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Podcast

Transcripts

Welcome to Chicana Feminism Theory, I am your host Javier Hernandez. On today's episode we will be covering the topic of Aztlán and indigeneity as situated in early Chicano nationalist movements to the re-articulation of both concepts in the theories of Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. To begin, I would like to talk about my own experience and relationship to those two ideas. As a self-identified Chicano, I have been interested in the idea of Aztlán as it has always seemed to represent something radical and something that belonged to us, it was and still is a countercultural idea that seemed to challenge Anglo-hegemony in the United States. I grew up listening to Chicano Rap like Kinto Sol, for example, that often talked about our indigenous identity as Mexicans usually focusing heavily on "Aztec culture" or even when I watched films like "Blood in Blood Out" or "Mi Familia" being exposed to Chicano iconography that drew heavily from Aztec imagery, and I felt linked to an indigenous past. I was enamored by the idea of an Aztec utopia that was out-side the bounds of an oppressive Anglo-U.S., which is exemplified in Aztlán. I've always found it difficult finding my own identity, I have often wondered if I should identify with my colonial ancestors and my Spanish blood or my indigenous side, which I know almost nothing about except for a few rumors from my dad and other family members. I am the güero of the family and I have always felt the contradictions internal to my Mestizo identity. Similar, to how Anzaldúa describes the borderlands as a wound between the U.S.-Mexico border, and the complications and challenges of multiple cultures in contact. We as Chicanos sometimes can feel disconnected to our identity as children of a kind of diaspora and thus feel and recognize what Gloria Anzaldúa describes in her book

“Borderlands/La Frontera” in our very own lived experiences. I was born to an immigrant Mexican father and a Chicana mother with Guatemalan and Spanish roots, but I never learned Spanish. I felt disconnected to the language not speaking it and by extension my people (Mexican and Guatemalan), but I found refuge in the ideas of Aztlán and Chicanismo in my early years. That being said, I still often had difficulty understanding my identity. I have been Mexican, Mexican-American, Mexican-Guatemalan-American, and at some point, claiming indigeneity. However, even still I never really felt indigenous, but I have always thought of myself as having indigenous ancestors from either Mexico or Guatemala where my family is from. Everyone that I have come across has grappled with this issue of identification whether racially or ethnically. If someone asks my race, I simply say I am Mexican and Guatemalan even though I know those are not racial categories, but national ones. And I have felt ambivalent at best whenever it comes to the topic of “indigeneity” and whether or not Chicanos/Chicanas have a claim to it. I’ve come in contact with very many Chicanas/Chicanos that claims “indigeneity,” in some capacity or another. I never know how to respond to that. But these days I do think of Chicanos/Chicanas claiming “indigeneity” and Aztlán as a problematic thing and as a form of erasure, which I’ll get into later on. But for now, let’s now talk more in-depth about Aztlán as a concept. This idea of Aztlán has been around for at least 500 years, it is the ancient homeland of the Aztecs, which is thought to be somewhere in the Southwest before they arrived in the valley of Anahuac and set-up their empire in the swampy land of Tenochtitlan what is today modern-day Mexico. It’s their own unique origin story. But for Chicanos during the 60s it became a guiding concept for Chicano-nationalism that was to emerge, first introduced into the Chicano-Movement in 1969 at the Chicano Liberation Youth Conference in Denver Colorado in the words written down in El Plan de Aztlán, a manifesto likely written by Alurista a Chicano poet

during that time, but attributed to Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales and recited by him during that conference. It essentially declared the Southwest the new Chicano nation and invoke “brown power” and a valorization of a Bronze people. The Aztlán envisioned by the early Chicano Movement leaders was largely thought as the a new political-home for Chicanos, a political consciousness, and was largely underpinned by nationalist/separatist sentiments, and very patriarchal in centering a hetero-sexual man as the ideal “citizen” so to speak of Aztlán. It would be the bitter flavor of machismo and homophobia in the Chicano-nationalists’ Aztlán that would bring on a new “Queer Aztlán” as envisioned by prominent theorists like Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa in each of their perspective works. In Cherrie Moraga’s work titled “Queer Aztlán: The Re-formation of Chicano Tribe” she criticizes previous Chicano Nationalisms and Feminism movements for their lack of addressing a plethora of identities. The Chicano Nationalists lacked the ability to recognize the complexity of gender politics in tandem with race, class, and other aspects of the communities varies identities, and Feminist movements at the time were focused heavily on gender without recognizing race. Both movements had “blind-spots” if you will and were unable to adequately represent the needs of Chicanas. So, in Queer Aztlán she writes about a re-articulation of nationalism and Aztlán with a radically different look and feel to it. Moraga writes about wanting a nationalism that “decolonizes the brown body” and has “la Chicana indigena[that] stands at the center” on page 150 of her essay on Queer Aztlán and immerses her vision of Aztlán with a focus on centering the women and the queer community in an inclusive Aztlán. Both of Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga recognize the intersectional identities that make up the Chicanx community, however, I think both still retain somewhat of a monolithic and Aztec-centric focus when talking about Chicana/o indigeneity when they invoke Aztec iconography and imagery. The Aztlán envisioned by the two Chicana writer’s is

considerably more dynamic and robust, I think anyone identified as Chicana/Chicano/Chicanx should look into their work for all that it does do deconstruct our identity and the liberatory work that they seek to do and find solace in it, however, I think what we also have to ask ourselves now is, if we really have a claim to indigeneity? Not all of us are indigenous and neither having an indigenous ancestor can give us such an identity. I think the usage of “Aztec iconography” and the appropriation of indigenous culture can be seen as voyeuristic and fetishizing in our work. In “Geographies of race and ethnicity III: Settler colonialism and nonnative people of Color” Laura Pulido attempts to problematize that exact thing. Laura Pulido, says that “Aztlán is simultaneously a decolonial and colonizing gesture”(315). And I think she’s correct in asserting that, because I think the our history as Chicanos or as Mexicanos we’ve been told to valorize the Spanish and European identity over the indigenous Indian identity, and I think “Aztlán” and the “Chicano/a” identity marked a rejection of that colonial – hierarchal thinking. Also, I think that as Chicanos from this side of the border that we must recognize our role in settling and colonizing the Southwest. Before this was the U.S. it was Mexico that was attempting to steal land from the Pueblos, Apaches, and very many other American Indian groups. So, I think it’s good to return to our roots and all, but we have to be critical from where we move now. I think Aztlán was a useful concept to have back in the day, but I think we now are tasked with untangling our complicated history for the better. We must recognize that in some ways we’re both and this really depends on the person, colonizer and colonized at the same time. Yeah, that is all I really have to say about this topic.