

Tools of the Empire: Cultural Narrative as a Socio-Political Device

Maxx Vogel

Spanish-199

Western societies are increasingly inclined to acknowledge that although our legislation has been rewritten and political structures reorganized, our sociopolitical systems and hegemonic behaviors are inherited from our predecessors. Impressions of the world's imperial past are plentiful and inconspicuous, imploring us to question how empires still exist. Certain practices that empires use to expand and enforce their control are seen by examining both early modern Spain, the United States, and the people they conquer. In comparison, it is clear that empirical powers employ a few archetypes of behavior to ensure that they govern not only the land and the population, but also the culture of the areas they dominate. The history of the United States and how they interact with indigenous nations and Latin America is not a direct reboot of Spain's relationship with Al-Andalus (the Muslim-ruled area of the Iberian Peninsula) and the moriscos (the descendants of formerly-Muslim converts to Christianity under Spanish rule). Still, there are several throughlines and plot repetitions in how they simultaneously embrace and appropriate the culture while rejecting the people from whom the culture originates.

One consistent tool of the dominant culture is what one might call "painting the picture" of the minority culture. A narrative is perpetuated that reduces or reimagines the cultures as having existed in an idealized past. This is seen consistently in US relations with Latin America wherein the US augments Latin America's connection to Spain and projects a romantic story burnished through the lens of time. Among the three pillars of white supremacy, Andrea Smith proposes that through the logic of Orientalism, the West "[defines] itself as a superior civilization by constructing itself in opposition to an "exotic" but inferior 'Orient'." (Smith, 68). Spain's

history is tangled in classifications as both “Western” and “Oriental,” but from the perspective of the United States, “the Spain they wanted to see was the romantic one, a Spain whose supposed backwardness rendered it relentlessly picturesque” (Kagan, 88).

The United States’ depiction of Spain as Oriental connects directly to the Iberian peninsula’s Moorish history. Ironically, for centuries Spain attempted to distance themselves from that relationship by juxtaposing themselves against romanticized visions of Al-Andalus and the other Islamic Iberian nations. During the 16th century, the poetic genre of the *romancero morisco* fell into fashion. These poems focused on “material trappings of chivalric fantasy: liveries, costumes, arms” and were “refracted through a Christian sensibility that selected carefully for the more appealing elements of Moorishness” (Fuchs, 82). The *romancero morisco* didn’t explicitly comment on the events of the Reconquista—a series of campaigns in which Christian Kingdoms captured Muslim territories in the Iberian Peninsula—or the politics that fueled it, but the absence of commentary provides sufficient and palpable insight into the reigning ideological stance.

“Painting the picture” is easy to overlook as a mechanism of colonization because the harm is implicit and less arresting than other forms of violence. Rather, erasure is the seldom convicted accomplice of systematic disenfranchisement, forced assimilation, exile, and genocide. In the United States, particularly in California and throughout the southwest, the aesthetic of the Catholic missions and narratives of rancho life are spun to seem like not only idyllic but essential stepping stones on the path of progress and civilization. This storytelling has served as a useful marketing strategy for real estate developers and others attempting to sell the brand of the

southwest. It has also been useful to indoctrinate into the consciousness of settlers that the occupation of these territories is the result of a peaceful transition.

“Painting the picture” is used to reframe both the past and the present. In *Luz en lo oscuro*, Gloria Anzaldúa recounts her experience at the Denver Museum of Natural History’s exhibit entitled *Aztec: The World of Moctezuma*. Anzaldúa describes entering a simulacrum of Tenochtitlan, as it was thought to exist, seeing indigenous objects “once used by [her] ancestors” on display, and pondering how “la negación sistemática de la cultura mexicana-chicana en los Estados Unidos impede su desarrollo, haciéndolo este un acto de colonización” (Anzaldúa, 48). Anzaldúa defines the museum itself as a colonized structure that will “rip off a culture, then regurgitate its white version to the ‘natives’,” but also “enact a psychosis of sorts, implying that all Aztecs are dead and only inhabit prehistory...when in fact there are still ten thousand Aztec survivors living in Mexico” (Anzaldúa, 48).

Another tactic of the hegemony is to assert that they have inherited the cultures of the people they conquer in one way or another. For the wealthy elite, their entitlement stems from the belief that they, having more resources, are better equipped to protect cultural artifacts. The ruling class also sees themselves as more civilized, and thus able to appreciate art in a way that the cultures from which it originates can not. They might also claim to be the rightful inheritors via the historical link of the land they occupy. If they can paint native people into the past, “non-Native peoples then become the rightful inheritors of all that was indigenous--land, resources, indigenous spirituality, or culture” (Smith, 68).

As early as the 1880's the general attitude of the United States toward Spain began to shift away from recognizing the nation as a natural enemy, but rather as comrades in a mission to bring religion and civilization--according to their definition--to the Americas (Kagan, 79). States like Florida, New Mexico, and California with histories of Spanish colonization would begin to "discover" their Spanish "roots." They would seize morsels of Spanish heritage and amplify them--asserting that they belong to the history of America. St. Augustine, Florida found surprising success with their citywide celebration of Spanish explorer and conquistador, Juan Ponce de Leon. American towns that had previously attempted to bury their Spanish past saw how recovering this history could land them a spot on the tourist map.

In California, Junípero Serra, the priest known for establishing many of the region's Missions, was uplifted as a key figure connecting the United States to Spain and Mexico. Americans attempting to document California's history, like writer Theodore Hittell and members of the Society of California Pioneers, chose Serra to fill a forefather-like position for the American West. In order to appeal to a widely protestant audience, Serra's Catholicism was downplayed. He was sometimes distinguished as a Franciscan, to draw upon the orders' humanitarian reputation, but was more typically and intentionally identified as simply Christian. During a centennial celebration of the Mission San Francisco de Asís--which occurred the same year as the centennial of the United States--the mayor of Oakland spoke of Serra with rhetoric that "invoked qualities commonly associated with the country's Founding Fathers," undoubtedly in concert with others efforts to position Serra as "the state's spiritual father, its first citizen, and a patriot to boot" (Kagan, 119-120). From there, all of the Spanish missionaries in California as

well as the subsequent Mexican history and culture could be easily absorbed by the broader narrative of American heritage.

In comparison between the United States and early modern Iberia, the discussion of whether the region's culture was hybridized or appropriated requires more nuance. The conquest of Granada in 1492 is often used to mark the end of Moorish rule on the Iberian peninsula, however the transition of power was a result of many incremental military advances. The "gradual nature" of this shift "meant that Christian and Moorish practices coexisted more or less uneasily for centuries in Iberia, even in areas where the Christians had triumphed" (Fuchs, 11). Andalusian customs of dress, art, architecture, and horsemanship--among many--persisted in territories increasingly recognized as Christian Spain. The majority of these practices were so commonplace that, while "strikingly unfamiliar to other Europeans of the time," they were not recognized as foreign by Spaniards (Fuchs, 12). Delineation between local and Moorish custom became so hard to recognize that, although much can be traced to an Arabic origin, the culture was endorsed as "Iberian" by its participants. In this way, the Spanish "inheritance" of Moorish culture happened more naturally in comparison to the circuitous and contrived relationship between the United States and Latin America. That is not to say that Spaniards did not take a stance on whether to embrace maurophilia or perpetuate maurophobia, nor is Spain's history devoid of attempts to force the integration.

Race as it was conceived in early modern Iberia is fundamentally different from its contemporary definition in that race was explicitly linked to religion. The external stigmatization of the Black Legend and internal delirium over *limpieza de sangre* facilitated a feedback loop,

illuminating the interconnection of Spain and the Orient in an effort to deny it. Under the rule of a northern European monarchy it became particularly advantageous for Spain to become aligned with Europe. To shake its reputation as “a border nation of bad Christians who are ‘half Jewish and half Moors’,” Spain had to “loudly renounce its identification with all things Semitic--both Jewish and Moorish.” (Fuchs, 20). Racial distinctions were impossible to make based on phenotypic attributes, in part due to the common practice of both Europeans and North Africans enslaving people across the Mediterranean. “Although racism based on physical appearance did exist, and blacks were singled out for their color, Moors” and conversely, Christians, were not “reliably identifiable in this way” (Fuchs, 117). The purity of blood over which Spaniards obsessed allegedly proved whether their pedigree was “Old Christian”--that all of their ancestors were Christians as far as could be traced. In reality, all Spaniards likely had a mixture of Moorish and European lineage, not to mention ancestry that predates Christianity. However, the pressure to establish a racially Christian heritage was paramount in early modern Iberian society, further evidenced by “the famous syncretic gospels of the Sacromonte, the Morisco forgeries that endeavored to construct a shared Christian past for Moors in Spain” (Fuchs, 111).

In the United States, by contrast, racial categories have historically been marked by phenotypic qualities. Throughout the southwest existed a tripartite racial society divided between Anglo, Spanish, and indigenous people. Vernacular terms for each race varied from region to region, but the racial hierarchy was analogous. Once Santa Fe was acquired as an American territory, a government was composed primarily of delegates from the area’s elite Mexican population. This group, known as the *ricos*, differentiated themselves from the *paisanos*, “the poor, largely illiterate agricultural laborers” and “commonly referred to themselves as *españoles*,

claiming in some instances to be the direct descendants of the conquistadors who had first settled New Mexico in the seventeenth century” (Kagan, 104). Wealthy ranchers in California who referred to themselves as *californios* professed the exclusively Spanish lineage and purity of blood as well. While *ricos* and *californios* were afforded certain privilege, general ignorance as well as lingering prejudices of the Black Legend meant that most Anglo settlers grouped all Mexicans as belonging to an inferior “Latin” race.

In a letter addressed to novelist María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, Gen. Mariano G. Vallejo noted the difference between “Yankees” and *californios* to be that the former were inclined to capitalist ventures whereas “we [Hispanics] are better at taste” (Kagan, 116). Vallejo’s further musings of a hybridized society were both prescient of the region’s cultural landscape and optimistic of Anglo settlers’ willingness to collaborate. As stated, the habit of the empire is to uplift the culture of the colonized while subjugating its people. This is the convention of both Spain and the United States. However, it is worthwhile to note that Spain’s elite enjoyed Moorish and mudejar products made by Moriscos whereas Americans often create for themselves knock-offs of hispanic or indigenous extraction.

When Spain conquered Al-Andalus they amassed possession of existing structures built in an architectural style undeniably different from that of northern Europe. Many of these buildings were repurposed by their new tenants--mosques were converted into cathedrals, the palace of Alhambra became the Royal Court of Isabel and Fernando. Yet, the uniquely Arabic motifs persisted in a form of architecture known today as *mudejar*. The word *mudejar* comes from the Arabic concept of *mudayyan*, those who “stayed behind,” and refers to the “artistic

production of Muslims living under Christian rule” (Fuchs, 52). A quintessential mudejar building might feature a stucco exterior with horseshoe arches and latticed windows, centered around a patio. Inside it would incorporate intricate azulejo ceramic tilework, honeycomb-like domed muqarnas ceilings, as well as an *estrado*. The ubiquity of the *estrado*--a raised and carpeted platform almost exclusively used by women whilst they entertained or performed domestic work--in mudejar architecture is conflated with the Ottoman seraglio, demonstrating how Moorish heritage was intertwined with Spanish social customs as well as aesthetic. Given that “the widespread production of Mudejar art and architecture was attributed to actual persons marked by their religion or (after the forced conversions of 1502 and 1526) ethnicity” the classification of mudejar form as an ahistorical, national style curtails the nuances of its history (Fuchs, 52).

In spite of this more innocent appropriation, participants and spectators of el juego de cañas were explicitly aware of its annexation of Moorish custom. Players would dress themselves in Moorish clothing, mount horses in the Arabic *jineta* riding style, and participate in mock battles with light spears. El juego de cañas epitomizes the double standards enforced by the hegemonic structures that celebrate the wealthy elite and punish the racialized minority for participating in the same activity. In 1572, Phillip II issued an ordinance recommending the revival of el juego as a component to ensure proper military training. Moorish attire was near compulsory for participation in the games. However, the dress code did “not match either the purported military value of the *gineta* and the game of canes nor Phillip II’s prohibition of Moorish clothing in 1566, which explicitly banned the use of the *marlota*” (Irigoyen-García, 358). Essentially, Moorish garments such as *zaragüelles*, *camisa*, *marlota*, and *chapines* were

acceptable as a costume for aristocracy but criminal if worn by moriscos--an important distinction to make within the big picture of cultural hybridization. In her description of estate sales that occurred after the expulsion of the Moriscos of Valencia in 1609, Fuchs writes that “as the Moriscos were shipped out, their clothes and household goods were sold at bargain prices...[making] clear, Moorish items remained objects of desire even when their owners, literally expelled from the body politic, were most abject” (Fuchs, 71-72).

Centuries later in the United States, the same principles are used to extract people from their culture. For myriad reasons, primarily economic, developers of newly acquired lands in the late 19th and early 20th centuries began to adhere themselves aesthetically to the “Spanish style.” The nebulous expression functioned as a catch-all for architectural forms ranging from Mudejar to Mission Revival, irrespective of whether their origins were Mexican, Spanish, or otherwise. Towns hispanicized the names of their streets, like in St. Augustine where Washington Street became Granada street, Gregg Lane became Cadiz Street, Hospital Street became Aviles Street, and so on (Kagan, 317).

In 1917, the town of Ojai was rebuilt exclusively in the Spanish revival style. A project of this nature was unprecedented, and served as a model for several future developments. Santa Barbara’s Anglo inhabitants followed suit with urban planning designs intended to revive the town’s “Spanish heritage.” The uniform buildings complete with white stucco walls and red-tile roofs were reminiscent of towns in the south of Spain more so than Santa Barbara’s more recent Mexican past. Critics of the development would call California’s Spanish heritage a “‘fantasy’...invented primarily for commercial purposes and that barked racial prejudice, as the

state's heritage [is] far more Mexican" (Kagan, 339). Development projects including Rancho Santa Fe and San Clemente outside of Los Angeles boasted uniformly "Latin" architecture despite unambiguous stipulations as "whites only" communities.

The history of American criminalization of indigenous culture is wound into a complex web of legislation as old as the country. However, the simultaneous appropriation of art, culture, and fashion of indigenous, Latinx, or Chicanx origin while policing the expression and existence of the people from whom they derive is a contemporary issue. The fashion world, an industry often criticized for perpetuating Eurocentric beauty ideals, has increasingly been "inspired" by and profited off of Mexican culture. *Huipils*, or "the colorful, floral embroidery...worn by indigenous women in Mexico and Central America" has made its way to the racks of "any major retailer in the past few years" (Rivas, 2018). The trend developed concurrently with implementation of devastating and highly covered policy toward Latin American immigrants by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement under Trump's presidential administration. Similarly, celebrities like Kendall and Kylie Jenner as well as European fashion houses, including Givenchy, have incorporated the chola "look" into the portfolios of their brands. The fortunes they accumulate off of this "aesthetic" is categorically opposite from the response to actual Chicanx people who don the cholo or chola "look." A manual entitled *Chicano Street Gangs* entered the repertoire of the Arizona Department of Corrections in the 1980's as a guide to identify "gang related individuals." Its content reflects and perpetuates stereotypes that still fuel discrimination and harrassment of Chicanx people. Even though "these styles are widely popular in working-class Chicano youth culture and have been for some time" and "do not intrinsically indicate gang membership or gang activities" the effect is that the police

departments unconstitutionally “use popular dress styles as a gauge of a priori guilt or suspicion” (Cummings, 167).

The intention behind comparing these two civilizations is not specifically to condemn cultural appropriation, nor is it to disparage either Spain or the United States for their acrimonious histories. Alternatively, I hope that drawing these connections serves to illuminate evidence of systemic racism and neocolonialism in the present. Seemingly benign accounts of cultural theft are only possible against the larger backdrop of white supremacy. Conversely, empires rely on the tools of symbolic violence and microaggression to ensure their dominance. Recognizing the symbiotic relationship between hegemonic structures and how they are sustained is a theoretic point of departure toward dismantling them altogether.

Works Cited:

Anzaldúa Gloria, and AnaLouise Keating. *Light in the Dark: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality = Luz En Lo Oscuro*. Duke University Press, 2015.

Fuchs, Barbara. *Exotic Nation*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc., 2011.

Irigoyen-García, Javier. “‘Poco Os Falta Para Moros, Pues Tanto Lo Parecéis’: Impersonating The Moor In The Spanish Mediterranean.” *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, 22 Feb. 2012, pp. 355–369., doi:10.1080/14636204.2011.658701.

Kagan, Richard L. *The Spanish Craze: America's Fascination with the Hispanic World, 1779-1939*. University of Nebraska Press, 2019.

“The Police.” *Pachucas and Pachucos in Tucson: Situated Border Lives*, by Laura Lee Cummings, University of Arizona Press, 2009, pp. 165–176.

Rivas, Mekita. “Don't appropriate a culture - Especially If You're Dehumanizing Its People.” *Teen Vogue*, 28 June 2018, www.teenvogue.com/story/its-not-ok-to-appropriate-mexican-culture-if-youre-dehumanizing-its-people.

Smith, Andrea. “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy:” *Color of Violence*, 2016, pp. 66–73., doi:10.2307/j.ctv1220mvs.9.