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## How La Raza Became Invisible

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## How *La Raza* Became Invisible<sup>1</sup>

by Anita Otilia Rodríguez, Ranchos de Taos, January 2021

“History happens to people, our little lives are like the cells of a hologram. Our personal stories are miniature replicas of a larger historical narrative.”

Grandma Coyota<sup>2</sup>

My mother, Grace Graham King, was one of the privileged white women who came to Taos shortly after it was occupied by the United States. She came to study art, wandered into my father’s drugstore on the plaza, and drank the chocolate soda he made especially for her. Alfredo Antonio Rodríguez’s Aztec ancestors well knew the aphrodisiac qualities of chocolate. So, despite the mutual horror of their families, they married. That was about 1935.

In 1962, Grace published a little book of cartoons, titled, “*Viva los Turistas!*” from which I include a drawing. (Fig. 1) New Mexican tourism was profoundly influenced by the Taos art colony, whose stunning images revealed to the world our achingly beautiful land and strikingly different cultures. Almost all of Mother’s drawings are spoofs on the way the local community perceived the tourists—clueless.

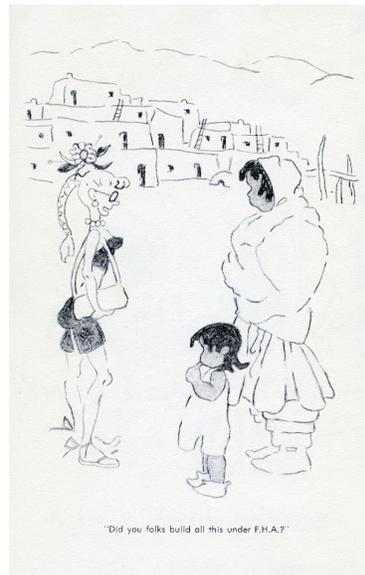


Figure 1. From the booklet, *Viva los Turistas* by Grace Rodríguez, 1962; Caption: “Did y’all build this with FHA?”

Artists and writers had just put Taos on the map and among Mother’s peers were such names as Willa Cather, Georgia O’Keefe, Mary Austin, Millicent Rodgers, and of course, Mabel Dodge Luhan. These Anglo-American women helped shape the role our local art community played in our

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<sup>1</sup> “La Raza” means “The People” and, as in probably most languages, means particularly, “Our People.”

<sup>2</sup> Grandma Coyota is a semi-mythical, capricious but very wise being who appears in the writer’s paintings and writings without invitation.

famously diverse but racially segregated community.

Eager to escape the restrictions of Victorian society and passionate about preserving “vanishing” art forms, these women painters—and the cliques they founded—were oblivious to the harm they inflicted on local communities. These women were unaware of their participation in the colonization of peoples whose worldviews were completely unknown to them. In fact, it was precisely the differences between them and the “other” that inspired their passion to consume the “exotic.” Cultural appropriation was not then recognized as racist or damaging.

Tourism facilitated, supported, and perpetuated colonialist aims and myths. The paintings of Bert Phillips, Joseph Henry Sharp, Eanger Irving Couse, Ernest Blumenschien, Oscar Berninghaus, and Herbert Dunton were pivotal in developing the tourist industry. They collectively marketed their images of Indians to Fred Harvey, who used them to launch the tourist business in the Southwest.

There is some clutching of pearls over questioning the artistic integrity of intentionally painting for advertising purposes—“Is it real art?”<sup>3</sup> OK, so they painted for money. I know that’s tacky but the real question here concerns a deeper, more profound form of integrity. Tourism represents a stage in the development of colonialism and colonialism is violence. This might not have been as clear in 1930 as it is now. But today, people who do not understand the violence implicit in colonialism are guilty of willful ignorance.

Commercializing “otherness” is inherently racist and the tourist industry is almost entirely based upon cultural appropriation and commercialization. White privilege permits indifference to the collective impact Anglo American artists have on the cultures that “inspire” them.

With emphasis, I want to stress the importance of recognizing that romanticizing or idealizing a people is equally as injurious, racist, and insulting, as degrading or vilifying them. The act of designating anyone as fundamentally “other” than yourself, as men have done to women, or white people have done to people of color, is a step toward racism’s and misogyny’s implicit goals – genocide and gendercide. Furthermore, “othering” another human being irrevocably impoverishes and distorts one’s own reality.

While Anglo Americans used their white privilege to support the return of Blue Lake (a 67-year-long struggle culminating in success in 1970 and indisputably a good thing), the same clique of Anglo Americans was literally stealing La Raza’s santos (our religious art) and were vocally unsympathetic about the loss of the land grants. “Well! The Spanish stole it from the Indians.”

The loss of land caused shattering cultural trauma and impoverishment for the Indigenous and Raza communities alike. It meant the loss of grazing land, access to firewood, food-gathering, and hunting, and drove men and adult children elsewhere to find work, breaking up families and weakening community safety nets.

From a self-sustaining agricultural people with an intact, functioning culture, we became landless,

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<sup>3</sup> For more on “...clutching of pearls,” see the PBS production, “Painting Taos,” KNME, 2009.

cheap, seasonal labor. These effects continue into the present. New Mexico's unemployment rate, poverty, addiction problems, lack of housing, educational challenges, high property crime, and racial apartheid can all be traced to the loss of the land and the system that appropriated it. Colonialism is an ongoing structure of violence with multiple layers of oppression that generate negative consequences.

Mabel manifested an iconic narrative of her time when she married Tony Lujan from Taos Pueblo. In New Mexico, Anglo American men had been marrying into Hispanic families for decades, assuming land titles and capital, and changing the nature of social relations and local economics. Mabel's marriage signified another chapter in the intersection between colonialism and ethnic relations. She lived in real life the myth of the "Noble Savage," conceived by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and propagated by Aldous Huxley, who was a member of Mabel's clique. Hers was THE marriage in the society of her time and was featured in newspapers from Taos's *El Crepúsculo* to the *New York Times*. Along with the racist mythologizing of the "noble savage" comes the shadow image of the "ignoble savage"—to borrow a term from sociologist, Tomás Atencio, one of the founders of *La Academia de La Nueva Raza*. Hispanics became the "ignoble savages."

Mythologizing Native peoples as "noble" embellished tourist advertising and played to a popular intellectual affectation of the time. By contrast, for Anglo American purposes, the racially-mixed population of Mexican descent or Hispanic people lacked any commercial or romantic value, other than as manual laborers. It was the land they wanted. Racialized ideologies completely erased the pre-existing colonial presence of Mexico and Spain, a geo-political historical reality in the region that the U.S. preferred to ignore to feed its Manifest Destiny rationale.

My mother's marriage to a self-identified Mexican is an example of the complex social relations produced by colonial and imperial logic. Her family had nowhere near the Dodge fortune but Mother was a member of the small Anglo clique and the daughter of upper-class southerners. My father was poor but from a family of educators and a business owner. But the day after their modest wedding, in what was then a very small town, no Anglo OR Spanish-speaking person congratulated them, not on the plaza nor in the drugstore. Their marriage was unmentionable, even in our little town newspaper, *El Crepúsculo*. This says something about the complexity of racism in New Mexico and the depth of feelings surrounding it.

The Hispanic people of northern New Mexico have been erased to the extent that on the popular information site, Wikipedia, it says, "The Taos art colony is an art colony founded in Taos, New Mexico, by artists attracted by the rich culture of the Taos Pueblo and beautiful landscape. Hispanic craftsmanship of furniture and tin work played a role in creating a multicultural tradition of art work in the area." From this paragraph it would be possible to conclude that *La Raza* is extinct and left behind only artifacts and crafts – not even "art."

Why did *La Raza* end up being erased from view? Lots of reasons.

Prior to and after the so-called Mexican-American War (1846–1848), Mexicans were demonized as an enemy population, a process that continued through the end of the nineteenth century and into

the first decades of the twentieth century, only a few years before the founding painters arrived. Even my mother, who was born one year after the Mexican Revolution (1910), mixed poison for Pancho Villa in her doll dishes. Advocates or expressions of Mexican autonomy and self-determination were loathed by state officials and journalists, and this trickled down to the general population. The literature of the time described the local population as, "dirty, ignorant, drunken, and lazy." New Mexico's petition for statehood was initially denied because of this "social undesirability." So, partly in the hopes that statehood would stop the massive land fraud, our politicians decided to emphasize our Spanish blood to "whiten" the petition, which was still not granted until 1912 although that did not stop the land loss or lessen the racism.

In the eyes of Protestants who were riding the wave of Manifest Destiny, the picturesque enchantment attributed to the "noble Pueblo savages" did not extend to the "ignoble Catholic Mexican savages."

The hippies repeated this syndrome of selective racism like some kind of eerie group reincarnation. While Dennis Hopper, who bought Mabel's house in 1970, posted armed guards on the roof to look out for the "ignoble savages" (or Chicanos) inside, the "noble savages" or Pueblo neighbors partied on Dennis's nickel. Also characteristic of both generations of Anglo migrants was the erasure of the United States' conquest of 1847 and an emphasis on the Spanish conquest of 1540. Occupied populations, in the selective vision of all colonizers, exist for the dominant society, either as relics of the past, obscured artifacts, and museum objects, or as commercially-exploitable objects.

Hunger for land and natural resources, fattened on the myth of Manifest Destiny, expressed itself in Taos in the form of real estate agencies, one of which was actually named, "Doughbelly Price's Clip Joint."

Perhaps the most famous among the corrupt land speculators drawn to the statewide land boom was Arthur Manby, who was murdered in Taos. My father was one of the businessmen who found his decapitated corpse when they went to collect unpaid debts in September 1917.

One of Daddy's favorite stories was about the springs that still bear Manby's name. He owned the springs and the grazing land above, and Daddy said he sold it repeatedly to poor shepherders. When their sheep were conveniently corralled and several payments pocketed, he would dress up as a ghost and scare them off, then keep the money and the sheep, and sell it all again. (Fig. 2)



Figure. 2. Drawing by Anita Otilia Rodríguez, *Manby and Sheep*, 2019; Caption “Manby would dress up as a ghost and scare them off.”

U.S. occupiers allowed the Pueblos to keep most of the land immediately surrounding their villages, although there was continuing encroachment everywhere else. But 85% of the land grants upon which the Spanish-speaking people had lived for centuries was lost in a historic, frenzied, land grab before Anglo painters got here. The government confiscated millions of acres and converted them into the Bureau of Land Management and Kit Carson Forest; land speculators, such as the Maxwell Grant, accumulated the biggest tracts of land in the history of the country.

The ongoing unequal application of laws and different perceptions of Natives and Mexicans upset an old and fragile relationship between two old neighbors already on the defensive under the encroachments of colonialism. And the new players brought the programming of a white supremacist system behind them, which always divides. “Dichos” or sayings are an integral, colorful and pungent addition to New Mexican oral tradition. There are people who remember dozens and have one for every occasion. A favorite dicho here, *en el norte*, that captures these historical developments goes like this: “*Cuando vino el alambre, vino el hambre.*” (“When the wire came, hunger came.”)

After the *Reconquista* (1790), when the Spanish returned to New Mexico after the Pueblo Rebellion of 1680, a century and a half passed before the United States absorbed the northern Mexican territories that comprised New Mexico. During that time, Pueblo and Hispanic people changed each other in a crucible of relative solitude.

A geographic settlement pattern dictated by the availability of water had made Spanish villages and Pueblos close neighbors, obliging people to share the water and resulting, inevitably, in trade and the sharing of material culture, remedies, seeds, recipes, architectural and agricultural techniques, beliefs, and attitudes. Necessity forged alliances to fight Comanches, Kiowas, Navajos, and Apaches together. Human nature provoked intermarrying, squabbling, friendships, feuds, and the whole spectrum of relationships.

But there is a peculiarly New Mexican, highly selective, cross-cultural intimacy between the Pueblos and the Spanish settlements that maintains religious privacy and simultaneously, permits lifelong, generational relationships. This phenomenon was formalized by serious ceremonial relationships through marriage, confirmation or baptism (close bonds known in Spanish as, *compadrazgo*). Perhaps the real victory of 1680 was that it established a template for religious freedom and privacy with impenetrable protections against spiritual appropriation – but still made room for cooperation, harmony, and intimate, authentic cross-cultural relationships. (Fig. 3)



Figure 3. Drawing by Anita Otilia Rodríguez, *Horseshoe Game*, 2019; Caption: “In my father’s time, many people spoke Tiwa and Spanish. There were tri-lingual horseshoe games on the plaza, liberally peppered with jokes.”

This fragile *détente* has steadily eroded since the occupation of 1847, battered by the continuous violence of ongoing colonialism. Mine may be the last generation to carry in living memory the template for a beautiful way to resolve and reconcile cultural conflict and confluence. New Mexico is a petri dish for authentic diversity and I believe our historical experience has something to teach. Our historical experience is longer than the occupier’s—longer than the history of the United States. Reflecting this long presence in the region, one of the older popular *dichos in el norte* is, “*El diablo sabe más por viejo que por diablo.*” (“The Devil knows more from being old than from being the Devil.”)

Under the new U.S. laws, the old relationship between Taos Pueblo and Hispanic Taos town began to break down. The selective application of divisive racism and exploitative property laws had consequences.

U.S. annexation and occupation stimulated a land feeding-frenzy, and it was open season on Hispanic farm lands, villages, and commons, and private property was suddenly taxed. By contrast, Pueblo villages and lands were held in trust and could not be sold, taxed, or mortgaged. This had severe economic consequences for the reservations and is one of the reasons for poverty and the sustained lack of development in Indian Country. Ironically, however, this isolation permitted greater cultural cohesion and privacy for the Pueblos. Hispanic villages and private houses were subject to sale, leading to the breakup of extended families and the weakening of intergenerational support systems.

“Enchantment” means the substitution of an imagined reality for the historical facts. The Land of Enchantment is an imperialist fantasy, enchanting only for the privileged, while behind the romantic facade generated by the colonizer, the real-life historical experience of the two oldest communities

in northern New Mexico has been brutally dis-enchanting.

Generational New Mexicans have been historically traumatized and continue to be in ways that Anglo migrants have not. Whatever personal hardships our Anglo neighbors have survived, they have not been conquered as a people, lost their land, been enslaved, and their community has not been subjected to systematic genocide, mass incarceration, ongoing police killings, and racial violence.

History tells us that not only is the dispossession of Native peoples and the legacy of slavery a living part of our country's present circumstances but science is saying that the emotional impact of violence on our ancestors changes our bodies. Basically, the ground-breaking science of epigenetics, polyvagal theory, and cutting-edge brain science suggest that the traumas of previous generations "turn on" or "turn off" certain genes linked to disease and dysfunction; in other words, memory and trauma is literally embedded in the body and passed down through generations. This discovery is revolutionizing biology, psychology, medicine, and changing the way we think about history—and how we make history.

What you just read is a window into the hearts, the blood memory, and bones of Hispanic and Native strangers you pass on the street here in Taos and in New Mexico. And it is just a peek into the grand, sweeping, complicated, tragic, bloody, beautiful, violent story of those of us who have ancestors buried here.

**Anita Otilia Rodríguez** was born in Taos in 1941. She is a painter, writer, poet, traditional *enjarradora* (adobe finisher), and activist. She has lived, traveled, and worked in Mexico, China, and Egypt, and has received international recognition. About her artwork, she states, "If you think about it, creativity is the opposite of violence. It can bring social change without violence. I deliberately paint for both intellectuals and people who don't read because a lot of my people don't read." She is the daughter of an artist and a raconteur-druggist, whose business was on the Taos plaza. Her mother, Grace Graham King, provided art supplies, and her father, Alfredo Antonio Rodríguez, provided a ringside seat to the plaza and the storytelling skills to capture the complicated history and cultural drama of their town. After resurrecting the traditional New Mexican craft of *enjarrando* (adobe finishing) and running an adobe business for twenty-five years, Anita became a full-time painter at forty-seven and at fifty-five, she published her first book. Color is the most prominent feature of her work and it carries enormous emotional content. Her work is deeply layered and narrative; sometimes, a single painting can have two or more parallel story lines. Her work is suffused with symbols and is full of surprises, jokes, and visual bi-lingual puns. She includes the Mexican skeleton, the *calavera* because of its democratic character (you can't tell if they are male, female, rich, poor or of any race except the human). Animals also sneak into her paintings; they hide under leaves and behind things, or else they take center stage, always suggesting multiple meanings.