

**Origins and Significance of *Canto al Pueblo*:
Image, Symbol and Identity of an Aesthetic Movement**

The Background

In retrospect, the *Canto al Pueblo* can be seen both as (a) a continuing process and, (b) as a beginning of a new contemporary aesthetic movement. The former alludes to a process called *Flor y Canto* derived from the Aztecan celebration called *In Xochitl, In Kuikatl*, literally, *la flor, el canto*; both symbolic of the creative act in which man or woman participates as part of their cosmic mission to leave something that contributes to the greatness of civilization, be it the essay or poetry, sculpture, painting, philosophy or science. The latter refers to the Chicano *Flor y Canto* and *Canto al Pueblo* festivals of the 70's and 80's.

As a continuing aesthetic process, *Flor y Canto* is historically the result of the organizing efforts of Chicanos who met in the historic *Youth Liberation Conferences* at Denver in 1969 and 1970 sponsored by the *Crusade for Justice*.¹ It is here that the identifying and symbolic marker of *Aztlan* is delineated and defined.² What is important at this embryonic stage of the Chicano Movement, is the identification of roots, and for the Mestizo Chicano, this meant pre-Columbian, Mesoamerican generally, and specifically, the Uto-Aztecan tribal nations, which for general purposes, meant *Aztecan-Metzika*. Here, the *Plan Espiritual de Aztlan* is formulated, underscoring the spirit of the ancestors from *Aztlan* within the contemporary socio-political struggle.³ It is clear at this juncture that the Chicano is underscoring with pride the high cultures and high civilizations of the pre-Conquest autochthonous America. The Hispanic side, while it feeds his current cultural needs, has a dubious Colonial *gachupin* legacy.⁴ On the one hand, the Chicano can question his people's Hispanic historical legacy,

and on the other, he is proud of his current culture, rooted in a syncretic Mexican tradition.

Notwithstanding, the Chicano's main target is Anglo American (W.A.S.P.) dominant society, as exemplified early on by Rendón in his *Chicano Manifesto*.⁵ Most important is the cultural and political affirmation for a group whose immediate ancestors have been colonized by the Spanish, the French, the Porfiriato dictatorship and, most recently, Anglo-dominant society in America. Most important was to coalesce in an organizing manner nationally, to fight for change not only in the communities but also in the Universities. Within the framework of the Chicano Movement, there are various early concepts which are salient and important, i.e., *Carnalismo*, *la Familia* and *Chicanismo* or *Chicanidad*.⁶ *Carnalismo* brought about a bond between all Chicanos in the struggle; for the committed Chicano, it obviated negative cultural patterns of one-upmanship or *Compadrazgo* and betrayal. It was a fusion of spirit rekindled in the highest ideals of his/her proud pre-Columbian ancestors, the Teotihuakan, Toltekah, Maya and the Aztekah among other autochthonous nations. It brought pride to all Chicanos at a time when, for generations, they had been taught by dominant society that they were different, and therefore, inferior. The Chicano movement was born with a fervor that was representative of other civil rights movements (African-American, then called Black Movement with its Black Panthers, Native American, with its American-Indian Movement, Women's Rights, with its Feminist Movement, etc.). While the Chicano embraced his Native-American roots and, with the Native-American Movement, in the beginning, he generally worked within the *barrio* and the University Chicano areas. The goal was education and change with an undercurrent of a type of Vasconcelian vision for the future.

The Chicano Movement was not restricted to a University student elite; while this idea has been postulated by some, my experience shows that the majority of students gaining entrance into the University when admission standards were opened, were sons and daughters of migrants, farmworkers and the poor, whose academic skills were lacking due to a poor education imposed by dominant society. Special programs were developed to assist minority students through the University curriculum. Chicano studies was developed, often in collaboration with these special programs, often interdisciplinary, although ideally, the effort by early Chicano Studies directors was to departmentalize. One can see that the strategy was correct, in view of the many Chicano Studies programs that were dropped during the Right Wing conservatism of the Reagan-Bush years. Perhaps there was a University elite, albeit small, but this was at the professorial level. Unfortunately, some, in their struggle to understand the conflict, buy into ideologies and schools of thought that are espoused in academia which fomented conflict and division. As a consequence, the Movement is split between the activism of the Chicano whose emphasis is pride in his Native roots as he struggles politically against the inequities of society and the activists who have an ideological political agenda. The latter denigrate the former as Romantic Nationalists. It is these Chicano academicians that represent the academic elite who are participants in the Chicano Movement, not at the grass roots level, but at the academic, intellectual level. There were some, however, who were totally committed to the Movement, and to be committed, in those days, was to risk job, reputation, status, etc.⁷ The choice was to work for the system or to work against the system; the choice was to work for your own ends and aggrandizement or to work for the students and the community. Too many, unfortunately, wore masks as they sought their own personal interests. It is this cultural/academic background scenario that, perhaps, answers the question: Why have the *Flor y Canto* and

Canto al Pueblo been but a passing reference in the history of the Chicano Movement?

Perhaps it was a problem of ideology versus cultural philosophy. Or perhaps, because the social science-oriented Chicano academicians felt that these national gatherings were exclusive to poets, artists and creative endeavor. Or perhaps it was because very early in the Movement, Ricardo Sánchez had blasted the self-interest Chicano academic types in his poetry, referring to the institutions as "*cacademia*". One thing is for certain, the *Cantos* were responsible to a great degree for the rise in Chicano creativity; it created new works of art, a national forum for dialogue and expression, anthologies for Chicano studies, notwithstanding, interdisciplinary academic criticism.⁸

The *Flor y Canto* and *Canto al Pueblo*

The origin of the *Flor y Canto* is in the Fall of 1973, which first brings together a small cadre of Chicano writers who will organize a more purposeful national festival that will give birth to the first *Flor y Canto* Anthology.⁹ The objectives of the festival were: 1)to provide a national forum for all Chicano writers affording equal time to all participants, known or unknown; 2)to create an atmosphere conducive to creative exchange as well as a critical environment for growth and development; and 3)to promote the appreciation of Chicano literature extending it to the people of the community.

It was with these objectives that the *Festival Floricanto II*, the *Second National Chicano Literature Festival*, was organized in Austin, Texas in 1975 under the auspices of the *Center for Mexican American Studies* and the cooperation of numerous community organizations. It is here that a number of important questions surfaced regarding Chicano literature, the movement and the

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