

***Creating Aztlán: Chicano Art, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Lowriding Across Turtle Island.* Dylan A. T. Miner. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014. 288 pp.\***

Reviewed by Ben Chappell

*Creating Aztlán* is a highly ambitious and sometimes mystifying book. The text mixes genres, moving from artist statement, theoretical manifesto, historical survey and literature review, to art criticism. The result raises numerous questions with potential to illuminate identity, politics, and aesthetic representation in the Americas. Yet some of the richest possible contributions end up getting downplayed, if not buried, in favor of the primary theoretical intervention the author seems to want to make instead, which is to situate Mexican American identity as indigenous sovereignty.

A quotation from Cherrié Moraga in the second chapter could serve as a motto for the project: “let us retain our radical naming but expand it to meet a broader and wider revolution” (80). Building on a critical engagement with cultural nationalism, the “broader and wider” move for Miner is to develop a more open conceptual apparatus, suitable to a kind of multiplicity and heterogeneity in which one group can claim indigeneity without detracting from prior claims of others. This gesture towards an expansive, experimental imagination is what reminds me of an artist statement, and it is sometimes inspiring. But far more ink is devoted to a more conventional “this, not that” rhetoric, or to asserting conceptual positions without going into their material consequences. For instance, Miner is clear on his view that the concept of indigeneity delivers autonomy, while *mestizaje* as an alternative is irretrievably entangled in the aims and interests of the settler state. The basis for this distinction is less clear. By calling “the people generally known as Chicanos or Mexican Americans” (221) “indigenous Xicanos,” Miner seeks to liberate this identity from definitions that serve settler colonialism, emphasizing the autonomy of oppressed people to name and define themselves. Thus, “indigenous” here works to subvert other terms, most obviously “immigrant,” “alien,” or others he does not mention, such as “minority.” There are advantages to this move, but it also raises problems. First, it is not clear that a relation to the state can be transcended by naming it away. To define a group as “Chicanos or Mexican Americans” is to do so in relation to the U.S. state and its citizenship. Secondly, to assert the indigeneity of Xicanos (following Miner’s stated practice of retaining the masculine form for general reference), Miner sometimes moves seamlessly between Mexica history or cultural narrative and references to “detribalization.” How, I wonder, do those Mexican Americans who know their families to be Yacqui or Purépecha respond to Miner’s definition of Xicanos as a “detribalized” people?

Late in the text, Miner draws a distinction between indigenist tropes and language such as those used to great impact by Gloria Anzaldúa, and notions of indigeneity that are produced out of active dialogue with tribal epistemologies and ontologies. I would suggest his text could also benefit from more of the same. Though Miner’s (Métis) Native status matters as part of this dialogue, his assertion that Xicano indigeneity poses no threat to those who have been previously

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recognized as indigenous is not quite convincing, since there is no account of how anyone responds to these political and artistic moves. While reception is not the focus of the project, Miner does reference Louis Riel's notion of artists as those who "give spirit back to [their] people" (75) which places art in a transactional, dialogic frame. How, then, do people receive these gifts?

The book is strongest when Miner, an art historian, recounts episodes from the history of indigenist claims in the Chicana/o movement, and when he presents specific artworks: the collaborative piece bearing the slogan "Iraq is Aztlán" is one particularly compelling example that could have fueled more extensive discussion. The displacement of Aztlán to another continent, presumably tied to Turtle Island by the common injuries of U.S. imperialism, presents the conundrum of a concept of indigeneity that prioritizes land but is not restricted to particular territory. Thus the artworks and stories of their production lend some material specificity to ideas such as the Xicano homeland Aztlán being a "multivalent chronotope" (68) that nonetheless "continually evades" cartographic knowledge (69). To make sense of this readers would benefit from more information on how such concepts are practiced and lived outside the gallery. Likewise, lowriding serves as a key trope in the title and frames several chapters, yet it is never discussed in terms of its own rich history as a popular aesthetic practice of vehicle customization, only very generally as a mode of movement (characterized mainly as being slow). As Miner equates lowriding variously with migration, diaspora, nomadism, zapatismo, and other ideas, the term comes off as a rhetorical gadget, rather than a subject worthy of contemplation and curiosity.

The book never claims to be an ethnography of the issues and phenomena it addresses. Still, Miner's interventions into "naming" Xicanos are bound to incite vigorous debates, so it calls for attention to voices that are not heard here. One of the most intriguing threads Miner introduces concerns "la otra frontera," or the U.S.-Canadian border, and he observes that this arbitrary line crossed Native people just as Chicana/os have claimed "the border crossed us." Exploring how people receive the idea that differently located experiences can be collapsed into expansive versions of the "indigenous" or "borderlands" would be an exciting project. *Creating Aztlán* may well inspire such work, perhaps by provoking other writers to argue with its claims.

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