

**Identifying Mestizo Phenomena:  
Representation and Reclamation of Mestisaje's Foothold**

"The Interpretation and Representation of Latino Cultures: Research and Museums,"  
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In Serge Gruzinski's recently released book, *The Mestizo Mind*, he addresses the difficulty scholars "experience in 'seeing' *mestizo* phenomena, much less analyzing them."<sup>1</sup> Gruzinski goes on to describe this "*mestizo* phenomena," in terms of the effects of centuries of contact and colonization. In this way, *mestizo* phenomena is much more than the resulting mixture and hybridization that has come to characterize *mestisaje*, but is instead, all of the effects of these contacts upon people and places alike. The effects and legacies are thus as much institutional as they are biological, aesthetic as much as they are ideological. Seeing will thus require a critical reading and an understanding of layers and the move toward interpretation, therefore demands looking deeper still.

In the larger study that this paper is drawn from, I am interested in numerous transitional moments, as focal points of marking and recording absence and loss as much as about recovering and inscribing presence. I begin the study, however, by focusing on the 1930s and moving backwards chronologically. Certainly a transitional moment, the 1930s was also contemporary moment of introspection across the nation, evoking a newly heightened interest in the American past, where images were taken throughout these communities, photographed and inscribed alike. Like the censuses and ecclesiastical records of previous generations, these representations allow us the opportunity to see the effects of previous centuries, to see the *mestizo* phenomena.

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<sup>1</sup> Serge Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind: the intellectual dynamics of colonization and globalization* (New York: Routledge University Press, 2002) p. 2.

It was at this time that Charles E. Gibson was hired as an amateur ethnographer by the Civil Works Administration to conduct several interviews in the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado, a valley once settled as part of northern New Mexico, but later annexed in 1861 with the making of the Colorado territory. Following his visit to one such household in Guadalupe, Colorado, in 1934, Gibson wrote the following:

Yesterday, when I called on Epifanio Valdez, grandson of Seledonio, with whom Luis now lives, Epifanio and his son were sitting in the sunshine visiting with a neighbor. At some distance sat Luis, alone and silent. When I began asking questions, Mr. Valdez called Luis over to us. He stood by, quiet and respectful taking no part in the general conversation, only replying to direct questions. I was interested in his attitude, which put me in mind of a well-trained negro servant of the old south, rather than an old Indian, who had spent his life herding sheep.<sup>2</sup>

Gibson's image of this community and household is a perfect illustration of Gruzinski's assertion that, indeed, it is difficult to see mestizo phenomena. What is clear, however, is that the mestizo phenomenon of this place is intricately bound, however, to mestisaje's foothold in the history of New Mexico—narrative histories of American Indian captivity and slavery. In other words, the mestizo phenomenon references the narrative of what it means to be Indian in the wrong place.

In the same interview, Gibson goes on to write that the Indian Luis was “originally the property of Seledonio Valdez,” and had been “acquired,” as had been the “custom” by “purchase from men who made regular raids into the Navajo country for the purpose of capturing slaves.” Gibson further notes that Luis, who himself claims eighty years, “has been in the Valdez family all his life.”<sup>3</sup> While there is much more to be noted

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<sup>2</sup> Charles E. Gibson, Jr. "Luis Valdez," in *Alamosa, Conejos, and Costilla Counties: Interviews Collected during 1933-34 for the State Historical Society of Colorado by Civil Works Administration Workers*. (Denver: State Historical Society Library of Colorado, 1934). Document 24, pp. 96-98.

<sup>3</sup>Gibson, *Ibid.*

about this peculiar narrative of slavery, which I do in the larger study, tracing this 1934 representation to an 1865 representation of this same Valdez household, where the five-year-old Luis Valdez is listed among one hundred and forty-nine other Indian captives in this valley. Yet, for the purposes of this paper and presentation, I introduce this inscription here simply to address the politics of representation, the politics of what is seen, interpreted and ultimately inscribed.

This observation reveals that indigenous captivity and servitude is, in many ways, a narrative about the positioning of subjects. Thus, while Gibson implies the very real social positions created in servitude, his inscription also captures in a broad stroke, the whole of this study, concomitantly accentuating the way in which this story is also about representation. Yet, even now, this particular representation of servitude, just as it appears to Gibson in 1934, is seemingly *out of place* as a slave narrative of the United States of America, which not only continues to echo of another place, but of another people. This obscurity exists, in 1934 as it may now, given the fact that the narratives of enslaved and emancipated Africans have largely defined nearly every aspect of our nation's history, including, according to Robin D. G. Kelley, "today's various racial constructions—whiteness, blackness, and an *Other* category that persistently renders nonwhites and nonblacks invisible."<sup>4</sup>

This obscurity is precisely what makes reading the old Indian Luis as a "slave" both so challenging and yet so remarkable. Hence, as Gibson reads Luis's "attitude" and position, he is, as he notes "put in mind" of two distinctive, if not foundational images—

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<sup>4</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, "Forward," in *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation* ed., Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller (New York: The New Press, 1998). P. vii.

“a well trained negro servant of the old south” on the one hand and “an old Indian, who had spent his life herding sheep” on the other. It is precisely the imperatives, defining “slavery” and “indianness” alike, that come to be structured and assigned along a temporal and spatial specificity.

Because a critical understanding of reading as well as writing practices and their effects is one of the concerns and basic premises in this paper, an understanding of what informs Gibson’s reading is thus paramount. Here where one stands, faces, sees and ultimately writes the Indian subject, matters. Hence, beyond Gibson’s represented subject positions of seemingly idle *nuevomexicanos*, a subservient indigenous subject and even, of the superimposing image of “negro” servitude, the inscription, even if inadvertently, also points back to Gibson himself, an Anglo-American agent of the U.S. Civil Works Administration, whose position in this story as author, is equally subject or at the very least, should be.

Therefore, what Gibson sees and writes may essentially reveal more about his own standing than about the images he interprets, seeing the “old Indian” Luis, even if being “put in mind” of *something, someone and somewhere* else. Yet, Gibson leaves nothing else, neither what constitutes his reading nor his relation to it. For this reason, it remains difficult to say exactly what information and writings would have informed Gibson’s knowledge of Indians, Mexicans, and slavery, of the U.S. South or otherwise. As such, in my encounter with Gibson’s text I am left only with a series of questions: What did he omit? How did his perception of either the *nuevomexicano* community or of Indians influence what he recorded? Who did he see as his audience and how did this influence his recording? What role, if any, did the Civil Works Administration, as his

pseudo-publisher, play in this direction? What writings influenced his imagery and perception of slavery? Nothing; of this the text says nothing and so in my encounter with it, my reading of it, I can say nothing but point to its silence. The representation by Gibson thus obscures what Johannes Fabian describes as “a personally situated process of knowing.”<sup>5</sup> This is, however, part of the politics of writing and representation that obscures the subject as much as it does the one who has inscribed it.

### **Listening for Mestizo Phenomena**

The invisibility of this particular mestizo phenomena—the presence of indigenous captives, servants and slaves in the history of our communities—however, is precisely why recovery and a full understanding of the history, legacy, and memory of colonialism will not only require putting slavery in its place, but will also entail recognizing that the place of slavery is not solely defined by the U.S. South, nor by its subjects. Even if distinct, there are parallel stories throughout the Americas, even in what is now referred to as the U.S. Southwest. Yet, these understandings have cast long shadows nonetheless in our contemporary perceptions of slavery, but for many, the delicacy and strength of memory has been longer still and recovery remains all the more critical.

While I agree with Gruzinski that the interpretive move necessitates being able to see *mestizo* phenomena, reclamation will also necessitate more than seeing and observing, but listening as well. This is important because, *mestizo* experience and history is subaltern history and as such is not only about invisibility, but is also about silence. Reclamation, like storytelling, necessitates an understanding of the importance

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<sup>5</sup> Johannes Fabian, “Ethnographic Misunderstanding and the Perils of Context,” *American Anthropologist* 97 (1995), p.45.

of listening. My research, in identifying captivity and capturing identity, has demanded not only seeing these images of *mestisaje* and slavery, but diligently listening to the language and stories embodied in memory still.

Toward these ends, learning how to *look* at what is seen and learning how to read what is inscribed, let me return to an image, albeit different from the one I began of Gibson's seeing Luis Valdez, but still of a household and one of several stories of research that have contributed to my dissertation. In 1995, while conducting interviews throughout Taos County I found my way into Costilla—a small farming village located on the north central most edge of New Mexico. There, Mrs., Martinez, presented me with a photograph. It is an image, as she told me of her family— of her great great grandfather's household, Juan Andres Bernal, a house, *ya caida*, fallen, she said pointing with her lips through the window, toward the houses down the road.

Although a sheepherder whose income and property value in the late nineteenth century would have comparatively identified him as one of the poorest citizens of Taos county, Juan Andres is pictured here with coat and tie and is positioned almost in the center of the photograph with the male members to his right. His wife, Cornelia is positioned to his left along with three of the daughters. However, even more than this positioned story of gender and age or even my thoughts about the photographer's position; what caught my attention, was that to the distant left, seemingly hidden into the shadows of one of the household's entrances was yet another family. "*Y la otra familia,*" I asked pointing toward the shadows. "*No mijo no son familia,* they are not family. Yet, having said this, she paused and began again, accentuating the subtle nuance that had long characterized this story of indigenous peoples being held within *nuevomexicano*

households: *bueno, si eran como familia*, well, they were *like* family,” she then explained, proceeding to point to what this seemingly subtle difference *being family* and *being like family* meant precisely to her. “*Esa mujer era una de las yutas criadas de los Bernales*,” the woman was a Ute servant belonging to the Bernal family. It was in this qualification, that Mrs. Martinez had also accentuated the stark contrast and differences, however that had similarly characterized this story.

The reality was that this woman might have actually been one of several indigenous women or children entered into and living in the community of Costilla in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And yet, one of the difficulties in the recovery of any indigenous histories and certainly of one that in stark contrasts, accentuates the reality of what it meant to be *entre-metido* or *mal-criado*— that is, entered into and or raised Indian, in the wrong place, is that if recovery is possible at all, it often emerges with a great deal of ambivalence.

Later, drawing from Mrs. Martinez’s recollections, I was able to search through various records to reveal that the woman whose face is here half-concealed by her shawl and distanced against the Bernal family home, may indeed have been one of many entered into the official record. The first, is of a captive Ute whose name was interestingly enough scratched off the ecclesiastical record, yet baptized in 1850 into the household of Juan de Jesus Bernal (Juan Andres’ father). The second returned me to 1865 listing of captives, wherein Margarita, a 25-year-old Navajo is identified, but unlike many on this list, wishing to return. The final is of a daughter of Margarita, who is noted as “*la india de JJ Bernal*.” Her child’s father is listed simply as “*no conocido*,” unknown in the 1875 record. The census records are just as telling. A “Margarita” shows up in the

household of Juan de Jesus Bernal, racially described as Indian with her occupation listed as “dms” or domestic servant in 1870. By 1880, however, another, perhaps the same Margarita is listed similarly in the household of Juan Andres Bernal along with a man by the surname “Aguilar” listed simply as a “peon.”

Beyond my efforts to accurately identify this woman’s identity obscured into these records, I realized then as I do now that this image, much like the records, has everything to do with distance, position and representation. These positions, experienced, identified, imagined and passed down through both text and story, do not simply reveal peculiar subjectivities and social distances, but identities, which gradually have become contemporary communities.

Part of the politics of representation, as I pointed to with Gibson, is often the failure of the scholar to identify their own subjectivity. I raise this point to note that my own distance may not be exactly as it would seem from this picture. I have known Mrs. Martinez all my life. I was in fact raised in this community and on these storied memories, having inherited these very struggles over identity— over the images of the Indian other captured within the images. Even my move into Mrs. Martinez’s home, like many of those I entered, from the very beginning came from a recognition that, as Greg Sarris writes, this is “a story for me, not only as a story that positions me in certain ways but also a story that can inform me about that position.”<sup>6</sup>

Although I was too young to understand how these stories of my youth were filled with meaning, the reality was, that it was these stories of intercultural violence and mixture that raised me up *knowing*, perhaps without the language, but knowing, that stark

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<sup>6</sup> Greg Sarris, “Reading Narrated American Indian Lives,” chapter in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 83.

contrasts and subtle nuances carried the image of identity, even here, in these houses. For me to dismiss this knowing, would be to dismiss the opportunity to discuss why this is important, however, where we stand in relation to the images, to the stories that we tell, inside and out.

Representation is after all, also about standing and position; where you come from and stand always matters, despite the mythology of objectivity. Without exception, many of the images of northern New Mexican and Colorado villages and families are predominantly by outsiders. The project of reclamation should not discount these perspectives; it should in fact, accentuate them all the more. Yet, it should also neither discount native perspectives as well. Recently, during a residential fellowship held at the School of American Research and following my colloquium presentation, an anthropologist approached me and felt it necessary to say, “It must be difficult, if not impossible to tell the History accurately since you are so close to it.” It is quite clear what I was being told that day; however, make no mistake about it, my telling was already cast as illegitimate, not rigorous enough, not just *so* close, but *too* close. The measure of distance itself in this case is what determines not only what counts as legitimate research but who can count as a legitimate researcher.

This is not to say that insider research, as such cannot engage in these same questionable practices of the past. Learning how to see *mestisaje* and its foothold in captivity should not be about evoking nostalgia, where images can be as romanticized as they have been in the past. For those few researchers that have emerged from these communities, there is a delicacy to this type of research. Being an insider does not carry the privilege of going away; home and the field are not distinct and telling stories has a

consequence, if not for me, then for my own family and community. Failure to recognize this risks an appropriation, as it has in the past, which can be used by the dominant society to justify a continuing material and ideological marginalization. Yet it is this type of writing on the edges of the contradictions and tensions of our communities, imagined and or otherwise realized, that we must account for, while continuing to realize that our reach may sometimes exceed our grasp.

Seeing, listening, understanding *mestizo phenomena* in the worlds we study, past and present, and in the worlds we live in, past and present, will, I think reveal reflections of this community that are not fixed or static, but instead alive with change, accommodation and imbued even with contradiction, which in the end may well provide counter points to the representations. Indeed, the most telling aspects of any deep and sustained study of the nuevomejicano Indo-Hispano culture, in fact reveals how the long story of the people itself rises from beneath layers of histories formed somewhere in-between erasure and memory—histories experienced, imagined and passed down through story, *telling*, as it is, *identities*. After all, identity, is no museum piece sitting stock still in glass cases, no singular archival document, no manifest monument, but instead is, as Eduardo Galeano writes, the astonishing synthesis of the contradictions of everyday life. Understanding this means keeping our senses vigilant, eyes wide open, seeing, listening, and feeling the amazing delicacy and strength of the mestizo phenomena that is around us.