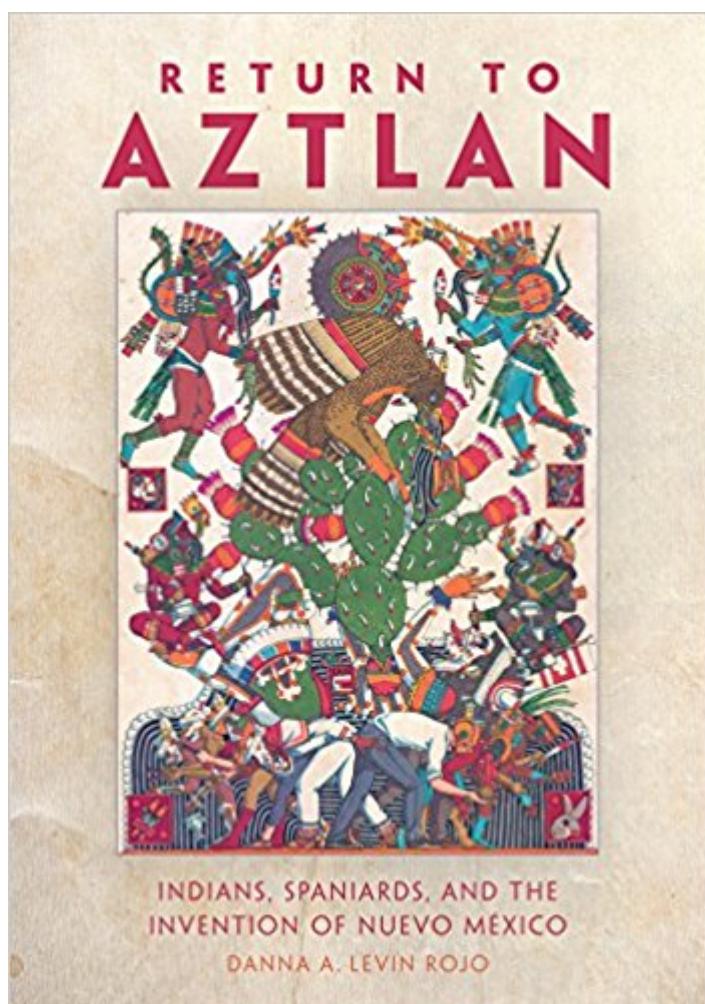


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Return To Aztlan: Indians, Spaniards, And The Invention Of Nuevo MÃ©xico (Latin American And Caribbean Arts And Culture)



Synopsis

Long before the Spanish colonizers established it in 1598, the *Kingdom of Nuevo México* had existed as an imaginary world and not the one based on European medieval legend so often said to have driven the Spaniards' ambitions in the New World. What the conquistadors sought in the 1500s, it seems, was what the native Mesoamerican Indians who took part in north-going conquest expeditions also sought: a return to the Aztecs' mythic land of origin, Aztlan. Employing long-overlooked historical and anthropological evidence, Danna A. Levin Rojo reveals how ideas these natives held about their own past helped determine where Spanish explorers would go and what they would conquer in the northwest frontier of New Spain—present-day New Mexico and Arizona. Return to Aztlan thus remaps an extraordinary century during which, for the first time, Western minds were seduced by Native American historical memories. Levin Rojo recounts a transformation of an abstract geographic space, the imaginary world of Aztlan, into a concrete sociopolitical place. Drawing on a wide variety of early maps, colonial chronicles, soldier reports, letters, and native codices, she charts the gradual redefinition of native and Spanish cultural identity—and shows that the Spanish saw in Nahua, or Aztec, civilization an equivalence to their own. A deviation in European colonial naming practices provides the first clue that a transformation of Aztlan from imaginary to concrete world was taking place: *Nuevo México* is the only place-name from the early colonial period in which Europeans combined the adjective *new* with an American Indian name. With this toponym, Spaniards referenced both Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the indigenous metropolis whose destruction made possible the birth of New Spain itself, and Aztlan, the ancient Mexicans' place of origin. Levin Rojo collects additional clues as she systematically documents why and how Spaniards would take up native origin stories and make a return to Aztlan their own goal—and in doing so, overturns the traditional understanding of *Nuevo México* as a concept and as a territory. A book in the Latin American and Caribbean Arts and Culture initiative, supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

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Customer Reviews

In this innovative reading of a familiar story, Danna A. Levin Rojo challenges scholarly and popular traditions that attribute the Spaniards' sixteenth-century search for Nuevo México to European medieval legends of the Seven Cities of Cibola. Instead, she demonstrates the pervasive influence that Mesoamerican historical memories of Aztlan, and the notion of returning to a place of origin, had on the European invaders. This book contributes to the literature on early colonial ethnohistory and will raise new questions in the field of U.S.-Mexico borderlands studies.

Cynthia Radding, author of *Wandering Peoples: Colonialism, Ethnic Spaces, and Ecological Frontiers in Northwestern Mexico, 1700-1850*

Danna A. Levin Rojo is Professor of Mexican Historiography at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in Azcapotzalco, Mexico City, and co-editor of *The Disputed Territory in the War of 1846-1848*.

3.5 out of 5 stars. In *Return to Aztlan*, Danna A. Levin Rojo attempts to show that the Spanish search for a "Nuevo México" (New Mexico) north of New Spain was based on indigenous legends of Aztlan, the mythological ancestral homeland of the Nahuatl-speaking peoples. Levin Rojo, Professor of Mexican Historiography at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico City, analyzes an array of Spanish and Indian sources along with archaeological texts and maps to support her thesis. Though not without faults, *Return to Aztlan* presents an intriguing example of how Spaniards and Indians adopted and adapted information in the colonial encounter, focusing on how Indian cultural and historical beliefs influenced Spanish exploration for a "Nuevo México." Still, historians of exploration will appreciate *Return to Aztlan* as an interesting addition to the long line of works that force scholars to consider the role that indigenous cartographic ideas played in European discoveries and colonization. Levin

Rojo's thesis rests more on textual evidence than cartography, but she does discuss Mesoamerican story-maps quite well. A deeper dive into European cartographic material would have improved her work. She would have also benefited from addressing more recent works of Atlantic/transatlantic history, such as the work of Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, which discuss the utilization of indigenous sources in European thought. Overall, *Return to Aztlan* is an excellent contribution to the literature of exploration and colonization, and illustrative of the dynamic interplay between Europeans and indigenes in creating the societies of the New World.

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