



# CONTRA AZTLÁN

A Critique of Chicano Nationalism

AN EDICIONES INÉDITAS ORIGINAL ESSAY



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The cap above is an image making the rounds as a counterpoint to now-President Donald Trump and the hat that he's made (in)famous. It serves as a visual reminder that a great deal of the U.S. territory was once Mexican national territory. A Chicax act of détournement.<sup>1</sup> Though it's an act of détournement which lacks a critical analysis of Mexican history. That such much of the Chicano movement's nationalist fervor arises from Mexico's territorial loss at the hands of U.S. racist aggression. This resulted with the Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848, which 'ceded' the territory now known as California and a large area roughly half of New Mexico, most of Arizona, Nevada, Utah and parts of Wyoming and Colorado to the USA.<sup>2</sup>

Last year, two artists undertook the task of surveying the northern border of Mexico as it was in 1821, marking it with obelisks that lie well within the current U.S. borders. Today we refer to this historical form of the Mexican republic as the First Mexican Empire; this empire extended well into the Central America, extending into the national territory of Costa Rica. If these artists were to survey the southern border of this Empire then we would begin to see the glaring oversight of this project. Yes, they claim to want to show the transient nature of borders but they inadvertently highlighted what the project of the Mexican republic is really about: the extraction of Capital to be found within its borders without the need of wars of aggression (colonialism); a project which prefers the class warfare of privatization of natural resources<sup>3</sup> held in common and the extraction of surplus value from its native, Black and mestizo populations. Once this State project held a territory which was once much more vast. The nostalgic picture of a peaceful homeland that Chicaxs often project onto Mexico begins to lose its luster. Yet from this nostalgia is born much of Chicano Nationalism.

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1 Further reading on détournement, *Détournement as Negation and Prelude* by SI 1959

2 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo

3 A prime, current example is the the current struggle against the Constellation Brands by the people of Mexicali, Mexico and its surrounding areas from taking their water. For further reading see here: <https://ediciones-ineditos.com/2018/01/17/communique-our-resistance-at-rancho-meno-6-arbitrary-arrests/>

## ¿Aztlán Libre?

It is the Chicano poet, Alurista, whom is largely credited with spreading the story of Aztlán as the mythic homeland of the Mexica. He also wrote what would become the leading document for Chicano nationalists: *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*. In it we find the first few fundamental errors in Chicano Nationalism:

“Nationalism as the key to organization transcends all religious, political, class and economic factions or boundaries. Nationalism is the common denominator that all members of La Raza can agree upon.”

Hic salta, hic Aztlán: a new nation to arise in what is currently the U.S. Southwest/West as part of the assumed patrimony of all Chicanxs, by way of a supposed shared ethnic heritage.<sup>4</sup> As an anti-state communist I desire the overthrow of capitalism en su totalidad. How then could even Chicant anti-state communists/anarchists support a plan which would inevitably align us with a new national bourgeoisie? The contradictions are glaring and would result in no liberation of the actual people which would make up this “Chicant nation” from either wage labor or general exploitation. Yet another revolution forestalled in the name of national sovereignty. Though there may be certain things which bind Chicanxs across these “factions” and “boundaries” which Alurista alludes to, it is these binds that dampen the communist project which understands that the notion of a Chicant Nation is a false one. Fredy Perlman, in his incendiary essay *The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism*, wrote:

“[One] might be trying to apply a definition of a nation as an organized territory consisting of people who share a common language, religion and customs, or at least one of the three. Such a definition, clear, pat and static, is not a description of the phenomenon but an apology for it, a justification.”

4 I note that this is a supposed shared heritage for even if the territory which Alurista calls Aztlán were truly the ancestral homeland of the Mexica, not every Chicant could lay “claim” to it since not all Chicanxs bear Mexica heritage. Chicanxs contain a multitude of ethnic heritages, including from Native Peoples from so-called Mexico, other origins such as from Europe and Africa. Chicant is not a race.

This fabricated justification is used to allow the project of capitalist exploitation. Further, if we were to begin to analyze this homeland which Chicano Nationalists hope to reclaim we also run into the fundamental contradiction wherein this supposed homeland has already been continuously occupied for millenia by many different Native peoples. To mention a few: the Tongva-Gabrielino, the Chumash, the Yuman, the Comanche, the Apache, the Navajo and the Mohave.

Further, the *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* states that Chicano Nationalists “declare independence of [their] mestizo nation.” Here creeps in the danger of a new form of oppression: yet another settler-colonial, mestizo nation once again makes an enclosure around Native peoples. Though the National Brown Berets, a Chicano Nationalist group, instead claims that.

“The amount of mixture of European blood on our people is a drop in the bucket compared to the hundreds of millions of Natives that inhabited this hemisphere. The majority of us are of Native/Indigenous ancestry and it is that blood that ties us to and cries out for land.”<sup>5</sup>

A strange play of blood belonging lays the groundwork for a presumed claim to Aztlán. Kim Tallbear, an antropologist at the University of Texas, Austin and a member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate of South Dakota, laments:

“There’s a great desire by many people in the US to feel like you belong to this land. I recently moved to Texas, and many of the white people I meet say: “I’ve got a Cherokee ancestor”... That worries us in a land where we already feel there’s very little understanding of the history of our tribes, our relationships with colonial power...”<sup>6</sup>

Chicanxs are the historical product of colonialism, racism, capitalism, slavery genocide and cultural erasure. Part of the struggle to liberate Chicanxs (and all people) would inevitably incorporate the

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5 National Brown Berets, *Our Nation Aztlán*. [Site is gone, link is cached content]

6 New Scientist, “*There is no DNA test to prove you’re Native American.*”

reclaiming of lost ancient ways, but this cannot overtake the struggle of Native peoples who have managed to maintain a direct connection to their deep past & present. Indigeneity is more than just genetic heritage; it is a real cultural link. And a politics based on genetic heritage begins to look more and more eugenicist.<sup>7</sup> It is unclear how the Chicano Nationalist project would differ from the sovereignty that the American Colonialists merchants (“Founding Fathers”) sought to establish from the English Crown.

## **Against All Nation-States, Against the Police**

The original 10-point Program of the Brown Berets includes the demand that “all officers in Mexican-American communities must live in the community and speak Spanish.”<sup>8</sup> Forty-seven year later in 2015, the LA Times reported that 45% of the LAPD force is Latino and yet relationships between the LAPD and the city it overlooks remain strained.<sup>9</sup> It could be said that at the time of the drafting of this program that this was a radical demand, but 61 years prior there is an anecdote that exemplifies that Mexican-Americans had already known another way was necessary.

“...scores of cholos jumped to their feet and started for the spot where the [LAPD] officer was supposed to be sitting. If he had been there nothing could have prevented a vicious assault and possible bloodshed”<sup>10</sup>

Now the context: Mexican-American LAPD Detective Felipe Talamantes, along with other Mexican-American LAPD Detectives, arrested three members of the P.L.M., a Mexican Anarchist-Communist organization, in Los Angeles under trumped up and false charges in 1907. At the time it was noted that it was highly possible that the LAPD detectives were working under direction of the Mexican Federal Government, then headed by dictator Porfirio Díaz. It was seen as a

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7 It is worth noting that the notion of La Raza C6smica created by Mexican philosopher Jos6 Vasconcelos (a notion widely embraced by Chicano Nationalists) is essentially Eugenic.

8 Hecho en Aztl6n, “Brown Beret Ten-Point Program” (1968)

9 LA Times, “LAPD is more diverse, but distrust in the community remains.”

10 LA Times, Nov. 13th 1907



way to clamp down on Mexican radicals in the USA just prior to the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910.

Someone in the courtroom said that Det. Talamantes might have been in attendance at a hearing resulting in the scene described above with the jumping cholos. At the time there was already a very strained relationship between the LAPD and Mexicans in Los Angeles. Consequently, there was massive support by Mexicans, Mexican-Americans and white radicals for the three anarchists. Noting that on principal, all anarchists are against the institution of the police. Throughout their imprisonment they were able to raise a remarkable \$1,950 in their defense: remarkable in light of the meager size of the contributions ranging from \$0.10 to \$3.00.<sup>11</sup> This anecdote is so telling since it mattered little to the those who supported the 3 arrested that the LAPD detectives were themselves also Mexican-American. These detectives were clearly understood to be complicit with the white-majority which controlled the conservative power structure which was local governance at the time.

To this day Chicano National Liberation group, Unión del Barrio, advocates in Los Angeles what the Brown Berets advocated back in 1968: a Civilian Police Review Board. As the more radical elements of the Black Lives Matter movement call out for the wholesale abolition of the police, Chicano Nationalists, in their racialized myopia, fail to see and acknowledge the anti-Black origins of the police in the U.S.A.<sup>12</sup>

Fredy Perlman notes something curious about pro-nationalists and says:

“It is among people who have lost all their roots, who dream themselves supermarket managers and chiefs of police, that the national liberation front takes root; this is where the leader and general staff are formed. Nationalism continues to appeal to the depleted because other prospects appear bleaker.”<sup>13</sup>

But what is the prospect, however bleak, the anti-state communists offer?

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11 Edward J. Escobar, *Race, Police and the Making of a Political Identity: Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department, 1900-1945*, p. 58

12 For further reading, see “*Origins of the Police*” by David Whitehouse

13 Fredy Perlman, “*The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism*” (1984)

## **Contra el nacionalismo, por el comunismo y anarquía!**

Chicano nationalists often talk about “the border jumping over them” to counter the racist narrative that Mexicans are somehow invaders of what is now the American SouthWest. They rail against borders that their parents, grandparents and others have to perilously cross, yet they evidently do not desire the abolition of borders but rather desire a re-drawing of them. Anti-state communists (& anarchists) desire the wholesale abolition of borders, nation-states, capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism and work. Though of course it is a difficult push forward these measures without speaking to the experience of identity, speaking through the lens of a purely national liberationist scope is to speak in half-measures.

Mao Zedong thought, a frequent source of much National Liberation ideology, here is critique by Perlman:

“Few of the world’s oppressed had possessed any of the attributes of a nation in the recent or distant past. The Thought had to be adapted to people whose ancestors had lived without national chairmen, armies or police, without capitalist production processes and therefore without the need for preliminary capital.

These revisions were accomplished by enriching the initial [Mao Zedong] Thought with borrowings from Mussolini, Hitler and the Zionist state of Israel. Mussolini’s theory of the fulfillment of the nation in the state was a central tenet. All groups of people, whether small or large, industrial or non-industrial, concentrated or dispersed, were seen as nations, not in terms of their past, but in terms of their aura, their potentiality, a potentiality embedded in their national liberation fronts. Hitler’s (and the Zionists’) treatment of the nation as a racial entity was another central tenet. The cadres were recruited from among people depleted of their ancestors’ kinships and customs, and consequently the liberators were not distinguishable from the oppressors in terms of language, beliefs, customs or weapons; the only welding material that held them to each other and to their mass base was the welding

material that had held white servants to white bosses on the American frontier; the “racial bond” gave identities to those without identity, kinship to those who had no kin, community to those who had lost their community; it was the last bond of the culturally depleted.”<sup>14</sup>

The project of supplying Chicanxs with an alternative to National Liberation, or some other false appeal to Nationhood, is one that is more necessary than ever. As radical Chicanxs who desire to truly free this world (or perhaps destroy it), we should take it upon ourselves to create the rhetoric, the movements, the history which we want to see in the world. I look forward to helping find, create and elevate such work which would fulfill this project of total liberation, not just for Chicanxs, but for oppressed people everywhere.

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14 Ibid

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