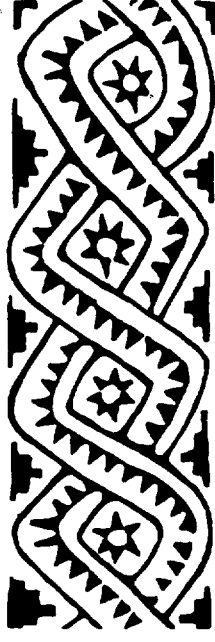


The Aztec Palimpsest



Mexico in the Modern Imagination

DANIEL COOPER ALARCÓN

5/2/15
15
1269
1227
15
547

The University of Arizona Press • Tucson

Introduction

While Cortés was at Coyoacán, he lodged in a palace with whitewashed walls on which it was easy to write with charcoal and ink, and every morning malicious remarks appeared, some in verse and some in prose, in the manner of lampoons. . . . As Cortés himself was something of a poet, he prided himself on composing answers, which tended to praise his own great deeds. . . . But the couplets and sentences they scrawled up became every day more scurrilous, until in the end Cortés wrote: "A blank wall is a fool's writing paper." And next morning someone added: "A wise man's too, who knows the truth . . ."

—Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*

*

The events described in the story above, generated by suspicion among Cortés's men that he had cheated them of their share of Aztec gold, are emblematic of several points I wish to develop in this book. First, the old adage that history is written by the conquerors is complicated here by a lack of consensus among them, thus the competing versions of history presented in the anecdote make the rejoinder "who knows the truth . . ." a problematic statement at best and point toward common (mis)perceptions about distinctions between history and myth, and history and literature. Second, we can also read this story as a dominant history being challenged by those in a lesser position of power (i.e., Cortés's men) and, as such, as an example of counterhegemonic discourse, reminding us that challenges to hegemony often require some degree of privileged agency.¹ Finally, the whitewashed walls on which the texts can easily be inscribed and written over clearly demonstrate that histories, although their authors may try very

hard to present them as monolithic, pristine texts, never emerge on a "blank wall" or *tabula rasa*. Díaz's history, like the wall he describes, is a complicated palimpsest, a site where texts have been superimposed onto others in an attempt to displace earlier or competing histories.² Significantly, such displacement is never total; the suppressed material often remains legible, however faintly, challenging the dominant text with an alternate version of events. Even when erasure appears total, important evidence of the textual removal remains that should prompt us to view the dominant discourse in a critical light, just as the walls of the Aztec palace transformed by the conquistadors into a blank slate remain a crucial marker of a silenced indigenous presence and suggest a ubiquitous but hidden wealth that generates the Spanish texts superimposed on them.

This process of erasure and superimposition resulting in a tangle of contentious and sometimes contradictory texts is characteristic of the production of Mexicanness, the object of this study. I begin with the premise that "Mexico" is a concept encompassing a broad geographic, social, and cultural terrain in historical flux, a concept that is as much the product of a complex network of discourses as it is a physical place.³ Moreover, I believe that examination of these discourses (specifically, historiography, nationalist rhetoric, literature, literary criticism, and tourist propaganda) reveals an intense degree of interest as to how "Mexico" is defined and represented, not only by Mexicans themselves, but also by different ethnic and cultural groups in the United States and, to a lesser extent, Great Britain.⁴ Not surprisingly, my notion that Mexicanness is produced through interdependent discourses manipulated in part by hegemonic groups has been strongly influenced by the work of Edward Said, in particular those theories put forward in *Orientalism* (1978). Building on the work of Michel Foucault, Said set out to show that discursive representation and political and economic domination over groups different from one's own are intimately linked. More important, he demonstrated that the long-standing treatment of discursive

representation as inherently separate from social institutions and material reality is one of the central pillars supporting such domination. It is difficult to overstate the importance of Said's contribution. As José Rabasa puts it: "Orientalism [i.e., colonialism understood as a form of discourse] suggests a whole set of questions that point to how Europe systematically produced large portions of the non-European world, in our case the New World, through political, military, ideological, scientific, and imaginative kinds of writing and imagery" (*Inventing America* 10).

Thus, one of the goals of this study is to scrutinize the systematic production of Mexicanness in various discourses in order to reveal and understand the economic, social, and political interests driving it. Moreover, I seek to correct the erroneous but common assumption that Mexicanness is produced only by dominant or hegemonic groups. Here I have found it useful to apply Mary Louise Pratt's conceptualization of *transculturation*. The term implies a cultural interaction that forces us to consider the important role played by marginal or colonized peoples in the production of discourses about them. To quote Pratt: "Ethnographers have used this term to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture. While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own and what they use it for" (*Imperial Eyes* 6).⁵ But while it's important to recognize that marginalized groups may oppose, acquiesce to, or even collaborate with the institutionally driven production of their "selves" by hegemonic groups, we need to go a step further and remember that, as in a palimpsest, an indigenous discourse precedes those (super)imposed on it, one that is never completely erased. Therefore, the types of Mexicanness produced by Mexicans and Mexican Americans occupy crucial sites of analysis in this study and are situated against one another in ways that reveal neglected areas of inquiry: for example, the disturbing parallels between many Chicano configurations of

Mexico and their Anglo counterparts, and the relationship between Mexicaness and tourism as a form of neocolonialism actively promoted by Mexicans themselves.

To return to my original premise, it is possible to speak of two networks here: a discursive network producing Mexicaness, and a network of divergent interests seeking to manipulate that discursive network. In order to examine how the different social groups comprising the network of interests manage the discursive network for specific political agendas, I offer the palimpsest as a theoretical paradigm through which the construction and representation of cultural identity can be foregrounded as an object of study. As already noted, a palimpsest is a site where a text has been erased (often incompletely) in order to accommodate a new one, and it is this unique structure of competing yet interwoven narratives that changes the way we think of cultural identity and its representation, as well as enabling an examination of history, cultural identity, ethnicity, literature, and politics *in relationship to each other*, providing a new vantage point on the relationship of the United States and Mexico at a time when these two nations are more intimately linked than ever.

The examination of the production and utility of Mexicaness has proven to be a challenging project, particularly in terms of coverage, and I have limited the scope of my investigation to three specific areas of inquiry that are interconnected in significant ways but have received little cross-disciplinary scrutiny: Chicano nationalism, English-language literature about Mexico (focusing on prose), and Mexican touristic discourse. While there have been excellent studies within each of these three principal areas of investigation, historically they have been treated as isolated topics. By examining them in relation to one another, as I do here, we see how these three discourses are inextricably bound together and how a critical approach that treats them as a network is crucial to understanding their wide-ranging social implications. In the following paragraphs I outline my investigation

and elaborate on the problems in existing scholarship that it addresses and seeks to correct.

Significantly, each of the three discourses produces Mexicaness for a non-Mexican audience, most often one in the United States. Part I examines the relationship between Mesoamerican histories, Mexicaness, and Chicano nationalism. More specifically, it examines the ways in which the historical production and revision of the Mesoamerican myth of Aztlán proved useful to the architects of Chicano nationalism during the heyday of the Chicano movement, but then paradoxically helped to fragment the movement soon after its period of greatest success.⁶ In this section we see the vital role that the creation of a paradisaical Mexican space played in both Aztec empire building and Chicano civil rights struggles; but more important, we see how a lack of attention to the palimpsestic historical production of the Aztlán narrative has contributed to misconceptions about the nature of Mesoamerican histories and Chicano cultural identity. Until very recently, it was rare for Chicano studies scholars to criticize Chicano nationalism or the Mexicaness it produced as a means of legitimating Chicano presence in the United States. Building on the important work of Angie Chabram, Rosa Linda Fregoso, J. Jorge Klor de Alva, and Alex Saragoza, I demonstrate how one of the unfortunate consequences of this unquestioning allegiance to Chicano nationalism has been the lack of a critical paradigm for Chicano cultural identity that can accommodate *intracultural* differences. Moreover, I show that by familiarizing ourselves with the historical production of the Aztlán narrative prior to its appropriation by Chicano nationalists, we witness a demonstration of a theoretical model that not only can accommodate intracultural differences but is also capable of responding to the provincial and rapidly shifting nature of cultural identities. Furthermore, this model enables us to read in new and provocative ways the colonial discourse that shaped the production of Mexicaness, as I demonstrated above in my reading of the story of Cortés

at Coyoacán. In short, the palimpsest becomes a valuable tool for identifying attempts to revise and control Mexican myth, history, and culture, as well as a viable model for understanding Chicano cultural identity. Perhaps most important, however, part I details the intricate relationship between historical inquiry, historiography, and cultural nationalism, a relationship that demands a paradigm like the palimpsest that can accommodate interwoven narratives.

We can similarly apply the insights of critical studies of colonialism and theories of the Other to the production of Mexican-ness in English-language literature, a field that has received little scholarly attention and none at all through these important theoretical lenses. Thus part 2 of this book considers the production of Mexican-ness by Anglo and Chicano writers in terms of recent critical thinking on discursive representation. Furthermore, despite the pioneering work of Cecil Robinson, Benjamin Keen, Ronald Walker, and Drew Wayne Gunn, there exists a considerable body of literature produced by Anglo writers since 1980 that has received no attention in terms of the production of Mexican-ness and which I examine closely because it raises important questions about the relationship of postmodernism and cross-cultural writing.⁷ In terms of the Chicano literary tradition, scholars have consistently focused on the ways Chicano literature produces Mexican-ness in order to solidify a Chicano identity, while neglecting the potentially negative impact of such production on Mexicans and Mexican culture, another problem addressed here.

Just as Aztlán emerged from Chicano nationalist discourse as a crucial imaginary Mexican space, so too do these distinct literary traditions construct other influential Mexican myths, most notably the myth of Mexico as Infernal Paradise (a phrase coined in 1946 by Malcolm Lowry, whose novel *Under the Volcano* [1947] occupies a prominent place in this literary tradition and has been extremely influential in the development of the Infernal Paradise myth). I examine recurrent figures, tropes, and representations (e.g., the frequent insistence that Mexico is "timeless") and their

evolution in order to consider their wider social implications and to read them as clues to the political agendas they support. For example, I contend that the rise of Manifest Destiny in the United States and that country's subsequent imperial thrusts into Mexico were to a certain extent encouraged and made possible by the literature in this tradition. This relationship is clearly visible in Richard Henry Dana's 1840 memoir, *Two Years before the Mast*, one of the most popular American texts of the nineteenth century. In it, Dana represents Mexican territory in attractive terms (focusing on its wealth of natural, exploitable resources) while representing the Mexicans in pejorative ones (lazy, slow-witted, lascivious—in short, undeserving of such wealth).

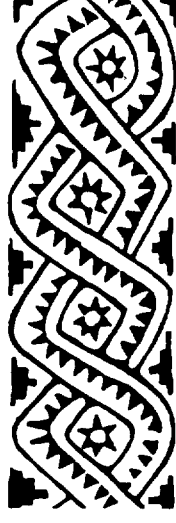
Or, to give a more contemporary example, if timelessness becomes part of a Mexican mystique through its historical inscription in English-language literature and subsequently becomes a quality actively searched for by tourists visiting Mexico, we are confronted with the paradox articulated by Linda K. Richter: namely, that serious social problems in Mexico remain untended because they have become part of the "authentic" Mexicaness the tourist pays to see. My approach is to challenge the assumptions of the texts supporting these myths, to disrupt them and ask questions of them they prefer not to address. I argue that rather than give us a set of "truths" about Mexico, the texts provide us with both comforting and frightening fictions that serve a number of different political and economic purposes. In these middle chapters, the interconnectedness of the three principal areas of investigation becomes clear: not only is the Infernal Paradise gradually invested with a liberating mystique similar to that attributed by Chicano nationalists to Aztlán, but a devotion to Aztlán encourages some Chicano authors to reinscribe Mexico as Infernal Paradise and to reproduce other troubling forms of Mexicaness.

This interdependence is also central to the book's third and final part, which examines how the kinds of Mexican-ness produced by Anglo and Chicano writers have been put into the service of

the Mexican tourist industry. Fascinating problems abound here, particularly in terms of transculturation: economic incentives encourage the reinscription of Mexican stereotypes by Mexicans themselves, who dramatize and perform popular narratives for the tourist; tourist advertisements and propaganda seek to ground an "authentic" Mexicanness in reality, while Mexican communities revise their collective sense of themselves in response. Part 3 both documents these phenomena and discusses their far-reaching implications.

To sum up, this study amplifies and extends the small number of existing analyses of Mexicanness into new theoretical realms, examining the relationship of the different discursive traditions surrounding Mexico to systems of power. It tracks and delineates the markedly interdependent and systematic historical production of Mexicanness in a variety of discourses, and locates them in relation to one another, correcting the prevailing tendency to treat them as isolated topics. I also seek to challenge the notion that the Mexicanness produced by Chicanos and Mexicans is inherently unproblematic. Thus, the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approach employed here distinguishes this study from previous scholarly work. Perhaps most important, this study shows how the Mexicanness produced by different discourses has been used by the Mexican tourist industry in ways that clearly illustrate the dangerous repercussions of the myth that reality exists independently of its discursive representations.

Part One



Chicano Nationalism and Mexicanness

using the palimpsest as a theoretical model foregrounds cultural identity as an object of study and insists on an understanding of cultural identity as fluid and provisional, thereby resisting monolithic conceptualizations of cultural identity and providing space for intracultural differences.

Notes

Introduction

1. I'm indebted to Stephanie Athey, Stetson University, for the latter observation.
2. From the Greek *palimpsestos*, literally, "scraped again."
3. Whenever I use the term *discourse* in this study I mean specifically a semiotic system that is inextricably bound up with a broad array of social institutions that govern the distribution of power within that society.
4. To this point I have placed the term *Mexico* within quotation marks to indicate that it is something more than a geographic or political entity, a convention I will now drop for readability even though I continue to connote its status as discursive construct. When I need to make this status explicit I will do so with the term *Mexicanness*.
5. Pratt notes that the term was first coined by Fernando Ortiz in a 1947 study of Afro-Cuban culture (228, n. 4). I would add that her discussion of how marginalized groups respond to domination bears remarkable similarities to Michel de Certeau's ideas of oppositional tactics articulated in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Stephen F. Rendall.
6. Aztlán was the Aztecs' mythical, paradisaal homeland. I discuss its evolution and political uses extensively in chapter 1. As for the Chicano movement (a.k.a. the Chicano Power movement, the Chicano nationalist movement, and el Movimiento), scholars disagree as to its precise chronology, but I have (generously) fixed its boundaries at 1965 and 1975. The best history of the movement is still *Youth, Identity, Power*, by Carlos Muñoz, Jr.
7. I owe a tremendous debt to each of these authors: Robinson for breaking new scholarly ground; Keen for his masterful discussion of how the representation of Aztec culture by Mexicans as well as non-

Mexicans responded to and influenced important political and philosophical movements; Walker for identifying the prominence and importance of the Infernal Paradise trope, as well as for excellent discussions of the English modernists; and Gunn for his thorough and precise history of the literary tradition. See Cecil Robinson, *With the Ears of Strangers*; Benjamin Keen, *The Aztec Image in Western Thought*; Ronald Walker, *Infernal Paradise: Mexico and the Modern English Novel*; and Drewrey Wayne Gunn, *American and British Writers in Mexico, 1556-1973*.

Chapter 1. Toward a New Understanding of Aztlán and Chicano Cultural Identity

1. Several theorists have been instrumental in helping me conceive of the palimpsest as a useful analytical tool and a theoretical trope. José Rabasa's and David Carrasco's work on Mesoamerican history, Sandra Messinger Cypess's exploration of la Malinche, Annette Kolodny's proposal for a new approach to American literary history, and Michel de Certeau's examination of oppositional practices all use the palimpsest to vividly convey the complicated nature of their areas of inquiry. See José Rabasa, *Inventing America: Spanish Historiography and the Irony of Empire: of Eurocentrism*; David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition*; Sandra Messinger Cypess, *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth*; Annette Kolodny, "Letting Go Our Grand Obsessions: Notes toward a New Literary History of the American Frontiers"; and Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

2. Not initially!

3. Padilla is drawing on the work of Franz Fanon. See Genaro M. Padilla, "Myth and Comparative Cultural Nationalism: The Ideological Uses of Aztlán"; for Anzaldúa's position, see Patti Blanco, "Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa."

4. See, for example, Enrique Florescano, *Memoria mexicana and El nuevo pasado mexicano*; and Susan D. Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexica History*.

5. By Eurocentric, I mean the common tendency to study Mesoamerican cultures with the goal of explaining the Spanish Conquest (as, e.g., in

the work of Octavio Paz and Tzvetan Todorov). The inevitable result of these studies obsessed with the Conquest is to portray all of the Mesoamerican cultures as inferior, the product of a people destined to be conquered. See Paz, *The Other Mexico*; and Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*.

6. I thank Larry Evers, University of Arizona, for suggesting this observation to me.

7. See, for example, Mario Barrera, *Beyond Aztlán: Ethnic Autonomy in Comparative Perspective* 3-44.

8. For another example of a failed attempt to define Chicano ethnicity based on commonalities, see Alice H. Reich, *The Cultural Construction of Ethnicity: Chicanos in the University*.

9. "Indeed, a crucial but neglected area of research is the historical geography of the Chicano population" (Saragoza 45). Sergio D. Elizondo and Gilberto Cardenas also criticize the southwestern focus; see Elizondo, "ABC: Aztlán, the Borderlands, and Chicago"; and Cardenas, "Who Are the Midwestern Chicanos: Implications for Chicano Studies."

10. Alarcón points toward further investigation of this interrelationship when she comments, "It must be noted, however, that each woman of color cited here, even in her positing of a 'plurality of self,' is already privileged enough to reach the moment of cognition of a situation for herself. This should suggest that to privilege the subject, even if multiple-voiced, is not enough" (Alarcón, "The Theoretical Subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-American Feminism" 366).

11. It is interesting to note the ironic reversal of the controversial theory that the Aztecs believed Cortés to be Quetzalcoatl in Durán's belief that the Mesoamerican culture hero was really Saint Thomas. Nor was Durán the only Spaniard to believe that an early Christian missionary had come to the New World. This is a point often missed by those who suggest that the Aztecs' concern for prophecies was a unique cultural attribute that facilitated the Conquest. See Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden, "Fray Diego Durán: His Life and Works" 23-31.

12. There were other reasons, to be sure, including Europeans' intense curiosity about the New World. For a fuller discussion of the motives behind these historical recovery efforts, see Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire* 15.

13. Jorge Klor de Alva argues that because of the dialogical methods