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Miguel Gandert

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Summer 1994

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THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY: IMAGES, CEREMONIES,
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By
Miguel Gandert, M.A.
University of New Mexico



**Southwest
Hispanic
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Retratos Mestizaje
A Photographic Survey of *Indo-Hispano* Traditions
of the Rio Grande Corridor

by
Miguel Gandert
Department of Communication and Journalism
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Retratos Mestizaje: A Visual Examination of the Indo-Hispano Traditions of the Rio Grande Valley

Chicano, Latino, Hispanic: the debate over cultural identity is an important issue for all *hispanos* in the United States, but within the 400-year *herencia* found in New Mexico, the definition of who we are is confusing and often controversial.

Growing up in Santa Fe, New Mexico, I was taught that *nuevo mexicanos*, especially those of us from the north, were Spanish/American, *manitos* (from the word *hermano* meaning little brother. A derogatory term was used by *norteños* to describe *nuevo mexicanos* from the southern part of the state, implying they were more Mexican than the "Spanish-Americans" from the north.

But culture can be examined in more critical ways than bloodlines. The camera, far from being an objective observer, can be a catalyst for self-examination and visual comparison, especially in regard to ritual, cultural, and spiritual traditions. My prime focus for this project is a visual examinations of several community rituals and what they share with similar cultural communities in the region.

In 1540 the Spanish *conquistadores* first appeared in what is now New Mexico. It became one of the most remote outposts of the Spanish diaspora. During that time, relationships between native peoples and the descendents of Spanish-Amer-Indian miscegenation evolved unique cultural traditions, many of which continue today.

Who are the arbitrators of this traditional culture, who are the guardians of *herencia*? I believe clues to our cultural

identity can be found in fiestas, feast days and rituals, during which the communities of the Rio Grande corridor reflect on their historical and spiritual traditions. For many of the communities examined in this survey, great sacrifices are made by members of the community to create elaborate pageants based on traditions that have evolved from the combination of colonial Spanish and Amer-Indian traditions.

For the last several years I have been photographing the urban and rural *hispano* experience found along the Rio Grande corridor. The images in this survey have been edited to create a visual discourse, an examination of who we are, and perhaps a more realistic look at our *mestizaje herencia*. My interest is in blurring the lines between southwestern Indian culture and that which has been traditionally described as southwestern Hispanic culture. For the sake of this discussion I will describe these traditions with the term *indo-hispano*, a term that I think to be the best representation of the cultural heritage of this region. Images in this survey were taken in communities as far north as Amalia, New Mexico, a village a few miles from the Colorado border, to *Ciudad Juarez*, a Mexican border city of over a million people.

Prior to discussion of the images in the survey, it is important to examine the methodology under which my images were created. I consider myself a documentary photographer. I believe my work is part of a continuing tradition in photography that is as old as the medium. Documentary photography is, simply, the fair and reasonable presentation of the real world with images that

should communicate ideas. My primary concern has been people and their relationship to their environments.

In the photographic history of New Mexico, the visual history of the state has been traditionally created by white males, and the interpretation and dissemination of images have been controlled by the same. For example, at the turn of the century, much of what was known about *nuevo mexicanos* is based on the images of Charles Lummis, a white man who photographed the *hermanos penitentes* while protected by an armed guard. The visual history of the depression era in New Mexico is seen through the images of John Collier and Russell Lee, who visited the state while on assignment for the Farm Security Administration. Even today New Mexico's visual record is being created by whites. In New Mexico Treasures, a calendar released by the New Mexico Office of Cultural Affairs, only two of the 32 photographers published are Chicano.

I feel it is important at this time *nuevo mexicanos* assert their cultural identity as image-makers and scholars by examining with a critical eye and an *indo-hispano* perspective, the traditions that make New Mexico a culturally rich place.

In the kind of photography I practice, there are certain issues that need to be addressed. Perhaps the primary one is that I have little interest in the journalistic fallacy of objectivity. I am not an objective viewer of events, but I do make the effort to be fair and honest. I am not trying to manipulate the truth; rather I am trying to create images that are compelling to look at as well as informational. There is a large amount of portraiture

in my images; by using this confrontational way of picture-making the subjects of the imagery are giving some control over the way they are perceived on film.

A photograph should possess creative tension and a sense of drama; it should provide a satisfactory aesthetic experience. Theatrical qualities within the frame have always been an important factor during my editing process. The pictures that are exhibited or published are only a small percentage of the images that are actually taken during specific events.

The theatrical qualities in documentary imagery are often criticized. Postmodernist photographic theory claims that documentary photographers take liberties with the medium for its presumed claim to present a verifiable reality. Another contention is that the photographer reduces subject matter to voyeuristic consumption. I believe that the theatrical quality of my shooting is not problematic in relation to the to the ritualistic pageantry, for my images and the goals of those presenting that pageantry are similar. And one would hope that as a an artist trying to understand and preserve things that change and disappear, images go beyond the simplistic issues of voyeurism.

I want to create images that viewers will study and question. In the strongest images there needs to be a tension, or at least empathy for the subjects in front of the camera. As a *chicano* I believe the viewpoint of my pictures will reveal a different viewpoint and a level of intimacy that is not seen in photographs by white counterparts. In other, more traditional social sciences such as history, political science, and anthropology, *chicano*

scholarship has created insights into the ways we view New Mexico's regional culture.

The camera and the photographer are constantly framing and editing images out of the world. In my work single images are less important than larger groups of images. The photographs in my exhibitions are conceptually linked; they relate to very specific themes and issues. In this survey of images, I have gone from showing very specific events to the presentation of political, religious and cultural events in a regional context. The pictures are an examination of similarities in spiritual community *hispano* rituals. The goal of the images in this survey is to create dialogue. I hope that upon viewing these photographs, *nuevo mexicanos* will address the issue of *mestizaje herencia* and *indo-hispano* culture, and will support new dialogue about post-Spanish colonial heritage, a product of the miscegenation between Spaniards and the native peoples of the land now called America.

There is a specific thesis for the selection of photographs in this survey. I want to create a visual argument: the culture of the native peoples of this region, both *hispanos* and Amer-Indians, is an *indo-hispano* culture and that based on that shared heritage, the cultural delineation between *nuevo mexicanos* and southwest Amer-Indian is more political than spiritual.

When we look at how *nuevo mexicanos* define their cultural legacy, the question needs to be asked how much of our image is formed through the mainstream media. Was it not politics that defined *nuevo mexicanos*, role in territorial New Mexico? In terms of land grants and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, it appears

that white colonists needed a method to distinguish between the legal rights of Indians and *mexicanos*. Indians have been perceived as sovereign nations protected by United States and New Mexico's territorial governments; if the same sovereign rights had applied to *nuevo mexicanos*, there would have been little prime land available to settlers coming from the east.

The photographs curated for this survey focus on land grants and on one specific religious event and two different rituals that are performed with minor variations in many areas in post-colonial Spanish regions in the Americas. The focus on this survey concentrates on the corridor of the Rio Grande river between New Mexico's border with Colorado and Juarez, Mexico.

In this survey I have created images using both color and black-and-white material. My usual working method is to photograph in black-and-white, and most exhibitions of my photographs will be in black-and-white, but in order to get the maximum discourse from this survey material and research, I have also made numerous photographs in color. I hope this material will have a communication life beyond the exhibition wall and that the potential use will be to illustrate, the research of other scholars working in this region.

The spirituality of land, the injustice against the land claims of *nuevo mexicanos* based on the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo is where this survey begins. This treaty between Mexico and the United States was signed in 1848, ending the Mexican-American war and ceding New Mexico to the United States. A major provision of the grant was to insure the land grants that were made to Indians

and *hispanos* under decrees from the king of Spain were respected.

One Hundred and forty years later the treaty is still an issue. In 1988 I documented the land occupation by followers of Amador Flores in the northern New Mexico community of Tierra Amarilla. Based on the treaty, Flores wrote a deed, filed the it at Rio Arriba county, and paid taxes on the land. A land speculator from Arizona claimed the land and New Mexico's district court told Flores the land was not his, he would have to leave. Flores refused, was jailed and a group of armed supporters occupied the land. Pedro Archuelta, a veteran of Reis Lopez Tijerina land grant campaign 20 years earlier, lead the occupation. During the time I was photographing, a *New York Times* reporter interviewed Pedro and asked him why *hispanos* should have any claims to the land, and why they shouldn't give all the land back to the Indians Archuelta answered with a single profound sentence in Spanish, "*¿quienes mi mama?*," A definite reference to the miscegenation between Spanish colonists and the region's native people.

When we contemplate the spirituality of southwestern Indians, we thinks of traditional religion based on a reverence for the ancient ones, the past and the sanctity of land. In many ways our Indian *vecinos* had a profound effect on how the *hispanos* regarded the land, as the original land grants with community ownership were structure much like pueblo land holdings. Continuing struggles in northern New Mexico to preserve water rights and the traditional agrarian lifestyle show that *nuevo mexicanos*, fidelity to preserve and survive continues.

The issues of land grants and spirituality come together each year during Easter in Tomé, a village located about 30 miles south of Albuquerque. In 1966 the courts were petitioned to dissolve the original Spanish land grant and a lump sum was paid to the heirs. A volcanic mound called *El Cerro*, is located in the heart of the grant and is considered sacred to the community. The land was sold to the Horizon Corporation, which held the title to the property and posted signs prohibiting trespassers. It was not until January of 1993 that *El Cerro* was returned to the community. Yet despite the Horizon signs about trespassing, over the years, *nuevo mexicanos* appropriate the hill as their own each Easter.

For the last several years I have spent Good Friday at *El Cerro* and created a series of images called "*Los Peregrinos de Tomé*." The pictures document a spiritual pilgrimage, as each year hundreds of New Mexicans make an annual pilgrimage to *El Cerro*. It is a vital center of worship for this part of New Mexico. Years ago the community *morada*, a meeting place for the *hermanos penitentes* (a lay Catholic brotherhood) was located at the base of the hill. Although the most recent *morada* has been abandoned, the *hermanos* still have a profound influence on the spirituality of the hill. Many people, in the tradition of the *hermanidad*, carry crosses on their backs and climb the hill barefoot or on their knees.

A key image in this series of photographs is a picture of Edwin Berry, a *penitente* and the *hermano mayor* of the Tomé brotherhood. In the photograph Berry is shown singing traditional *alabados* (Spanish religious hymns) yet at the same time he is

playing a drum. When Berry is asked the significance of the drum, he says it is because of his Indian heritage. Like many *nuevo mexicanos*, Berry considers himself a *genizaro*, a descendent of detribalized Indians from the colonial period. Berry acknowledges cultural miscegenation as key to his heritage, and like Pedro Archuelta, is proud of that *herencia*.

When one begins to examine the content of many images in the survey, there are many which contain references to *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*. Her symbol is key to understanding the cultural identity of this region in that she is the most widely venerated symbol in the northern portion of the Spanish diaspora. *La Guadalupana* is the spiritual symbol of the miscegenation or the colonial Spaniard and the Amer-Indian.

The history of the *virgen* is almost as old as the history of the Spaniards' arrival in the new world. The apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe, *La Morenita* (the Dark Virgin, as she is sometimes called,) appeared in the Americas on December 9, 1531, 39 years after Christopher Columbus landed in the Americas. She appeared on a remote hilltop called Tepeyac in what is now Mexico City. The hill at Tepeyac was the sacred place of the pre-Columbian goddess *Tonantzín*, the earth mother. The young dark-skinned Virgin, wearing a blue-green mantle filled with stars, was seen by an Amer-Indian peasant, Juan Diego, leaving her image on his cloak.

With the early Spanish and *mestizo* settlers, the Virgin and her influence came north up the Rio Grande. She has since become the symbol of peace and justice for minorities along the Rio

Grande as well as other *hispanos* in the region.

Los matachines a ritualistic dance is another point of visual analysis of these photographs. This ceremonial dance is an important part of numerous *hispano* and Amer-Indian communities. Although the origin of the word "*matachine*" is unknown, the dancers' steps, movements and meaning are thought to have come to the Americas from Spain, and may date from the Moorish invasion in of Spain in the eighth century. Although the dancers and the ritual vary from community to community, there are numerous characters who remain constant within all the different presentations. In New Mexico the *matachines* pageant is considered primarily a *hispano* tradition although numerous pueblos including Taos, Picuris, San Juan, and Jemez all perform the ritual dance. In Mexico and along our southern border with Mexico the *matachines* is performed by numerous indigenous groups including the Yaquis from southern Arizona and the Tarhumaras who live in the remote areas of Copper Canyon in northern Mexico, both are Amer-Indian peoples.

The dance of the *matachines* does not have a specific day on which it is performed, but rather is used to celebrate numerous feasts of importance depending on the community and the ritual performance varies from community to community.

Hispanos who dress as Indians is a third point of visual analysis in this survey. From northern New Mexico to Juarez there are numerous communities that perform dances and rituals during which *hispanos* face paint, feathers, drums, and noisemakers that look like bows and arrows. In this visual survey the importance of

Amer-Indian objects is seen in numerous rituals. In the north, New Mexico *hispanos* call themselves "Comanches," in Juarez, Mexican performers who dress as Indians called themselves "Apaches," and in the *Tortugas* celebration in Las Cruces, the *nuevo mexicanos* who perform costumed as Indians call themselves *matachines*. Another group of dancers who dress similar to the *matachines* in the northern communities of New Mexico, call themselves *danzantes*.

There are certain characters that are important in the *matachine* ritual. A partial list of the roles is important to the analyze of these images. The *abuelo*, or in Mexico *el viejo*, is a masked clown whose role is to keep order during the rituals. In the survey pictures, a wool masked figure appears in Amalia, where the *abuelo* dances alone during the Midwinter Masquerades, unlike in other communities where the *abuelos* are just one of many characters that participate in the ritual dances.

In Picuris, a small northern pueblo, where Indians dance the *matachines* on Christmas eve and Christmas day, there are two *abuelos*, a male dressed as a male and a second in drag. Both wear rubber masks. In Bernalillo, 14 miles north of Albuquerque, the *matachines* dance on the feast of San Lorenzo. The *abuelos* wear black hats, and although they keep order, they are not masked. In Alcalde, where the *matachines* dance on the 27th of December, the *abuelo* mask is made of fur, much like the ones in Amalia.

In Juarez, Mexico, *el viejo* is much like the *abuelos* in Picuris, where rubber masks or Mexican wrestling masks are worn and the characters not only play the trickster, the fool, who keeps order, but also play tricks, while *mexicanos* dressed as

Indians dance to the intense beat of Indian drums.

The *Malinche* is usually played by a young girl dressed in white. The young girl is the symbol of purity, named after the Indian wife of Hernan Cortes. She dances in the ceremonies in Alcalde, Picuris, Albuquerque, Bernalillo, *Tortugas* in Las Cruces, and San Antonito, a small village on the east side of the Sandias where the *matachines* dance for the *Fiesta de Nuestra Señor De Mapimi*.

The *monarca* is the lead dancer in the *matachine* ceremony. It is he who the *Malinche* pays tribute to. He is an important character to all the typical *matachine* rituals.

On December 12th, the *Fiesta de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* is key in this survey in that three of the *indo-hispano* pageants and a pilgrimage similar to Tomé, are celebrated on that day. Barrio San José, Albuquerque's largest *hispano* barrio, celebrates with *matachines* as a part of their community ritual. Community parish members dress up as Juan Diego and Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. It is interesting to note that the *matachines* in San José are not from the community, but come from San Antonito.

In Las Cruces, the celebration is large and spectacular. The day begins with pilgrims climbing A Mountain, to the east of Las Cruces. Although the mountain is covered with radar antennas, this pilgrimage, like the one in Tomé, is an example of *nuevo mexicanos* reappropriating spiritual land rights. Later in the day at the church in *Tortugas*, the *Guadalupana* is celebrated with *hispanos* dressed as Indians dancing to the beat of drums. The Indian dancers at *Tortugas* call themselves *matachines*, although

danzantes, the dance group that most resembles the northern *matachine* dancers, complete with a *monarca and malinche* do not call themselves *matachines*.

The parallels between *Tortugas* in Las Cruces and the celebrations in front of the cathedral in Juarez are notable. Once again *mexicanos* dressed like Indians perform in devotion to the *Guadalupana*. The structure of the dance is nearly identical to *Tortugas*, except the role played by the *abuelo*, or, as they call him, the *viejo*, is a significant one.

The tradition of *hispanos* dressing as Indians exists in northern New Mexico as well; in the survey we have images from Alcalde, where community men dress as Indians in order to do battle with Spaniards in a new world version of the historic drama, *Los Moros Y Cristianos*, a pageant performed in New Mexico at Santa Cruz, a *hispano* community near Chimayo. The ritual of the *Moros y Christianos* is also performed by *hispanos* and *indios* throughout the Americas.

Cultural identity, how is it lost? In *nuevo mexico* there was first the loss of the land, and this story continues today. The land has been lost and the lifestyles have changed; traditions are threatened. Next there is loss of language. How many young *chicanos* no longer speak Spanish, or have learned the language in school? With the loss of Spanish we lose much of the oral history and the spiritual traditions. Finally there is the loss of culture. This is the battle that all cultures struggle with in the modern world. This issue is especially important in the reconstructing of an *indo-hispano* cultural legacy.

The photographs in this survey are part of a regional study in which the camera and visual imagery will reveal a cultural identity in the southwest that pays tribute to miscegenation and the rich cultural tradition it has created, and to understanding what it means to be *nuevo mexicano*. We are still asking, *¿quienes mi mama?*

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