aztlán and Colhuacan where our fathers and grandfathers lived and from where they left on their migration” (Durán 1994, p. 221) and heard the ancient prophecy that Huitzilopochtli will one day be expelled from Tenochtitlan and return home. Then Moteuczoma and Tlacaelel “wept and were moved” and ask the sorcerers to take the sacred clothes of the maguey fiber mantle and breechcloth to the main temple where they “would be placed upon Huitzilopochtli, since his mother had sent [them] to him” (Durán 1994, p. 222).⁵

What is Aztlán?

In this gem of a surviving Mexica story of the fertile place of origins and migration, filled with dialogues between humans, ancestors and a divinity, we are drawn to the central message spoken by Coatlicue: “Behold my sons, the virtue of the hill . . . for we become rejuvenated whenever we so desire” (Durán 1994, p. 220). Herein lies a clue to the question of Aztlán’s true significance as one embodiment of the sacred archetype of an *altepetl*. This ‘virtue’ or sacred status consists of 1) the primordial hill surrounded by water as a blissful paradise on earth – in fact made of the

earth in the form of caves and grottoes surrounded by agricultural and watery abundance. The Náhuatl term used for such a place was *altepetl*, or water-mountain, meaning sacred hill of sustenance. The Náhuatl *altepetl* is a metaphorical doublet *in atl in tepetl* that combines two words, each with material and cosmological significance. The word *in tepetl* (hill or mountain) and *in atl* (water) are united into one word with a third meaning – in this case ‘mountain of water’ or hill of abundant sustenance.⁶ Moreover, 2) the *altepetl* of Aztlán was the home of the sacred mother who dwells in its interior waiting for the return of her offspring and who emerges when gift-giving travelers from the capital city arrive.

We are told several times in the text that Aztlán, also called Chicomóztoc (Place of Seven Caves), was a place of abundant natural resources, life-giving sustenance and agricultural work. It is populated by “flocks of birds, large beautiful fish . . . groves of trees . . . chilis, corn” (Durán 1994, p. 221) as well as the populace who work the fields and waterways. Throughout Mesoamerica and sometimes known by different linguistic terms, the shared understanding was that an *altepetl* was not only a primordial granary and the source of life-giving waters and seeds for germination. It was also the home of patron gods and goddesses *who dwelled in the interior*, periodically coming out into the world. These titular deities or divine ancestors of specific ethnic groups, immigrants, cities, towns or barrios were referred to as the ‘hearts’ of the hill or hearts of the people, ethnic group or community. This patron deity/ancestor often guided the people on a pilgrimage and bestowed a promised land on them. These sacred beings dwelling within Aztlán/Chicomóztoc were medicine spirits as well, protecting the people from diseases. Also, they functioned as the moral conscience of the community, punishing people for ethical transgressions or abandoning traditions.⁷

Furthermore, central to this version about a ruler who seeks Aztlán is the message that what he wants most of all is to connect with the divine mother who dwells at the *altepetl* awaiting the reunion with her son Huitzilopochtli. Mother themes appear throughout the text. Moteuczoma wants to find “the land that has given birth to the Aztec people” by discovering if the woman who gave birth, “the mother of our god Huitzilopochtli still lives.” The expedition Moteuczoma sends out is a gift-giving expedition carrying “women’s clothing . . . quantities of cacao and teonacaztli [‘divine ear,’ a flower added to a cacao beverage . . .]” (Durán 1994, p. 214). The Mexica magicians discover in Aztlán that the mother goddess is very much alive and grieving for her lost son since the mythic time when he departed carrying her humble gifts of huaraches for the journey away and for the journey back to Aztlán. Coatlicue shows the magicians the true power of Aztlán to bestow eternal life on those who live there and who climb and descend in order to become wiser in experience or younger in age. The archetypal message is “come home to your mother and you will live here forever.” As we shall see in the next section, this promise points to another ‘virtue’ of Aztlán, namely that it is not only a place but also an era of sacred time.

Aztlán recalled to life in an Indigenous codex/Mapa

That Aztlán was one version of a widely shared paradigm of origin and migration stories is borne out in two of the best-known pictorial images of Aztlán/Chicomóztoc produced by Indigenous scribes in the early colonial period: the *Codex Boturini* and the *Historia Tolteca Chichimeca*. The former has “emerged as an emblem of Mexica history” and “chronicles the Mexica migration from Aztlán to the Valley of Mexico” (Leibsohn 2001a, p. 101).⁸ The latter document along with its combination of colorful imagery and Náhuatl written text contains one of the most vivid images of Chicomóztoc ever found (Leibsohn 2001b, pp. 241–244). Each shows the Chichimeca migration from Chicomóztoc to an urbanized region in impressive detail. However, the most sensational, colorful and detailed image of the archetype of Chicomóztoc has

recently come to light in the recovered codex known as *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan #2*, painted just 20 years after the arrival of Spaniards in Mexico. Here is a short summary of how this remarkable image came to light.

In 2006 I was invited to view the *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan #2* in the home of the Mexican philanthropist, Angeles Espinosa Yglesias, following her visit to Harvard University's David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies. This document, considered the pictorial prize of all the early colonial codices, had disappeared from public knowledge over three decades before when it was stolen from the *cabildo* (town hall) of Cuauhtinchan, near the city of Puebla. Angeles Espinosa Yglesias had recently come into possession of the MC2 with the purpose of protecting it from further decay and so it could be studied and understood. Angeles sought someone at Harvard University who could assist in deciphering this precious Mexican codex. When this nearly 500-year-old (3-by 6-foot) painting on *amatl* bark paper was laid out before me on her dining room table, I was amazed by the brightness and delicacy of the colors, the detailed migration pathways with hundreds of printed footprints and the many *altepētl* glyphs both small and large. A magnificent example of native Mexican art lay before me and two large hieroglyphs immediately caught my eye. There in the upper left-hand corner was the single most detailed colorful scene of the Place of Seven Caves I had ever seen in over 35 years of researching the Aztlán evidence. As a Mexican American who had been nurtured by and worked to shape the spirit and politics of the Chicano movement I had published one of my first articles in the journal *Aztlán* on "A perspective for a study of religious dimensions in Chicano experience: Bless me, Ultima as a religious text" (Carrasco 1982). Thus, I was thrilled to cast my eyes on a dramatic scene where a group of Chichimec warriors and priests were either falling or flying out of the Place of Seven Caves, associated, in my mind, with Aztlán. There it was: the richly detailed and colorful image of the ancestral *altepētl*, a more colorful and detailed version of the simple drama of departure from Aztlán depicted in the *Codex Boturini*. Leading a group of male warriors was the image of a large, colorfully dressed woman carrying what looked like the sun on her back and a trophy leg in her right hand. The males who followed her were carrying weapons and some carried sacred bundles on their backs. The seven caves appeared with red hues within an immense green and blue hill, which, like the hill described in the Durán version of Aztlán, had a curved peak at the top. As in the Diego Durán written version, a powerful female figure dwelled in the center of Chicomóztoc, but, as I soon learned, in this codex she is a mighty warrior.

With the support of Angeles Espinosa Yglesias and the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard University, I organized a 15-person, five-year study of the *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan*, resulting in detailed photographic, ethnographic and historical knowledge of its contents and meanings (see Carrasco & Sessions 2007). We learned that the over 650 hieroglyphs of the *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan #2* (MC2) narrate an archetypal and historical Mesoamerican odyssey of the arduous journey from Chicomóztoc located on the northern edge of Mesoamerica to a new homeland beyond the volcanoes of Iztaccíhuatl and Popocatepetl in the Puebla region. This journey of twists and turns reflects the three human needs mentioned in the beginning of this chapter (Boone 2007). The homeland of the Place of Seven Caves in the upper left-hand corner opens down into a labyrinthine, snaking road where hundreds of footprints linked to roadside scenes trace the journey away from Chicomóztoc through cornfields and hunting grounds, past scores of *altepeme*, such as Tenochtitlan (which appears as a modest *altepētl*), Chapultepec, Coyoacan, and other sites in the Valley of Mexico, then moving past Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl, eventually arriving at the great pilgrimage capital of Cholula. After a war is fought to defend the city, the travelers take an immense journey over parts of central Mesoamerica going as far south as the Oaxaca region, as far north as Vera Cruz and eventually

settling southeast of Puebla, Mexico. The mountain ranges of Orizaba and La Malinche appear as snowcapped glyphs looming over adjacent *altepeme*.

While there are many differences between the MC2 migration story and the Diego Durán version, three similarities are striking: 1) both link a peripheral place, the Place of Seven Caves; 2) this is evident via a long journey to a great city located in the MC2 in the center of the *Mapa* (whereas in Durán the capital city is the beginning and end point of the story); and 3) both illustrate that a powerful female figure dwells within and emerges from the Place of Seven Caves.

When we focus on the dramatic opening scene at Chicomóztoc, we witness two large, well-dressed Toltec priests who have walked from Cholula and arrive at the mouth of the caves on the date 2-Wind. They ask the Chichimeca inhabitants to come out and travel to the capital city of Cholula to defend it from the Olmeca-Xicallanca.⁹ But standing between the two Toltec priests (whose names are Feather Lip and Serpent Foot, according to the glyphs attached to their bodies) and the warrior goddess is a crouching bilingual Chichimec translator, Cóatl whose forked tongued glyph signals his bilingual abilities. How appropriate for Mexican Americans today that in this epic telling of the ancestral migrations, bilingualism is crucial for the story to advance!

Detailed research of this scene by anthropologist and historian Keiko Yoneda has revealed the following ethnohistorical data that parallel in some ways the Aztlán versions of this paradigmatic adventure. The MC2 narrates a nearly 300-year history (beginning around 1250 and ending around 1540) of the northern Mesoamerican peoples who became known as the Cuauhtinchantlaca Chichimecas. This ethnic group (which was divided into seven smaller groups as symbolized in the seven caves) left their northern homeland in the middle of the 13th century at the Place of Seven Caves at the request of the besieged Tolteca Chichimecas who were fighting to keep their hold on Cholula. This opening scene shows that they were inspired by and led by the warrior goddess Itzpapálotl or Obsidian Butterfly. Notice that she is larger than her male companions, colorfully dressed and attached with a shield, arrows and solar imagery. Like the word *altepetl* her name is another *difrasismo* or metaphorical doublet combining the name for the earthly stone obsidian *itztli* (sharp, hard, colorful and used in cutting, weapons, mirrors) and the name for the airborne butterfly *papálotl* (soft, ephemeral, beautiful). In Itzpapálotl we see another example of archetype and variation. As in the Durán account, a mighty female occupies and leads the men at the main *altepetl* but in this case she is not a divine mother but a divine warrior (Yoneda 2007, pp. 161–205).

Aztlán as sacred time

This scene of the dramatic emergence of the warrior ancestors from Chicomóztoc is the Indigenous storytelling way of saying that the Place of Seven Caves was valued not only because it was a place of ‘origins’; it was also the place of *the origins of a special kind and period of ‘time’*. At this location and by these actions of emergence, a powerful transition between the mythic past and the human present happens. The deeper significance for the Mexicas (and this can be for Chicanas/os as well) is the Mesoamerican belief that this time of transition linking the mythic forces of ancestors to the human present never ends. For Mesoamerican peoples, each moment of human time could be intersected by the time and powers of gods and ancestors. We can have access to this creative, liminal phase of existence if we can just find a way to reconnect with Aztlán/Chicomóztoc. The Indigenous belief is that our human time today becomes fuller when we find openings to the ancestral times that are available – if only we know where and when to seek the opening.

For Mesoamerican peoples, human time is often created by sacred forces coming up from the underworld (or from above) at a crucial moment of transition between the time of the gods

and time of humans. The colorful scenes of emergence of the ancestors/gods from the earth and sky in various codices mark the moment when divine time and the divinities appear on the surface of the earth and initiate human history, calendars and memory on the surface of the earth. In the MC2 we witness this tie between the place of emergence and the start of a new time period in the large hieroglyph of the Place of Seven Caves whose shape makes it analogous to the Earth Mother's womb with seven caves giving birth to 13 beings. The colorful image of the cave symbolizes a 'transcendent' place of spirits, ancestors or gods, and these beings from the underworld are flying out of an opening and onto the earth's surface and the historical time of humans. This is an example of 'magical flight' associated with shamanic and ancestral abilities to travel from one plane of existence, from one time period to another.

The significance for Mexican Americans (or Chicanas/os) is to continue seeking to know the powers of Aztlán. The Chicomóztoc/Aztlán archetype reveals that the sacred places and cycles of time of these ancestors did not end when the Mexicas or Chichimecas left their homelands under the influence of the mothers/warriors for the arduous pilgrimage to the city. Furthermore, these influences, as many Chicana/o artists show, did not end when the Aztec world was overwhelmed by the allied armies of Spain and Tlaxcala. This continuity between the time of the gods/ancestors and the time of humans is symbolized in the MC2 when deities show up at different parts of the historical journey to Cholula, Oaxaca, Vera Cruz and back to the Puebla region. Along the way the travelers carry, open up and carry out rituals with the sacred bundles so carefully wrapped on their backs. The objects in these bundles represent deities, precious seeds, territory and are ciphers for stories told during the religious ceremonies. In other words, the magical memory of Chicomóztoc's paradigmatic powers is always carried along the road. This religious fact leads me to ask: What are the sacred bundles that Chicanas/os carry today along the roads to their cities and homelands?

Aztlán, archetype and La Virgen de Guadalupe

One purpose of this chapter is to provide for Mexican Americans a deeper historical and phenomenological understanding about the cultural powers, meanings and historical reach of the Aztlán story, what I am calling a 'native Mexican archetype of origins'. The central image of this archetype is the *altepetl* or hill of sustenance of which Aztlán and Chicomóztoc are examples. By archetype we mean a deeply held conception – a root paradigm about how time and space were created and believed to provide models for ritual recreations by the descendants of the ancestral heroes. In the Mexican case, this archetype consisted of a peripheral territory, a place far from the capital city where the Place of Seven Caves harbored ancestral farmers and/or warriors. One overlooked variation on this theme includes a divine female who either led the ancestors out of the Place of Seven Caves or sustained them at an island paradise. The Aztlán and Chicomóztoc versions studied here also emphasize gift giving, a defeat of death and direct communication between humans and the divine.

There appear to be evocative signs of influence between the archetype of the pre-Hispanic *altepetl* of Aztlán/Chicomóztoc and the apparitions of La Virgen de Guadalupe. Time does not allow to go into a thorough comparison between the two traditions, but a list of parallel elements will open the discussion. First, the apparitions to Juan Diego as told in the Náhuatl version (*Nican Mopohua*) take place at Tepéyac, "the hill with the bump", a word that has the same root as *altepetl* (*tepetl* or hill). The pre-Hispanic site of revelation is to the fore. Second, *Tepéyac*, like Aztlán in the Durán account and *Chicomóztoc* in the MC2, was on the edge of the 'civilized' world; in this case the newly formed Mexico City. Third, Tepéyac was the site where Indigenous goddesses resided and were worshiped. Fourth, as in the Durán account, the 17th-century

document tells how a female divinity (Virgin Mary of Guadalupe) appears near the top of Tepéyac amid songbirds and fertility (i.e., flowers growing out of season). Fifth, the seeker after illumination, Juan Diego (as in the case of Moteuczoma's emissaries) is required to climb and descend the *altepetl* several times as part of his education about Tepéyac's significance and the purposes of the goddess. Sixth, Juan Diego speaks directly with the goddess/Virgen in an Indigenous language and from whom he receives instructions. Seventh, as in the Durán account, the Virgin provides a gift of clothing for the ruler in the city (now the Spanish Archbishop) and instructs Juan Diego to take it into the city to the new ruler of Mexico/Tenochtitlan. Finally, in both the Durán account and the Nican Mophua, the rulers Moteuczoma and Archbishop Zumárraga weep when the gift is delivered and they are taken into a shrine.

This parallelism suggests that the Aztlán/Chicomóztoc archetype, with its elements of 1) a sacred hill where a divine force or being appears (in both these cases a female divinity) and 2) walking journeys between the sacred hill and the city continued to have attraction and usage well into the colonial period. In recent years a serious debate has taken place about the extent of Indigenous influence versus Spanish invention in the accounts of the apparitions at Tepéyac. The most balanced and insightful arguments have been put forth by William B. Taylor in "Mexico's Virgin of Guadalupe in the Seventeenth Century: Hagiography and Beyond" in *Shrines and Miraculous Images: Religious Life in Mexico before the Reforma* (2010). Taylor's recognition and interpretation of the Guadalupe traditions of the 16th and 17th centuries point to a conscious repetition among Indian and mestizo communities of a "deep river of devotion" to sacred places and female divinities long before the Spaniards brought their versions of the Virgin Mary to Mexico. Even today among Mexican Americans who are devoted to La Virgen de Guadalupe and who may not have deep knowledge of the intricacies of the Aztlán story, elements of the appearance of the Virgin Mary at the sacred hill and the pilgrimage tradition to Tepéyac fascinate people and nudge them towards an appreciation of the Indigenous parts of Mexican and Mexican American identities. The story of the traveling Juan Diego, moving back and forth between the Virgen of Guadalupe at the *altepetl* of Tepéyac and the capital city's ruler – that is between an ancient periphery and a colonial center – fascinates Mexicans and Mexican Americans alike. They may not know that an ancient Chicomóztoc/Aztlán archetype dwells just below the surface of that story, but it does. When visitors come to the shrine of Guadalupe today, they witness on the side of the hill a larger than life-sized tableau of the apparition where a spring of water is constantly flowing through the scene. This scene is symbolic of that deeper river of devotion at an ancient *altepetl* where the mother of Jesus appeared and, in many eyes and hearts, continues to do so.

Chicano *altepetl*

Significantly, this attraction and usage of the Aztlán archetype with its elements of hill, water, sustenance, fertility and female divinity has been revived by a number of Chicano and especially Chicana artists. Artists and scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Constance Cortez, Santa Barraza and Ester Hernández, to name just a few, have represented the powers and relevance of this archetype in their work. To give just one example, Constance Cortez's essay "The New Aztlán: Nepantla (and Other Sites of Transmogrification)" in *The Road to Aztlán: Art from a Mythic Homeland* (2001) shows a return of the Aztlán archetype when she focuses on the Náhuatl word *nepantla*, which means an in-between and in-between place, a middle place or place of passage and reciprocity. According to Cortez, *nepantla* art celebrates intracultural diversity and stimulates personal visions of creative ways of turning marginality and religious experiences of land and gender into new and liberating expressions. *Nepantla* art demonstrates bold new combinations of motifs, colors, places and time periods, thus reflecting the Indigenous notion

of divine co-essences in Aztec cosmology that depends on intersections of mythic and historical times and magical flight. One of the most attractive *nepantla* art pieces that draws on the Aztlán/Chicomóztoc/*altepetl* paradigm is Santa Barraza's *Nepantla*, which evokes Cortez to give us a contemporary version of 'what' Aztlán was and still is, while linking the Aztec story of origins, pilgrimage and female powers to the struggles led by the United Farm Workers Union:

The image of La Virgen de Guadalupe is [woven] in a Zapotec woman's *huipil*, or skirt. That the woman is part of the land is indicated by the maguey plant that emerges from her head and by the plant from which she seemingly grows. . . . The reconciliation of two distinct traditions is the subject of the work.

(Cortez 2001, pp. 358)

Conclusion

What are we Mexican Americans seeking when we return again and again to Aztlán in our art, music, politics, symbols, scholarship and theology? We who have been cast out from the center of the Mexican world and pushed to the periphery of the Anglo world – forever citizens of the borderlands – call out to a pre-Hispanic story of an alternative beginning. This story is more than just about a desert hill with caves. It is about how the city at the center of the world and a borderlands space were united through ancestral inspiration, divine guidance and long-distance walking. This story helps us learn and teach about our human needs through the symbols of homeland, walking and female places (Carrasco 2001). Some repeat this story because it reminds us that we live in a republic that both rejects and uses who we are for its economic and political purposes while celebrating an east to west narrative that identifies Mexicans as barriers to a manifest destiny. What we accomplish in our returns to Aztlán is access to an epic story and place of nourishment, protection, creativity and support. It is the archetype of sustenance and creativity, hard life and long life of the Place of Seven Caves. Aztlán is one example of this archetype and provides orientation, affirmation and a space for new imaginings that we repeatedly register in our writings, art, fantasies and hopes. The message of this chapter is that the more we recognize the shape and power of this archetypal pattern, the more we will see that the feminine forces and sacred beings – the mothers and warrior women of Aztlán – have always been in the Seven Caves. If we listen closely, we will hear their voices echoing down through history and calling us for lives of engagement with our fuller human identities in places of revelation, along pilgrimage routes and under the guidance of female forces.

Notes

- 1 In this chapter, the original Náhuatl is translated as "Moteuczoma" rather than the more commonly used "Moctezuma" to refer to the *huei tlatoani* who ruled the Aztec empire when the Spaniards came to their lands.
- 2 For a deeper discussion of how cultural archetypes are imbued with cosmological and religious prestige, see Mircea Eliade 1996, *Patterns in Comparative Religions*, Bison Books, Lincoln, Nebraska. Also David Carrasco 2014, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, Waveland Press, Long Grove, Illinois. I am not the first to link Aztlán and Chicomóztoc closely together as a mythical unit. The native informants who told Diego Durán the story of Moteuczoma's search for Aztlán tied the two place names intimately together. Yet not every Chicomóztoc is an Aztlán. But almost every Aztlán that appears in pictorial or written documents is a Chicomóztoc or at least an *altepetl* in the way I write of it here. Further see Miguel León Portilla 2001, 'Aztlán: From Myth to Reality' in Rose Verony, trans., *The Road to Aztlán: Art from the Mythic Homeland* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California), for a fine interpretation based on his careful reading of pre-Hispanic and colonial sources. In *The Road to Aztlán*, one

- reason I set out to clarify the question of “What is Aztlán?” is because in this essay by Miguel León Portilla he refers only once to the notion of *altepetl* and this is the only such reference in the entire volume.
- 3 An aid for historians and interpreters seeking to grasp the paths of transmission of Indigenous concepts of Aztlán and Chicomóztoc appears in the essay ‘Durán’s *Historia* and the *Crónica X*’ by Ignacio Bernal in Heyden’s previously cited work.
 - 4 In the text Coatlicue is described as exceedingly ugly, dirty and not having bathed since Huitzilopochtli left a long time ago. I believe this reflects Diego Durán’s attempt to identify her as a ‘demon’ or devil feared and targeted by the Spaniards in their attempt to wipe out Indigenous religions.
 - 5 It must be noted that Coatlicue also prophesies the impending doom of Huitzilopochtli’s city in a way that shows us that the storytellers have pushed together the reigns of the two – Moteuczoma’s – the First who ruled from 1440–1464 and the Second Moteuczoma who ruled from 1501–1520. The impending doom of the Spanish invasion felt in the 1520 is projected backward onto the 1440s’ ruler. In a sense this story of the search for Aztlán is an expression of the anxiety of the Aztec nobles from who this story likely comes.
 - 6 Xavier Noguez writes, “Literally translated *altepetl* (plural *altepeme*) means ‘hill-water.’ Its equivalent in Mixtec is *ñuu*; the corresponding term in the language of the Yucatecan Maya is *batabil*. The significance of a *altepetl* among the Nahuas of the Late Postclassic and Early Colonial periods has received the most attention from scholars because there are extensive Nahua sources available” (Noguez 2001, p. 12). Noguez goes on to summarize the relationship between these religious meanings of *altepetl* and the basis for landownership and social integration during the pre-Hispanic era by James Lockhart in his study, *The Nahuas After the Conquest* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). It seems clear that this complex conception of sacred space and political order survived well into the 17th century and is reflected today in ancient place names and some ancestral territorial boundaries.
 - 7 For a broader view of how the *altepetl* served Mesoamerican peoples as creative points of orientation, see Karl Taube’s insightful “The Classic Maya Temple: Centrality, Cosmology, and sacred Geography in Ancient Mesoamerica,” in *Heaven on Earth: Temples, Ritual and Cosmic Symbolism in the Ancient World*. Edited by Deena Ragavan (2013, The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago Oriental Institute Seminars, Number 9, Chicago, Illinois). Taube shows that flower mountains, or *xochitépetl*, functioned in similar ways for many Mesoamerican peoples.
 - 8 Leibsohn has studied this tradition and notes that this narrative pattern of migrating from Aztlán to a new homeland is repeated in other accounts from central Mexico, including the *Codex Aubin*, *Codex Azcatlan* and the *Mapa de Sigüenza*.
 - 9 See the series of essays about the historical reconstruction of the content of the MC2 in Carrasco, D. & Sessions, S. (eds.) 2007, *Cave, City and Eagle’s Nest: An Interpretive Journey Through the Mapa de Cuauhtinchan #2* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press). Especially Elizabeth Boone, ‘The House of the Eagle,’ pp. 27–48.

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