

Aztlán, La Raza, and the Chicano Reconquista Movement: Myth, Race, and Mimēsis in the Origins of Totalitarianism

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1. INTRODUCTION

On March 27th, 1967, in the immediate aftermath of riots sparked by a high school principal's racist remarks, the first *Chicano* Youth Liberation Conference was held at the headquarters of the Crusade for Justice in Denver. Attended by some 1,500 *Chicano* students representing 100 organizations from all parts of the United States, the proceedings threatened to founder, when many of the Crusade's leadership were detained in jail. The youth attending, however, rose to the occasion and "spontaneously organized their own discussion groups, workshops, and topics" (Navarro, LRUP, 87-88). The final product of the conference—*The Spiritual Plan of Aztlán*—was a manifesto instrumental in the crystallization of what has come to be known as *Chicano* Nationalism (or as it is known in its most radical form "*Chicano* Hypernationalism" or even "*Chicanismo*").¹ More prophetic and romantic

¹ The word '*Chicano*' does not have a certain etymological origin. It seems to be a truncated form of *Mexicano*, perhaps based upon the inability of Nahuatl speakers to sound the latter word, except as *Mesheecano*. '*Chicano*' in the 1970's was a preferred designator of Mexican Americans, but because of its associations with various liberation movements of the 1960's and 1970's, many Mexican-Americans prefer to dissociate themselves from this word. It currently has an ambiguous political reference signifying a program of political aspirations as held by individuals of Mexican descent who live "in the margins" between U.S.A. and Mexican culture. *Chicano* Hypernationalism is usually coupled with the demand for a *Chicano* separatist state which will embody the values of *Chicanismo*. '*Chicanismo*' refers to the "Chicano experience" and is also synonymous with "*Chicano* Worldview." It is my contention that this term designates a diffuse (and not tightly consistent) ideology including, but not limited to, (a) a distinct cultural identity, (b) pride in culture, (c) the brotherhood and sisterhood of Chicano/as, (d) the centrality of family, (e) the centrality of community, (e) a nationalist identity opposed to absorption into either the U.S.A. or the Mexican State, (f) opposition to the U.S.A. two-party system, countered by a third alternative (the RUP, for example), and (g) opposition to capitalism in favor of some form of nationalist socialism or Marxism. It sometimes takes on a much broader connotation, so vague as to be a mystification. For a

than strategic and tactical, *The Spiritual Plan of Aztlán* expressed the profound aspirations of an exploited minority to re-establish their mythical homeland in its (purported) original geographical location, the southwest United States. For this and other reasons, *The Spiritual Plan of Aztlán* has been the single most durable, influential, and threatening of the documents of Chicano liberation, being especially the spiritual mainspring of both *La Raza Unida Party* and *MECchA*.

Let me read the preamble in its entirety.

El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán

In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage but also of the brutal "gringo" invasion of our territories, *we*, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, *declare* that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny.

We are free and sovereign to determine those tasks which are justly called for by our house, our land, the sweat of our brows, and by our hearts. Aztlán belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops and not to the foreign Europeans. We do not recognize capricious frontiers on the bronze continent.

Brotherhood unites us, and love for our brothers makes us a people whose time has come and who struggles against the foreigner "gabacho" who exploits our riches and destroys our culture. 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 our brothers in the bronze continent, we are a nation, we are a union of free pueblos, we are *Aztlán*.

Por La Raza todo. Fuera de La Raza nada.

(DCS, p. 4)

The mission of program, such as it was, was summarized as follows:

discussion the features of *Chicanismo*, see: Armando Navarro, *La Raza Unida Party*, throughout, but especially, pp. 262-265. For a view that broadens the conception, see: Arturo Rosales, *Chicano!* p. 250.

Program

El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán sets the theme that the Chicanos (La Raza de Bronze) must use their nationalism as the key or common denominator for mass mobilization and organization. Once we are committed to the idea and philosophy of El Plan de Aztlán, we can only conclude that social, economic, cultural, and political independence is the only road to total liberation from oppression, exploitation, and racism. Our struggle then must be for the control of our barrios, campos, pueblos, lands, our economy, our culture, and our political life. El Plan commits all levels of Chicano society—the barrio, the campo, the ranchero, the writer, the teacher, the worker, the professional—to La Causa.

(DCS, p. 5)

The *Plan* then goes on briefly to describe organizational goals of *Chicano* nationalism as: (1) unity of those committed to the liberation of the race, (2) economic control of the community through the expulsion of the exploiters and the securing of communal properties “by nationalism and the *Chicano* defense units,” (3) education relative to “our people” and controlled by the community, (4) institutions which will be owned by the people, serve them, and seek restitution for “past economic slavery, political exploitation, ethnic and psychological cultural destruction and denial of civil and human rights,” (5) self-defense which will come from the people and its defenders will be given respect in exchange for their lives; delinquent acts will not be tolerated, only youthful revolutionary acts, (6) cultural products that “strengthen our identity, and “revolutionary culture” will be encouraged, and the cultural values of “life, family, home” will be “a powerful weapon to defeat the gringo dollar value system” and encourage ... love and brotherhood,” and (7) political liberation of the family of the race through majority control and minority pressure against the two-party system, against “the same animal with two heads that feed from the same trough” (DCS, pp.5-6). Although commentators within the movement are divided as to the realism of the mission and the implementability of the goals, there is general consensus that *The Spiritual Plan of Aztlán* is a founding document of the *Chicano* Movement.

In this paper, I am not primarily interested in the *history* of the ways in which this document was used ideologically to ground the *Chicano* Movement, nor am I primarily interested in the oppositions between the assumptions of this document and the broadly Marxist assumptions of the *Chicano* liberation. Instead, what I choose to focus on, here, are two ideas contained in this document and which are emblematic of *Chicano* Nationalism. My interest, here, is to describe the way in which the ideological notion of race thinking and the mythical notion of *Aztlán*—are mutually imbricated—in the ideology of *Chicanismo*.

Specifically, it is my purpose to focus on the pre-totalitarian phenomena which are present in *Chicanismo*, which Arendt details in her great work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and to show that they can be seen—against the features of U.S.A. exceptionalism— as an example of *antithetic mimetic doubling*. Now, before I am accused of being one of the minions in lock-step with one of Glenn Beck’s conspiracy theories, let me file a quick and unequivocal disclaimer. In this essay, I am not maintaining either that racial thinking is tantamount to racism, nor that the race thinking of the *Chicano reconquista* movement will inexorably lead—to use Arendt’s own phrase— “by some ‘immanent logic’” to the future development of a *Chicano* totalitarian movement. Describing racist thought of the 19th CE, Arendt has made this fallacy of these equivalencies clear: “[A]lthough racism ... revived elements of race-thinking in every country,” it was merely “a source of convenient arguments for varying political conflicts, but it never possessed any kind of monopoly over the political life of the respective nations; it sharpened and exploited existing conflicting interests or existing political problems, but it never created new conflicts or produced new categories of political thinking” (Arendt, **OT**, 183). It is clear that Arendt views these concomitant phenomena of imperialism as necessary but not sufficient conditions for the emergence of totalitarianism. I claim nothing more than this (and often significantly less).

My chief interest in this paper is to examine the close connection between race and the political re-appropriation of the myth of *Aztlán*, as mimetic responses to the ideology of USA exceptionalism. My emphasis in this examination will be on how the appropriation of

race and myth was accomplished, not on the effectiveness of that re-appropriation on political action, the latter being outside of my area of competency.

To accomplish my intention, I have organized this presentation into three parts: first, I will review Arendt's prescient remarks about the origins of racial thinking and its connections to Imperialism in that incubator of 20th century totalitarianisms, the 19th century. Second, I will supplement her sketchy discussion of the role of legend and politics in light of recent discussions of political myth. Third, I will contextualize *Aztlán* against the partial ideology of race in the *Chicano* movement, showing how it has been re-contextualized and re-appropriated as a political myth.

2. IDEOLOGY, RACE, AND LEGEND IN THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM:

To subject the relationship between myth of *Aztlán* and *Chicanismo* racial ideology to Arendt's analysis, it is best to explain, first, how she conceptualizes ideology in the most general sense, second, how she analyzes racist ideologies and their accompanying movements as proto-totalitarian phenomena and, third, how she believes myth (or *legend*, as she narrows it) contributes to the latter.²

a. Arendt's notion of ideology:

For Hannah Arendt, ideology is not understood according to meaning prescribed by its earliest French theoretician, Count Destutt de Tracy, as a science which takes ideas as its subject matter, what we today would call the history of ideas. Rather, Arendt understands it, negatively, as a species of uncritical, de-philosophized thinking.

² Following Flood's definition, I use the phrase 'partial ideology' to indicate that what under the umbrella of *Chicanismo* is prescindable from its Marxist, Socialist, and Feminist elements, and this includes the unique elements of *Chicanismo*, itself. Although these together are the ideological mix of the *Chicano reconquista* movement, they are not, taken individually, unique to that movement. Arendt speaks similarly about ideologies as being "full-fledged" or not full-fledged. Christopher Flood, *PM*, p. 22.

According to Arendt's most succinct definition, ideologies differ "from ... simple opinion[s] in that" they claim "to possess either a key to history, or the solution to the 'riddle of the universe,' or the intimate knowledge of the hidden universal laws which are supposed to rule nature and man" (*OT*, 159). More expansively, ideologies share six broadly defined features: (1) Ideologies are about what becomes, is born, and passes away; (2) Ideologies claim to explain everything within their range; (3) Ideological thinking is not susceptible to empirical test—it is not falsifiable—but "insists on a 'truer' reality" concealed behind all perceptible [471.] things, in the light of which their significance is perceived; (4) because ideologies cannot fundamentally alter human nature or the nature of physical existence, they instead achieve an alteration of human perception of reality, they achieve an emancipation of thought from reality through an exceptionless logic (*OT*, 470-471); (5) ideologies are effective when they lead their adherents to action "by the [voluntary] compulsion with which we can compel ourselves" (*OT*, 473) and (6) "[e]very full-fledged ideology has been created, continued and improved as a political weapon and not as a theoretical doctrine" (*OT*, 159).³ Ideologies may change their sense but always as pragmatically driven by the changing political scene.

An ideology is the logic of an idea applied to history; its statements are not about what is but what is in process, "in constant change." Instead of deriving its key idea from observations about history, history is treated as though it must follow the idea. "Ideologies pretend to know the mysteries of the whole historical process—the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future—because of the logic inherent in their respective ideas" (*OT*, 469). According to Arendt, "Ideologies are never interested in the miracle of being" (*OT*, 69). One might say, they are pitched toward the what may be, not what is, toward the eschatological not toward the ontological. They are interested in

³ "Full fledged ideologies" are, for Arendt, "systems based on a single opinion that proved strong enough to attract and persuade a majority of people and broad enough to lead them through the various experiences and situations of an average modern life." This notion of a full-fledged ideology has affinities with Flood's "comprehensive ideology," except that for him ideology is value neutral. See Hannah Arendt, *OT*, p. 159, and Christopher Flood, *PM*, p.22 .

becoming and change only as it conforms to a pre-established schema; thus, race, class, or spirit are not scientific objects within an ideology, rather they become instruments by which history is given an *a priori* interpretation. The instrumentality of interpretation and the pretense of explanation based on it are key to what is constitutive of ideologies.

The fixed ideas of ideology are not Plato's essential forms nor are they Kant's regulative principles of reason). Their function is exhausted in their instrumentality. "To an ideology, history does not appear in *the light of an idea* (which would imply that history is seen sub specie of some ideal eternity which itself is beyond historical motion) but as something that can be calculated by it" (OT, 469). Here, the idea is already known as the truth by its logic and historical motion is pre-apprehended in the idea. "Racism is the belief that there is motion in the very idea of race" (Arendt, OT, 469).

Ideologies by Arendt's definition are the "-isms" which claim to explain everything in process, especially by proceeding from a single idea or premise and then rhetorically demonstrating that the processes of history can be comprehensively explained (OT, 468). For Arendt, ideologies feign a quasi-scientific character but, unlike normative science, their method is neither inductive nor rooted in empirical method. Ideology is superficially deductive. If it seems to make use of facts, it first forces them first onto the procrustean bed of its own narrow logic. Ideologies turn syllogistic reasoning and dialectics into iron-clad sequences driven by monothematic ideas which functions as its premises. An ideology assumes that everything can be explained by a single idea, an idea that cannot be contradicted because it is already comprehended there. Ideologies are about total explanations. In short, they are *totalizing* (to use the postmodern descriptor) (OT, 470).

An ideology makes use of a peculiar optics—" in Arendt's words, tantamount to a "sixth sense—by which its central idea emerges from its place of concealment and can be seen as active in history (OT, 471). This optics is propaganda. By propaganda one comes to the vision of ideological truth, mimetically. "Comprehension is achieved by the mind's imitating, either logically or dialectically, the laws of 'scientifically' established movements with which through the process of imitation it become integrated" (OT, 471). The greater

the integration of the ideology, the more one follows the ruts which the propaganda wears down, so that, finally, the only thinking that the ideologue finds himself capable of must be accomplished through it.

Indoctrination also increases detachment from common human affections. The mark of perfect commitment to the iron-clad necessity of the ideology is the “ice-cold reasoning” (Hitler’s phrase) which refuses to flinch at any derivative conclusion and follows it into action, no matter how barbaric (*OT*, 474). Under complete totalitarian control, all interest in the ideas behind the ideology is eclipsed by the ideology’s instrumental logic. This logic, then, takes on a life of its own. When the logic of an idea possesses the masses, according to Stalin, it is “like a mighty tentacle seizes you on all sides as in a vise and from whose grip you are powerless to tear yourself away; you must either surrender or make up your mind to utter defeat” (Stalin, speech Jan. 28, 1924 quoted in *OT*, 472).

When a totalitarian regime succeeds in making the social environment conform to the logic of an ideology, the individual is mobilized to become a part of the logical process in which he does not control the beginning and in which he becomes a cog in its machinery. Ideally, this mobilization will more radical than mere commitment to Nazism or Communism ideologies, ideologies which may still be used as criteriologies for the judgment of truth and falsity, consistency and inconsistency. Mobilization is complete when people have no conception of the distinction between fact and fiction or what is true or false; mobilization is complete when the individual becomes an utterly pliable client. Mobilization is complete, when, as Arendt puts it, the ideologue no longer has the capacity to begin anew, when all chances for a new start to thinking or acting is foreclosed by the ideology’s historicist assumptions.⁴

With this, contact is lost with fellow humans and the reality around them. Then “enmity is replaced by that of conspiracy, and this produces a mentality in which—real

⁴ This notion of beginning anew receives deceptively little treatment in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, but for Arendt it is key to critical philosophical thinking and the formation of free societies. It is at the basis of the western philosophical tradition as well as the American Revolution.

enmity or real friendship—is no longer experienced and understood in its own terms but is automatically assumed to signify something else,” this something else being the ideological interpretation of what hatred or friendship *really* is, such ideas being understood completely in the way monothematic governing ideas define them (*OT*, 474).

b. Racism as an ideology:

Among the nineteenth century ideologies that provide the grounding of twentieth century totalitarianism, Arendt ranks racism as one of the two most important, the other being the Marxist theory of class.⁵ Race-thinking “with its roots deep in the eighteenth century, emerged simultaneously in all Western countries during the nineteenth century” (*OT*, 158). By the end of the nineteenth century, it was accorded “the dignity and importance” of a “major spiritual contribution” (*OT*, 158). Racism was the main instrument of imperialism, but it *was not* a kind of “exaggerated nationalism,” though it has often been confused with it (*OT*, 161). To nationalism, correctly conceived, racism was antithetical, and as a 19th CE political tool, it was used to undermine the body politic, even while it claimed to unite it. In this connection, Arendt notes that it is a commonplace to frame the struggle between Marxist and Racist ideologies—especially by Marxist ideologues— as a struggle between nationalism vs. internationalism, national wars vs. civil wars. But “[f]rom the beginning, racism deliberately cut across all national boundaries, whether defined by geographical, linguistic, traditional, or any other standards, and denied national-political existence as such” (*OT*, 161.) “Historically speaking, racists have a worse record of patriotism than the representatives of all other international ideologies together, and they were the only ones who consistently denied the great principle upon which the national

⁵ Only two ideologies have survived “the hard competitive struggle of persuasion” and come to prominence: (1) the class-struggle view of historical development and (2) history as the natural struggle of races. Both have had extraordinary mass-appeal to such an extent that—at the time that Arendt was writing—accounts of historical explanation were not considered plausible unless they made appeal to these ideologies (*OT*, 159).

organizations of peoples are built, the principle of equality and solidarity of all people guaranteed by the idea of mankind” (OT, 161).

The value of nineteenth century racist ideologies for imperialism was as both as an insulator against the radical otherness of colonized people and as a justification of their ill treatment. Employed as insulator, an ideology meant that colonial bureaucrats were neither required to think empathetically nor to feel sympathetically about the indigenous peoples; it thus became an excuse for a facile incomprehensibility. As a justification for ill-treatment, it meant that, in the colonies, one could justify the capricious or brutal application of law or avoid its application altogether. Hitler’s ice-cold rationality was already a bureaucratic practice in the legitimized, uncomprehending exploitation of the colonized peoples. Racism thus became one of the chief instruments of external imperialism, so much so that Arendt says that imperialists “would have” found it necessary to invent “racism as the only possible explanation and excuse for ... [their] deeds, even if no race-thinking had ever existed in the civilized world” (OT 183-184). But it was the (so-called) civilized that succumbed to utility of this idea, first as a theory about the rise and fall of civilizations, and then reworked as an ideology and legitimation of the dominance of one group over another—of the colonial masters over their subjects—and finally as a doctrine of supremacy of particular nation-races over all others.

Arendt distinguishes the emergent varieties of racism according to whether they were connected with nineteenth century *external* imperialist aspirations or whether they were associated with nineteenth century continental (or *internal*) imperialist aspirations, especially those connected with the various “pan-peoples” movements. The latter, though springing from different conditions and having different form, consciously aped some of the features of the racism of far-flung colonies

Continental imperialism began in “the frustrated ambitions of countries which did not get their share in the sudden expansion of the [eighteen] eighties; ... tribalism appeared as the nationalism of those people who had not participated in national emancipation and had not achieved the sovereignty of a nation-state” (OT, 227). A combination of these

frustrations were found in Austria-Hungary and Russia with their comparatively large Slavic and German irredentist populations.

Tribalist thought and racist thought eventually formed a confluence, when the features of racist ideology were adapted with greater particularity to fit the political intentions of various disorganized and dispossessed peoples whose population stretched over the established states of nineteenth century Europe. Tribalism, which narrowed racism from the supposed characteristics of white, black, and yellow races to the characteristics of peoples, argued that the distinctive superiority of a people could be found in its origin and heredity, that a peoples' character was an irreducible property of their origin and constitution.

Tribalism possessed a series of regular features: It rejected the Judaeo-Christian theology and the anthropological theory of the monogenic origin of humankind in favor of polygenism of racist theories, considering the Biblical account a pack of "pious lies" and turning the neutrality of Darwinian evolution to its advantage. It proposed its own theory of divine origins. It considered the various tribes as differently endowed—intellectually and physically—and forming a hierarchy of genius and fitness. It thus put all tribes into the competition for survival. It was opposed to intermarriage of peoples as a dilution of the blood of the genius tribe—an equivalent to a dilution of their superior traits. It proposed a finality of the tribe as a whole, that the tribe was to achieve a teleonomic purpose or destiny—whether "Light of the World", "Sheppard of Races," "Suffering Christ of Europe," "Christopher Nation," etc.—which would be played out, historically. Finally, tribalism was Anti-Semitic: it was Judaism's mimetic double, and thus opposed in resentment, to the claims of Jewish exceptionalism. Because "the Jews were the one perfect example of a people in the tribal sense, their organization was the model the pan-movements were striving to emulate, their survival [, their mission,] and their supposed power [were] the best proof of the correctness of racial theories" but the Jewish model was, paradoxically, the biggest roadblock to any other tribe's claim to unique superiority (Arendt, *OT*, 234-239).

Tribalism meant instant ethnic value. “Like the title of the heir of an old family, the ‘innate personality’ preached by Tribalism was given by birth and not acquired by merit. Such “‘true nobility’” was taken by 19th CE Liberal writers as replacing the “shabby titles” of non-hereditary royalty, titles which could be conferred or retracted because of actions, whereas nature was the ‘force of genius’ not based on human deeds (OT, 169). Pan-nationalist movements peddled a “‘enlarged tribal consciousness’” that equated nationality or membership in a people with the constitution of the soul. The danger of this equation was that it meant the development of “‘a turned-inward pride that ... [was] no longer concerned with public affairs but ... [pervaded] every phase of private life until, for example, the private life of each true Pole’” was “‘a public life of Polishness’” (OT, 226).

Against expectations, 19th CE Romanticism became one of the buttresses of racist and tribalist ideas. In it, the idolization of the unique personality of the individual eventually came to mean that “‘arbitrariness became the proof of genius.’” Romanticism was wedded to a pragmatism which accepted that “[w]hatever served the so-called productivity of the individual, namely, the entirely arbitrary game of his ‘ideas,’ could be made the center of a whole outlook on life and the world” (OT, 168). And this, again, was generalized to the notion of the genius of races and tribes and the assumption that each might have an exceptional worldview which was the foundation of its uniqueness, ingenuity, and productivity.

c. Legends as buttresses of ideologies:

Although she treats one of the central foci of this paper as an aside, Arendt, nevertheless, does touch on the important role that legends (or myths) play in the legitimization of ideological interpretations of history.⁶ She describes this role so beautifully that the passage requires quotation, in part:

⁶ Her discussion of legends, on pp. 207-221 of *the Origins of Totalitarianism*, less on the theory of the ideological appropriation of legend and more on the characteristics of the imperialist bureaucrats and spies who sincerely believed such legends. For an explanation of this fascination, on Arendt’s part, see my comments in footnote 8.

Legends have always played a powerful role in the making of history. Man, who has not been granted the gift of undoing, who is always an unconsulted heir of other men's deeds, and who is always burdened with a responsibility that appears to be the consequence of an unending chain of events rather than conscious acts, demands an explanation and interpretation of the past in which the mysterious key to his future destiny seems to be concealed. Legends were the spiritual foundation of every ancient city, empire, people, promising safe guidance through the limitless spaces of the future. Without ever relating facts reliably, yet always expressing their true significance, they offered a truth beyond realities, a remembrance beyond memories (OT, 208).

Legends or myths are called on by the ideologues of external (or colonial) imperialism when it is necessary to re-write history, especially when what had happened adventitiously must be turned into proof of strategy or proof of history's direction (Arendt, OT, 207). Legends, because they are about retroactive valorization of past actions invite the ideologically engaged to participate in them. It is in the willingness to emulate these enacted virtues that the ideologue claims those actions for himself, to claim their political aspirations as his own, "to consent to assume his responsibility for them, and to consider past events *his past*" (Arendt, OT, 208).⁷ Because these myths and legends invite participation and can be an inspiration to responsibility and action in the present—because they invite heroism—Arendt thinks that they are nobler and communally-oriented. Her pithy summary of their superiority is epigrammatic: "[L]egends attract the very best in our times, just as ideologies attract the average, and the whispered tales of gruesome secret powers behind the scenes attract the very worst" (Arendt, OT, 209).⁸

⁷ "Legendary explanations of history always served as belated corrections of facts and real events, which were needed precisely because history itself would hold man responsible for deeds he had not done and for consequences he had never foreseen. The truth of the ancient legends—what gives them their fascinating actuality many centuries after the cities and empires and people they have served have crumbled to dust—was nothing but the form in which past event were made to fit the human condition in general and the political aspirations in particular. Only in the frankly invented tale about events did man consent to assume his responsibility for them, and to consider past events *his past*. Legends make him master of what he had not done, and capable of dealing with what he could not undo. In this sense, legends are not only among the first memories of mankind, but actually the true beginning of human history." 208.

⁸ In the series of lectures she gave on Kant's political philosophy and another on the *Critique of Judgment* at the New School in 1970, Arendt made some remarks which clarifies her valorization of legends over ideologies and conspiracies. If we accept the idea that a legend, by its interpretation of a particular historical event, creates an imaginative example (the analogue for the Kantian notion of the schema) out of a particular event, then it lifts that

Although the mythic legitimation of internal (continental) imperialism requires the proof of history's direction, myths and legends are also called upon by the ideologues of tribalism or the pan-peoples movements for a variety of other purposes. These ideologies also needed myths of origin, myths of destiny, myths of virtue, myths of genius, and so on. Arendt asserts that so long as nation-states were robust and unchallenged, there was no necessity for the creation of myths or legends of origin; only after it is challenged by imperialism—and specifically the continental variety—that foundation legends are created.⁹ The valorization of a people in its (supposed) historical mission through time is more demanding than the justification of the colonial domination of a people for a specific historical period; the former requires greater variety, if not consistency, in its legends.

Unfortunately, Arendt leaves the explanation of how myths function in relation to ideology pretty much undiscussed. And it is precisely the end of this thread that I will take up in the next section.

event to the level of moral exemplarity. Now it may well be the case that *the particular event* is not, in fact, the instantiation of a moral value, but that does not negate the *sui generis* goodness of that value, it merely indicates that one has judged wrongly in thinking the particular event is an example of it. Put it another way, those agents of the British secret service in the British empire were admirable to the extent that they recognized virtue and put it into action but they were naïve not to see that it was for the accomplishment of wrong ends. Myth or legend created for political ends is not made good by that fact, but the presumption is that the good that it has in it—especially as it moves one to action—will be a powerful attractant. Those under the influence of a legend are thus more admirable because they are still moral judges and actors, while the ideologue is a mere cog of a larger process, while the conspiracy nut—in his social alienation and atomization—is an impotent paralytic. This is why she can assert “The fact that the ‘white man’s burden’ is either hypocrisy or racism has not prevented a few of the best Englishmen from shouldering the burden in earnest and making themselves the tragic and quixotic fools of imperialism” and “[o]nly those who had never been able to outgrow their boyhood ideals and therefore had enlisted in the colonial services were fit for the task” (Arendt, *OT*, 211). An aretological approach to ethics would make this error a matter of an ill-formed conscience, one which divorces the object of the act from its end or motive; the Kantian approach leaves it relatively unexplained. Arendt, the neo-Kantian, can still see virtue in the attempt to do the good for the wrong reasons. See: Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, pp. 75-77; 79-85.

⁹“It seems rather significant that the growth of national bodies was nowhere accompanied by a foundation legend, and that the first unique attempt in modern times was made precisely when the decline of the national body had become obvious and imperialism seemed to take the place of old-fashioned nationalism.” Arendt, *OT*, 208

3. SACRED MYTHS, POLITICAL MYTHS, AND THE POLITICAL APPROPRIATION OF SACRED MYTHS:

Especially in the second half of the 20th CE, the comparison of political myth in to sacred myth has been taken up because of the recognized similarities in function both phenomena apparently share. A series of political thinkers—Ernst Cassirer, Carl Schmitt, Hans Blumenberg, Christopher Flood, and Chiara Bottici, to name a few—have weighed-in on what constitutes political myth and how it differs from sacred myth. It would be beyond my ability to rehearse, in the confines of this paper, what has been accomplished elsewhere and so much better by others.¹⁰ Instead, my purpose will be to propose a definition of sacred myth cobbled together from the writings of my colleagues in the field of religious studies—and this more as a heuristic than a final statement on the matter.

a. What is a sacred myth?

Sacred myth is as much a contested concept in religious studies as is political myth is in political science. My guidelines for proposing this definition are general ones that govern all definitional ventures. A good definition is one which is prosaic, concise, precise, clear, compact, and its sentences should express necessary features of the object described, without the pretence of being incapable of improvement. Especially, my main concern is to provide necessary features which a myth must possess without promising sufficiency in these features taken concomitantly. My definition of sacred myth follow.

A sacred myth is:

(1) a narrative about how mysterious foundational events, structures, or qualities of the cosmos or humankind came into being, especially as these are the results of supernatural beings or forces;¹¹ (2) it is a narrative which is interpellative and its origin indisponible; (3) it is

¹⁰ See the bibliography for the works of these theoreticians.

¹¹ Chiara Bottici expresses this “explaining how” function by referring to Kerényi’s Prolegomena to Essays on a Science of Mythology (Kerenyi, ESM, 6-7) where he cogently distinguishes natural-scientific explanation, which is about causes, from the “explanations” myths provide. The German word ‘*begründen*’ means “to ground,” “to substantiate,” or “to lay the foundations” for meaning, to answer the question whence something comes, its significance, and where it is going. See: Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, 122-123.

*culturally located, culturally important, imaginative, polysemic, and it demands emotional involvement and individual participation. (4) It is considered true relative to the tradition from which it emerged, though it may or may not claim to have happened in historical time. (5) A sacred myth is (almost) always a part of a larger sacred mythological corpus which is intertextual (or mutually implicative), but owing to its inherent polysemy, its meaning is generally underdetermined so that it may be given other interpretations inside or outside the religious tradition with which it is associated.*¹²

I think that most of this definition's assertions are self-explanatory, but a few are in need of clarification. First, myths do not provide scientific explanations which would satisfy contemporary standard of scientific rigor, though they are about what and how things came into being, especially providing the significance of that genesis. Second, though many features of myths are malleable to the interpretive manipulations of regime and ideology, the embedded claim of originating source is not. Myths carry with them the force of their claims to authenticity. Third, myths are uniquely constructed to get our attention, to seem that they are addressing us, personally, in especially in our unresolved questions about existence. Fourth, and finally, myths are never interpretable without a social or intellectual context.

b. What is a political myth?

Following a neutral minimalist definition of ideology, which reduces ideology to a "political belief system," Christopher Flood's definition of ideology, unlike that of Arendt, is neutral (or indifferent) with respect to truth value (Christopher Flood, *PM*, 15). He, nevertheless, defines political myth in a way compatible both with the definition of sacred myth that I have proposed as well as with the negative evaluation of ideology proposed by Arendt. Flood defines political myths as non-sacred but exemplary and authoritative "narratives of past, present, or predicted political events" which relate stories of "origins and foundings, stories of exploits of culture heroes, stories of rebirth and renewal, and

¹² Two primary sources for my "essential" definition are William G. Doty and Mircea Eliade. See: Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (pp. 410-434) and *Myth and Reality* (pp. 1-20); and William G. Doty, *Mythography: the Study of Myths and Rituals* (pp. 31-65).

eschatological stories”; “political myths can be classed together as mythologies when they are perceived as being related to each other” by circulation in a “particular social group and/or by sharing elements of their subject matter” (Flood, PM, 42).

Political myths have one other feature; they are “ideologically marked” (42). This phrase means that myths’ “narrative discourse carries the imprint of the assumptions, values, and goals associated with a specific ideology or family of ideologies, and that it therefore conveys an explicit or implicit invitation to assent to a particular ideological standpoint,” which the political myth claims faithfully to convey and which is based on its faithfulness to the interpretation of the “facts” that it narrates (43-33).

Despite a general compatibility between my definition of sacred myth and Flood’s definition of political myth, there are *apparent* differences. It might seem that because it is politically controlled and created to serve ideological purposes, a political myth loses its effectiveness as its meaning is seen to be underdetermined, so that the practical—propagandistic—control of meaning is of greater importance to political myths. But this is also true of religious traditions, especially in those traditions whose myths are so managed that only a single interpretation is allowed. The ways in which conservative or fundamentalist traditions control of sacred myth in relation to their dogmas has affinities with political control of a myth relative to its ideology. Finally, the fact that the historical truth of a political myth is important to an ideology would also seem to be a difference, but this again is only apparent. Again, in those religious traditions that take a literalist or historical positivist approach to their religious narratives, the historicity of their religious myths is unquestionable.

Flood makes one final set of distinctions which will be particularly serviceable for my analysis of *Aztlán* and its grounding racial ideology. This is the distinction between *partial* and *comprehensive* ideologies, the former has a narrower thematic scope, while the latter refer to comprehensive world-views. In anticipation of my concluding analysis, I would like to suggest that if a comprehensive ideology is either inconsistent *with*, or not the driving ideology *for*, other partial ideologies with which it is aggregated, then it must share pride of

place with these partial ideologies and, relative to the political group, must be considered a partial ideology, itself.

c. What is a political appropriation of a sacred myth?

With definitions of sacred and political myth in place, we see that though both definitions overlap, on the whole, they are still dichotomous and, therefore, irrelevant to the case of *Aztlán*. The idea of *Aztlán*, as used by the *Chicano* movement, is neither a sacred myth, *simpliciter*, nor a political myth, *simpliciter*. Were it simply a sacred myth, then it would grounding only religious meaning; were it simply a political myth, then it would have to be—in the narrow sense—what Arendt calls a “legend” designed for the purpose of supporting an ideology; it should not, according to Flood, have any sacred content. What is required to fill the void, here, is *a tertium quid*: we need to explain the political or ideological appropriation of a sacred myth, something which is not the simple equivalent of either sacred or political myth.

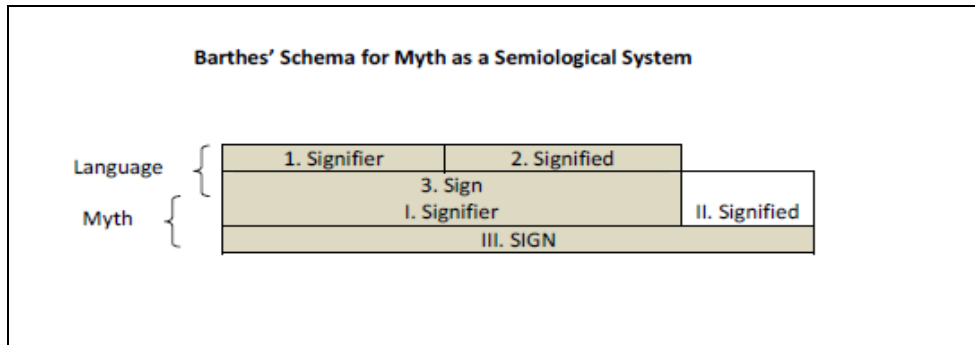
To this end of establishing this third variety of myth, I would like to refer to the well-known and serviceable treatment of Roland Barthes in his essay, “Myth Today.” At the risk of rehearsing something already familiar, let me explain how Barthes understanding is relevant to the example of *Aztlán*.

Barthes says that myth functions as a semiological system with some peculiar features:

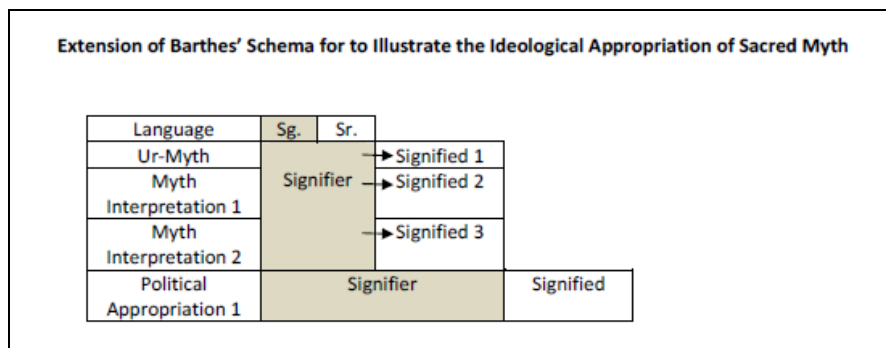
In myth we find ... [a] tridimensional pattern: the signifier, the signified, and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: *it is a second order semiological system*. That which is a sign (namely, that which is the associative total of the concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. We must recall, here, that the material of mythic speech (the language itself, ... rituals, etc.), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth. Myth sees in them only the same raw material; their unity is that they all come down to the status of a mere language. ... [M]yth wants to see in them only a sum of signs, a global sign, the final term of a first semiological chain. And it is precisely this final term which will become the first term of a greater system which it builds and of which it is only a part. ... [I]n myth there are two semiological systems one of which

is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language ..., which I shall call the *language-object*, because it is the language which the myth gets hold of to build its own system; and myth itself, which I shall call *metalanguage*, because it is a second language which speaks about the first. When he reflects on the metalanguage, the semiologist no longer needs to ask himself questions about the composition of the language-object ...; he will only need to know its total term, or the global sign, as this terms lends itself to myth.¹³

Barthes provides a diagram to illustrate this description:



Even though Barthes extends the meaning of myth well beyond narratives, the narrower signification we have recommended works just as well with his description and schema. If we replace, in the Barthesian diagram, the word myth with sacred myth, add an additional level, and label it the ideological appropriation of the sacred myth, we schematically represent what takes place in the appropriation of sacred myths for political ideological purposes. This displacement and extension can be represented as the following:



¹³ Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" in *A Barthes Reader*, pp. 99-100.

The adapted diagram is intended to show that the ideological appropriation of sacred myth is to recontextualize it and give it new surplus meaning. What were the signifiers and signifieds of the original myth, become the signifiers of a new field of meanings. The intertextuality of the original myth is now expanded to include ideological interpretations not originally intended.¹⁴ In the words of Eric Czapó, the *mythogeme* is now transformed and bundled into an *ideologeme*.¹⁵ This kind of appropriation is not new with the Barthesian iteration of it. It is analogous to the distinction that Christian theologians have made between the senses of scripture.¹⁶ A similar appropriation of theological meaning is certified as a legitimate practice in those Christian traditions where a sense other than the literal is recognized and so long as a secondary sense—Barthes' metalanguage—does not contradict the literal or historical meaning of the text.

¹⁴ The use of the word 'Ur-myth' should not cause confusion, here. I am not maintaining, as some Folklorists have, that there was an original myth which was the basis of all later modifications. My choice to retell Durán's record of the Aztlan myth should establish that. Rather, Ur-myth, here is following Blumenberg's understanding of what he calls "radical myth." "[R]adical myth does not have to be the initial myth. ... On the contrary, the myth that is varied and transformed by its receptions, in the forms in which it is related (and has the power of being related to) history, deserves to be made the subject of study if only because such study also takes in the historical situations and needs that were affected by the myth and were disposed to work on it. ... [A] fundamental myth [is not an] original myth [because the former's] consolidation must be a diachronic process, a sort of testing of what could no longer be dispensed with in a unit myth, both in identifying it and [175.] in laying claim to what it accomplishes as an image. The more successful the process of solidification, the more hard-wearing its result" (Blumenberg, *WOM*, 174-175.) According to this understanding, Durán's narrative is both an ur- and a unit myth.

¹⁵ Czapó describes the process as follows: "The conceptual links between ... objects [food, fire, women, jars] and institutions [sacrifice, technology, marriage agriculture] would not have been legible to the ancient consumers of ... myth if they were limited only to [its] ... structure [and had no access to its code of cross references between objects and institutions]. The assumption is that myths communicate because they belong to a higher level of language, which is acquired in the same way as ordinary speech, in the process of acculturation. A structuralist might extend the linguistic series extending from phoneme to mytheme by stating that bundles of myths constitute an ideologeme, and bundles of ideologemes constitute a cultural mentality or ideology." Eric Czapó, *Theories of Mythology*, p. 263.

¹⁶ The semiology of the Christian Scriptures follows analogous rules, according to Thomas Aquinas. As he puts it, "The author of Holy Writ is God, in whose power it is to signify His meaning, not by words only (as man also can do), but also by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property, that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. Therefore that first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal, and presupposes it" (*ST* 1a, Q. 9, *Resp.*). Thomas constrains promiscuous signification by further stipulating that the spiritual sense must not contradict the literal/historical sense, on which it depends.

Even so, the theological and the ideological appropriation of texts are different in important ways. Different in the ideological appropriation of a sacred text is the partial violation of the condition of consistency. A political ideology has no *a priori* reason to make its appropriation consistent with the sacred text (mythogeme), rather, in re-grounding the text it may be more politically expedient to contradict its original meaning—at least, in part—in order to use it, instrumentally, to move its subjects to belief and action. The larger political-ideological context drives the appropriated sacred myths to a much greater degree than the spiritual senses of the scriptures ever drove the literal/historical meaning. Thus, the political-ideological determination of a sacred myth comes very close to the freedom of appropriation Barthes describes, his discussion of the freedom of myth, even though his conception of myth is broader than I wish to take into account, here.

4. AZTLÁN, POLITICAL APPROPRIATION AND RACIAL-CENTRIC THINKING

The only thing left in this presentation is to explain the ideological function of the myth of *Aztlán* in relation to the *Chicano* racial ideogeme. Before this, a rehearsal of the myth of *Aztlán* is required.

a. Narrative of the Aztlán sacred myth

To establish how the myth of *Aztlán* is appropriated by the *Chicanismo* ideology, it is first necessary to recover an outline of original narrative of, as near as this is possible. I say “as near as this is possible” because one immediately faces a series of difficulties. There is the problem of the incredible subtlety of Nahuatl, the language in which the myth was transmitted orally and then written down in ideograms and hieroglyphs. Nahuatl makes use of a noun system which allows a binary coupling to produce a third meaning, so that anyone listening to an orally transmitted narrative or reading a text without knowing the code will take the couples as separate words and the narrative, at points, as gibberish (Coe, *M*, 221-

223).¹⁷ The difficulty in understanding is best illustrated by the comments of Fray Diego Durán, a Dominican and one of the preeminent ethnographers of Aztec religion and the Spanish invasion in the second generation of conquistadors.¹⁸ Durán meticulously recorded the first-person accounts of the religion of his indigenous informants despite the difficulties: “[A]ll these chants are filled with metaphors so obscure that very few persons can understand them unless their significance is studied and discussed. I have listened with great attention to what they sing and after hearing the words and metaphors, which at first seem nonsense, I find them meaningful thoughts, after I have examined and meditated on them ...” (Duran cited by Ignacio Bernal, *HINS*, 574).

The other, original, form of the transmission of the *Aztlán* myth was in the form of ideographic codices which functioned more as aids to memory than texts whose meaning was determined. ““Essentially they were only list of events which certain well-trained individuals learned to ‘read’ out loud, elaborating on the action of events, which could not be described adequately by picture writing; they added adjectives and reproduced conversations or any other pertinent commentaries that had been memorized” (Bernal, *DHCX*, 570). The written records we have of the *Aztlán* myth are based upon these highly variable interpretations.

The myth of *Aztlán* is not one myth but a myth told in a variety of ways—both orally and ideographically—and in connection with other myths related to it according to ancient Mesoamerican coda. Some these are preserved in works of colonial ecclesiastics Tezozomoc’s *Cronica Mexicayotl*, *Codex Ramirez*, *Codex Aubin*, *the Annals of Tlateloco*, and *Historia Chichimeca* and most importantly for our purposes, *History of the Indies of New Spain* by Fray Diego Duran (Michael Piña, *AHMDA*, 16). What we have in the preserved myth of *Aztlán* is more a mythology than a single archetypical mythogeme. Though it may be told as

¹⁷This is compounded by the morphological indistinguishability of nouns and adjectives in Nahuatl. Frances Karttunen, “Nahuatl,” *FAWL*, 504.

¹⁸ Durán painstakingly produced three works of inestimable value for the study of this period: *History of the Indies of New Spain*, *Ancient Calendar*, and *Book of the Gods and Rites*.

the latter, there are inter-textual elements which make the telling of it as a single mythogeme, incomplete.

Finally, the myth of *Aztlán* is a *living* myth, resurrected in the *Chicanismo* movement, to be sure, but also transmitted orally and writing in Mexican culture; as such, it has taken on the characteristics of myths of “a golden age,” “a return,” and eschatological fulfillment which are like those widespread in other cultures. Sometimes, these themes are in apparent opposition to one another. Some are brought to the foreground and others pushed to the background in the telling of the myth, as the occasion, or political purpose, demands.

With these series complications noted as a disclaimer, let me sketch the key parts of the *Aztlán* myth. The basis of my narrative is the myth as preserved by the Dominican Friar, Diego Durán..

After living for many years in Aztlán (“the place of white herons”) in the community of the Seven Caves (Chicomoztoc),¹⁹ six of the tribes decided to leave, in sequence, first, the Xochlimilcas, then the Chalcas, the Tepanecs, the Colhuas, the Tlalhuicas. [In the version I follow, no account of the cause of the migration is given. In other accounts, they were the vassals of another Aztec group and they decided to throw off their yoke of servitude.] These six tribes migrate south and, in sequence, they settle at various distances around the great Mexican lake, annihilating the indigenous dwellers of the region who threaten them. Hundreds of years later, the seventh tribe—the Mexitin—migrates to the region of the great lake. Favored by their tribal god, Huitzilopochtli, they are promised the land already settled by the six tribes. Prescient Huitzilopochtli secretly prophesies everything that will happen to them on their migration. They set out on a journey of many years and everywhere they tarry, they build temples and cultivate the fields. When they decide to go on, the infirm are left behind to populate the land. During their travels, there are episodes of triumph and challenge. The most important of these is the abandonment of Huitzilopochtli’s sorceress sister, who sires a son who later returns to kill him, but his adversary’s arrival is anticipated and Huitzilopochtli gives orders that his heart should be torn from his breast and cast into a marsh. When they are obedient to the instructions of their god, the Mexitin prosper, When they are disobedient, they are punished. Gradually the original tribe splits into three groups, two of which are left behind,

¹⁹ In some accounts Chicomoztoc, *Aztlán*, and Colhuacan (“place of the ancestors”) are conflated, in others, *Aztlán* is made the original dwelling place of the Aztecs and Chicomoztoc a period of lengthy sojourn on the way to site of Mexico City.

to settle the wilderness while a small remnant—the strongest, most courageous, and most pious—press on.²⁰ For 80 years they wander, until one night Huitzilopochtli speaks to Cuauhtlequetzqui (one of his litter-bearers) in a dream and delivers a prophecy: when the heart of Copil his nephew was discarded, it landed on a stone and through the heart a prickly pear cactus grew, and on this cactus a magnificent eagle dwells who makes his meal of the birds with bright plumage all around him. “This place is called Tenochtitlan [“place of the stony, prickly pear cactus”] and there you will find your rest, comfort, and the grandeur of your people. There, your name will be praised and your Mixitin nation will be made great. The might of your arms will be known and the courage of your brave hearts. With these you will conquer great nations, near and distant, you shall subdue town and cities, sea to sea. You shall become lords of gold and silver, of jewels and precious stones, of splendid feathers with the insignia of nobles. We shall rule over the people we find there, their lands, their sons and daughters. They will serve us and be our subjects and tributaries.” The next day, they find a stream which formerly ran clear now running in two streams red and blue and nearby they discover a robust eagle, its wings stretched out cooling itself but brilliantly illuminated in the noon-day sun with a small brightly colored bird in its talons.²¹ Seeing the bird, they recognize their journey has come to an end. They bow to the eagle and he bows to the people. On this site, the Mexitin expeditiously build a crude temple on the site, and later, following the instruction of Huitzilopochtli, they build Mexico City (Durán, *HINS*, 2—50).

From this brief telling of the legend it may be difficult to appreciate why Aztlán has become a utopian eschatological figure in *Chicanismo* ideology. However, an additional mythogeme helps illuminate the utopian dimension of Aztlán. Again, this account follows the narrative of Durán.

During his reign, Montezuma (the Great) waxes curious about Aztlán, the original dwelling place of his ancestors and Coatlicue, mother of the god Huitzilopochtli. He calls his adviser before him and expresses his desire to send his most valiant warriors on a quest for the

²⁰ There are some gruesome episodes to this account, for example, the sacrifice, skinning and the dressing of a youth in the skin of the comely daughter of the king Achitometl, and then inviting the unknowing king to worship her as the goddess of the Aztecs. Such episodes are more appropriate for the script of a Hollywood horror movie—I am thinking of the “Texas Chain Saw Massacre”—than as spur to eschatological hope. These episodes are not stuff of for *Chicano* ideological appropriation, for obvious reasons. See: Fray Diego Duran, *History of the Indies of New Spain*, pp. 36-38.

²¹ Others myths make it a serpent, and there is some speculation that Duran has somehow mistaken a word, here. The significance of this image is obvious as it is the fulfillment of the founding prophecy of the site of Mexico city and is emblazoned on the Mexican flag.

Aztec homeland. His advisor measures his intention as a divine inspiration but suggests an alternative means of discovery. This is a trip better made by wizards and not by braves. Montezuma accepts his adviser's suggestion, but not before summoning the court historian to establish the known details about the place. The court historian describes Aztlán—the place of “whiteness”—as a “blissful happy place,” “an island in the midst of waters, where the ancestors had an abundance of ducks, herons, cormorants, cranes, and all varieties of waterfowl; fish were abundant. It's a place where the ancestors were serenaded by songbirds in cool groves of willows, evergreens, and alders near clear-running springs. The ancestors grew all kinds of beans, chilies, tomatoes on floating plots. But when the ancestors decided to leave that place, everything turned against them; their path was turned to thorns.” Having its paradisaical state confirmed, Montezuma dispatches sixty sorcerers laden with gifts. The sorcerers promptly draw magic symbols on the ground and conjure a god who transforms them into their tutelary animal spirits (*nahuals*) in which forms they are transported to the banks of Aztlán. There they find people carrying on in beautiful surroundings, just as had been narrated about their ancestors. They find the mother of Huitzilopochtli, at the top of the central mountain, a wizened old hag who enquires after their ancestors long-dead, and she tells them how she misses her son. She also delivers a prophecy of how her son's domination over Mexico-Tenochtitlan will be wrested from him because just as he dominated nations, he will soon find that other nations will dominate him. She, then, reveals the miraculous nature of Aztlán—no one need ever die. As they climb down the hill, they see an old servant grow miraculously young before their eyes. With apologies, he presents them with simple gifts of flowers and homespun. The sorcerers thank him and depart, changing again into their animal spirits, and return to the court of Montezuma. Montezuma and his court weep “wistfully at not being able to see the land of their origin.” But they also are fearful about the prediction of Huitzilopochtli's demise. (Duran, *HINS*, 212-222).

The durable nature and appeal of myths like that of Aztlán are explained by Hans Blumenberg in terms of what he calls “unit myths” (Hans Blumenberg, *WOM*, 150). They are preserved as units, not because they can be divorced from any context, but because that context is the universal historical experience of humankind.

If one asks oneself the question of what the source of the iconic constancy of myth is, then there is only one answer, an answer that sounds trivial and all too simple to satisfy our expectations: The fundamental patterns of myths are simply so sharply defined [*prägnant*], so valid, so binding, so gripping in every sense, that they convince us [151.] again and again and still present themselves as the most useful material for any search on how matters stand, on a basic level, with human existence (Blumenberg, *WOM*, 150-151)

I think it is not difficult to see how aspects of these two myths might speak existentially to members of the *Chicano* movement, even if the ideological appropriation of the myth is necessarily one which must highlight certain features and suppress others. Among the themes of *Chicano* ideological significance are: the divine origin of the destiny of the Mexican people, the testing of the people, their wandering for 80 years, the providence behind their arrival at the place predicted by Huitzilopochtli, and the symbolism of the eagle on the cactus, which is emblematic of the Mexican flag. Highlighted is the paradisaical nature of *Aztlán*, the symbol of the perfect society before the fall into historical reality and the cult of human sacrifice became a regular part of the Aztec religion. Highlighted also is the nostalgic atmosphere of the myth which beckons a return to an uncorrupted paradisaical state. Highlighted may even be the assurance that the monstrous repetitive sacrificial religion has been left behind.

The *Chicano* writer Michael Peña has suggested that the myth of *Aztlán* operates on (at least) three distinctive levels: as a historical narrative which expresses the unique history of the Mexican peoples, but one which nevertheless establishes it in relation to a distinct contemporary geographical location inhabited by Chicanos but outside of the Mexican state. But it also puts the *Chicano* in touch with the mythical origins of his people. As such, it becomes a mythical grounding for a people who have too long felt rootless. Finally, it becomes symbolic of an identity not yet achieved. It is a living myth. It is the attempt to recover and old connection with the past and to live it as a new identity for the future. To explain this last operation, Peña argues, following Raimundo Pannikar, that *Aztlán* functions as an ideal, as a *horizon*, that the *Chicano* strives to realize in the concrete.

Aztlán and “the *Chicano* destin [are] ... intrinsically linked to the realization of [a] ... ‘mestizo nation,’ where the cultural ways would flourish and brotherhood would be the guiding principle. This mythic narrative provides a spiritual grounding for one of the core elements of the national liberation struggle, that is, territorial acquisition as an ideology and movement is very much concerned with the practical and symbolical uses of land; a nation without a ‘homeland’ is almost unthinkable. Chicanos were unaware of any historical contradictions within their interpretation of the myth of *Aztlán* and their subsequent struggle to politically [sic!] control it. The myth is inseparable from the consciousness that confirmed [conferred?] nationhood on the

Chicano people. It was an integral aspect of the *Chicano* nationalist worldview whose destiny was founded on the realization of *Aztlán* as a nation (Michael Peña, “The Archaic, Historical and Mythicized dimensions of *Aztlán*,” in **A**, 39.)

The fact that there is little awareness that the idealization of *Aztlán* is in contradiction to the Marxist-materialist elements of the *Chicanismo* ideology does not mean that there are no contradictions. It is a function of ideology (in Arendt’s sense) to deflect attention away from its internal oppositions in order to focus attention on the governing idea from which all consequences presumably follow. What we also find Peña saying about *Aztlán* is akin to what Arendt describes as mystification—mystification both as the pseudo-spiritualization of a political project and mystification as the obfuscation of a process of thinking. The last two sentences of Peña’s discourse are especially mystifying. There, Peña suggests that the myth and its geographical realization spontaneously emerged together with the recognition of the Chicanos as a people who are *somehow different from everyone else*, and that they therefore had a *de re* geographical claim to a mythical land which they now identify with real territory in the southwest U.S.A.!

But there is another part to the ideological framing of the myth of *Aztlán* that allows us to appreciate how insightful is Arendt’s characterization of the mysticism that accompanies racist ideologies. That framing is expressed as the second theme in *The Spiritual Plan of Aztlán* as the theme of uniqueness of the “Bronze Race,” or (as the racial thinker who invented it called it) “the Cosmic Race.” It is the identification with the Bronze or Cosmic Race that explains the unique destiny that *Chicano* ideologues associate with the cause and unique mission of their people.

b. Race ideology as one of the frames for Aztlán myth’s political appropriation

The most immediate ideological framing of the myth of *Aztlán* is the racial philosophy espoused by the Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos in his very brief monograph, *The Cosmic Race (La Raza Cósmica)*, published in Spain in 1925. Written by one of the most incredibly syncretistic thinkers that Mexico has ever produced—part Theosophist, part Pythagorean, part Buddhist, part Catholic, and part process philosopher—Vasconcelos has

had a profound influence on the *Chicano* movement owing to his quirky race-theory, a theory which feeds conveniently into the *Chicano*'s need for racial pride. The historian of the *Chicano* movement, Armando Navarro, has said that it was Vasconcelos' emphasis on *meztizaje*—the fusion of Indian and Spanish heredity—and his prediction of the dialectical perfection of the “Bronze Race”—which made this theory of race especially amenable to *Chicanismo* (Armando Navarro, LRUP,).

A quick review of Vasconcelos' theory shows that it corresponds, in many ways, to the racist theories that Arendt describes in *The Origins*, though it does so with a surprising twist. There is, perhaps, no better way to describe Vasconcelos' theory than to say that it is not a so much an ideology of the superiority of a “homogeneous” race as it is a kind of Hegelian sublimation of racist ideology and its reinvention.

Like the ideologies of race that Arendt discusses, the theory of the Cosmic Race purports to be a theory of history and of the decline and fall of civilizations, but whereas the typical ideology makes the mixture of races the cause of the sterility, sickness, and decline of civilizations, Vasconcelos argues it is exactly the opposite. It is the mixing of races that avoids the inbreeding which ultimately leads to their decline. Thus, it is not in the purity of race that one finds strength, but just as with the alloying of metal, it is through the mixing of races, in proper proportion, that a stronger stock is produced (Jose Vasconcelos, **CR**,). Just as the alloy, Bronze, is a stronger metal than its constituent components, copper and tin, so too the *meztizaje* joining of the Spanish and Indian races produces a union superior to the homogeneous, European, “melting pot” races in North America.

Vasconcelos argues that the comparatively slow development of the sciences and material cultures of Latin America is not due to any inherent deficiency in the indigenous “alloy” races. In fact, there is a simple *scientific test* that the Bronze Race is superior to all others: “[A]ny teacher can corroborate that the children and youth descendant from Scandinavians, Dutch, and English found in North American universities, are much slower, and almost dull, compared with the *mestizo* children and youth from the south” (Vasconcelos, **CR**, 32-33). The reason for the comparatively delayed development of material

civilization in Latin America must, therefore, be sought elsewhere: in the intentionally rapacious policy of divisiveness perpetuated by especially North Americans against the nations to the south and the fact that mixed races require a longer period to alloy their cultures.

Vasconcelos proposes a two-fold synchronism for gauging human development: the ages of the five races and the law of the three social stages. The ages of the races correspond to Vasconcelos' list of great civilizations: (1) Lemuria (Black), (2) Atlantis (Indian), (3) China (Mongol), and (4) the Western Empires (White). The fifth civilization will be that of the Bronze or Cosmic Race, the coming alloy race. Since two of these civilizations are mythical and have no historical basis, his racial theory of civilizations is hardly worthy of serious consideration.

His theory of three social stages is more interesting. Corresponding to the five civilizations is a three-fold development of consciousness. The first of these stages is the material or warlike (in which the principles of social cohesion are might and force), the second is the intellectual or political (in which the principles of social cohesion are logic and law), and the third is the aesthetic or spiritual (in which the principles of social cohesion are imagination and inspiration). The first two of these stages corresponds to the four first races; it is only with the arrival of the Bronze Race that the aesthetic or spiritual will be ushered in and only then will the alloying process, which has already begun, be complete. With the arrival of the Bronze Race a new golden age will appear, one in which meaning will be sought "not in pitiful reason" but in "creative feeling and convincing beauty." Norms will emerge by fantasy, not on the basis of tangible results, or on the basis of the rules of pure reason. Humans will live "beyond good and evil, in a world of aesthetic *pathos*" (Vasconcelos, **CR**, 29). Humankind's only imperative will be to follow "the path of taste," "to do our whim, not our duty," "to live joy grounded in love" (Vasconcelos, **CR**, 29). What will ultimately result is a eugenics based on aesthetics which will select for the most comely characteristics present in all races, so that only the most beautiful aesthetes will be born (**CR**, 30). All crudities will be bred out of the human race.

Needless to say, against the ideal of the Cosmic Race, the White North American comes off rather badly: s/he is materialistic, acquisitive, pragmatic, excessively logical, spiritually stunted, and dull. The balm and consolation for the Bronze Race is that the time of the White Race is ending. The future belongs to the Cosmic Race, a race that represents a quantum leap in its beauty, humanity, spiritual awareness, and happiness. “Poverty, defective education, the scarcity of beautiful types, the misery that makes people ugly, all those calamities will disappear from the future social stage” (CR, 30).

Though these eschatological prognostications have a wearily familiar ring about them, their utopian hopefulness is a part of their appeal to the proponents of *Chicanismo*. Because it promises an alienated people that their time has come, that they are the wave and vanguard of the future, they accept that it is their racial mission to make *Aztlán* here on earth. Despite Vasconcelos’ new sublimation of racial philosophy, his philosophy possesses many of the features of tribal and racist (and even continental imperialist) ideologies of the 19th CE that Arendt identified in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. What is, perhaps, so disheartening, here, is how Vasconcelos’ theory is just another illustration of how racial and tribal ideologies—in offering a key to the rise and fall of civilizations—always result in a repetition of past empty promises.

5. THE BROADER IDEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF AZLÁND’S APPROPRIATION: THE IDEOLOGY OF CHICANISMO AS THE ANTITHETIC DOUBLE OF USA EXCEPTIONALISM

There are many passages in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where Hannah Arendt signals her awareness of the mimetic nature of the construction of ideologies, particularly when those ideologies are species of tribalism or racism or forms of nationalism based in either. Arendt does not provide a theory for this imitation, but she is aware it and is based in envy, resentment, and a desire to claim for oneself the best features that *other* peoples claim for *themselves*, especially when the claim made devolves to a feature that one supposedly possesses as a part of one’s nature.

It seems to me that Girardian theory is particularly fit to fill in this deficiency in Arendt's analysis.²² Girard's understanding of the imitative competition between individuals is not only an answer to why racist and tribalist ideologies seem to pitch themselves directly against ideologies of similar kind (such as Judaism)—these competitions being symmetric and immanently mimetic, their object being the recognition of exactly the same unique claims—but it is also an answer to how diffuse and disorganized ideologies (like *Chicanismo*) can be shown to have a latent structure. I would argue that *Chicanismo*, in fact, is an example of an ideology that is in antithetic mimetic competition with a double, and its double responds in kind. I suggest that the antithetic mimetic double of *Chicanismo* is the cloud of *not entirely consistent* ideologemes called *American Exceptionalism*. In making this claim, I am not asserting that the influence operates unidirectionally—so that American Exceptionalism negatively determines *Chicanismo*—because there are features definitive of *Chicano* culture which precede its rivalry with AE. But I am maintaining that the features of *Chicanismo* ideology have been organized by this interaction. American Exceptionalism, too, has been influenced and organized by *Chicanismo*, but to a lesser extent, owing to the power of AE and the relatively short time that *Chicanismo* has been on the political scene in the United States. This dynamic will most certainly change in the coming century, and it is a reasonable assumption, I think, that the effect of *Chicanismo* on American Exceptionalism will dramatically increase.

It is this antithetic mimetic rivalry that provides the wider frame in which the myth of *Aztlán* and the racial-centric idea of the Bronze Race takes on additional meaning.

In the chart that follows, what I have done is to summarize in tabular fashion a series of descriptors which single out the ideologemes of *Chicanismo* and American Exceptionalism. I should explain, however, that this construct was designed more from the outsiders' perspective as it is reported by a series of writers within Latin America, writers whose works have formed the canon for *Chicano* intellectuals, a series of writers including José Martí, José Enrique Rodó, José Vasconcelos, Octavio Paz, Samuel Ramos, and a number of the *Chicano*

²² Please see the attached appendix for an explanation of how Girardian theory construes this rivalry.

historians whose works appear in the bibliography of this paper. What I have arranged, then, is a tableau of the traits of AE which may not correspond to the perception of the subjects holding to it. On the other hand, the tableau of idiologemes for *Chicanismo* comes from almost exclusively from *Chicano* and Hispanic writers. Ideally, and corresponding to the Girardian understanding of how *mimēsis* distorts our understanding of the doubled-other, it would also be good to devise another tableau, one which would portray the American Exceptionalist view and its perspectives of *Chicanismo*.

However, one cannot do everything, and I have already spoken too long.

One other point—a few of the cells on the chart indicate the mythological or racial narratives that contribute to particular idiologemes.

Thank you for your patience.

Tableau of Antithetic Ideologemes in *Chicanismo* and American Exceptionalism

OTHER NARRATIVE FRAMES	CHICANISMO	IDEOLOGY OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM	OTHER NARRATIVE FRAMES
	Assimilationist	Conquest and Subdue or Isolate	
	Third-party Alternative	Two-party System (Dictatorship)	
	Communal Values	Rugged Individualism	
	Organic Participation of the Subject	Atomization of the Subject	
	Extended Family	Nuclear Family	
Mythology of <i>Aztlán</i>	Primordial Claim	Manifest Destiny	
	Agrarian	Industrialist	
	Traditionalist	Pragmatist	
	Art/Craftsmanship	Science/Technology	
Rodó's <i>Ariel</i> Vasconcelos' <i>Cosmic Race</i>	Aesthetic Faculty	Instrumental Reason	
Eschatology of the Return to Canaan (Dual Exodus/Exile Story) Mythology of <i>Aztlán</i>	The Southwest = "A Return to <i>Aztlán</i> "	America = the Building of the "New Zion"	Eschatology of Building the Kingdom of God (New Jerusalem)
	Conservationist	Acquisitive	
	Marxist/Socialist	Capitalist	
	Introvert	Extrovert	
	Desire to be Left Alone, to be Left Unmolested	Desire to be Liked/Admired by Others	
	A People Defined by Multi-Racial Constitution	A People Defined by a Constitution of Law	
	<i>Chicano</i> Utopia	"Shining City on a Hill"	
<i>The Cosmic Race</i> of Vasconcelos	<i>Aztlán</i> , the Alloy Nation of the Cosmic/Bronze Race	America, the "Melting Pot" of White Races	

	The Promise of the Future	An Empire of the Past	
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APPENDIX: A SKETCH OF GIRARD'S THEORY OF MIMETIC COMPETITION:

The premise of Girard's topology of desire is that objects of desire are not radically or freely chosen (in most cases) but are chosen imitatively in relation to a model or mediator of that desire (Girard, *DDN*, [1965] 1976, p.p 1-2). In other words, "In the birth of desire, the third person is always present" (*Ibid.*, p. 21). All "[s]ubjectivisms, romanticisms and realisms, individualisms and scientisms, idealisms and positivisms appear to be in opposition but are secretly in agreement to conceal the presence of the mediator. All these dogmas are the aesthetic or philosophic translation of worldviews peculiar to internal mediation. They all depend directly

or indirectly on the lie of spontaneous desire. They all defend the same illusion of autonomy to which modern man is passionately devoted" (Ibid., p. 16). Humans do not possess the freedom to refrain from choosing a model. The only true freedom, according to Girard, "always involves choosing a model, and true freedom lies in the basic choice between a human or a divine mode" (Ibid., p. 58).

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Girard thinks that the mediation of desire can be schematized as follows: if the line of desire is depicted as a line connecting subject and object, then there is always a third that stands above this line "radiating [relations] toward both the subject and object" (Ibid., p. 2). The described triangle is "intersubjective" and "cannot be localized anywhere; the triangle has no reality whatever; it is a systematic metaphor, systematically pursued" (Ibid.). The triangularity of desire models a class of structures which do not operate mechanically but allude to the mystery of human relations, relations which have a logic and "which may be "systematized, [but only] up to a point" (Ibid., p. 3). This can be represented in the following diagram:



Girard recognizes a relative distantiation between the mediators of desire and the desiring subject, so that beyond a certain limit the mediator may be considered "beyond the universe" or *external* (I would say transcendental) or "within the same universe" or *internal* (I would say immanent) (Ibid., p. 9). Here, the space spanned in the distance that separates subject from mediator is not physical space, but spiritual space (Ibid.). External (or transcendental) mediation presupposes a great enough social or ontological distance between subject and mediator to eliminate any contact between the "sphere of *possibilities* of which the mediator and subject occupy the respective centers," while internal (or immanent mediation) presupposes the social or ontological distance between subject and mediator "is sufficiently reduced to allow these two spheres to penetrate each other more or less profoundly" (Ibid., p. 9). When the distance from the mediator is great, then no rivalry between subject and mediator is possible, and harmony between the two can be near perfect and the subject unabashedly "proclaims .. the true [that is derivative] nature of his desire" (Ibid.). This is also frequently accompanied by the veritable worship of the mediator as an idol. When transcendental mediation takes as its appropriate model of imitation God—non-idolatrously understood—then it takes an appropriate model of transcendent mimesis. On the other hand, when this model idolatrously constructs the divine or divinizes the human, then it becomes an example of *deviated transcendency*.

For internal mediation, on the other hand, "imitation is less strict and literal" just because the model is "close," but also because the subject of internal mediation tries to hide that imitation (Ibid. p. 10). Though the "impulse toward the object is ultimately an impulse toward the mediator ..., in internal mediation this impulse is checked by the mediator himself since he desires, or ... possesses the object" (Ibid., p. 10). Here, projection determines that the subject will view the mediator with rancor because the subject interprets every action on the part of the mediator as a stratagem or obstacle intentionally put in his path (Ibid.). The subject is torn between two emotions toward his model: "the most submissive reverence and the most intense malice" (Ibid.).²³ This allows the subject to deceive him/herself. The subject hides secret admiration in his/her hatred

²³ As Girard puts it: "Only some one who prevents us from satisfying a desire which he himself has inspired in us is truly and object of hatred." Rene Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. Yvonne Preccero, Trans. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976, pp. 10-11.

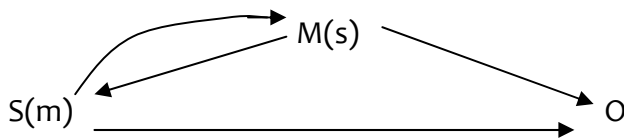
for the model and his/her reduction of the model to a depersonalized obstacle. Psychologically, the subject reverses the true chronological and logical order of desire to deceive him/herself into thinking that his/her desire was first and the mediator is the one engaged in imitation (Ibid., pp. 10-11).

Girard sees his essential universalization of these phenomena supported both by the Schelerian analysis of *ressentiment* and by his own analyses of envy, jealousy, vanity, snobbism, etc. (Ibid., pp. 11-12; 15-20). Each of these intentionalities distorts its object *noematically* inasmuch as the qualities of the object of desire are perceived through the intentional lens (*noesis*) of the emotion or conation connected with internal mediation (Ibid., p. 19).

The idolizing of the mediator or object of desire is an effect of a metaphysical revulsion with one's own being. Girard is not criticizing the profound wish to commune with the other but the thirst to absorb it or be absorbed in the being of the other. This desire to be consumed by or to consume the other issues from a self-loathing which is the result of the anxiety in the face of the displacement of God. "God is dead; man must take his place" (Ibid., p. 56). Faced with this substitution—but nevertheless taking up the impossible burden of "metaphysical autonomy"—the subject measures its impossibility in the distance between its "marvelous promise" and "the brutal disappointment" of its ever being accomplished (Ibid.) The impossible attempt to realize this substitution constitutes one of the tragic repetitions of modern humankind: we individually experience the futility of the Sisyphean challenge, but mimetically continue to push the boulder up the gradient. Caught in the maw of the metaphysical abyss that the death of God opens, contemporary humans seek this radical autonomy in themselves, their human models, or in their objects. This is what constitutes deviated transcendency..

However, because this deviated transcendency cannot truly be a substitute for the divine, the model quickly shows his/her clay feet and the subject is off on the search for another mediator. This repeated search and frustration has an accelerating effect which reduces the duration of the cycle and increases the number of alternative mediators. The result is that the personality of subject which is correlative to the desires of its mediators becomes fragmented and atomized. The subject now becomes poly-subjective; s/he is no longer a "unified being" (Ibid., pp. 93-94).

In internal (immanent) mediation, the intensification of desire occurs when the mediator and subject are drawn close together. Girard claims that desire then becomes viral, that it is then possible for one to catch a desire like a contagion (Ibid., p. 99). "In the world on internal mediation, the contagion is so widespread that everyone can become his neighbor's mediator without ever understanding the role he is playing" (Ibid., p. 99). When this happens, it is as though the two triangles of desire are superimposed. This can be graphically represented as:



Here, "[d]esire circulates between the two rivals more and more quickly, and with every cycle it increases in intensity like the electric current in a battery that is being charged" (Ibid.). Here, the relationship between disciple and model is symmetric and the competition for the object is intense and empty. The competition takes the foreground in rivalry for the object and the object becomes incidental to it. This is reciprocal mediation. In it, the metamorphosis of the object is fantastic and "common to both partners" (Ibid., pp. 100-101). "In double mediation it is [no longer] ... that one wants the object [per se] but that one does not want to see it in someone else's hands" (Ibid., p. 102). As this contagion spreads, and reciprocal mediators multiply, illusions about the objects of desire increase and competition becomes evermore-fierce (Ibid., p. 104).