

Mestizaje desde Abajo

Zapotec Visual Cultures and Decolonial Mestizaje in the Photography of Citlali Fabián

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In early twentieth-century Latin America, nation building foreclosed Indigenous futurities through the ideologies of mestizaje. At the turn of the twenty-first century, scholarship on Indigenous activism, movements, societies, and cultures highlights this legacy as an ideological arm of settler colonialism and questions the ability of the logic of mestizaje to articulate Indigenous personhood, survivance, and futurities. And yet, in the quotidian experiences and interactions of Indigenous peoples, in their commerce, cultural productions, and assertions of indigeneity, a kind of mestizaje molded by Indigenous people emerges. I refer to this as *mestizaje desde abajo*, mestizaje from below, a concept that originally emphasized the changing economic and social dynamics in the lives and communities of upwardly mobile Indigenous people in Peru and Bolivia. Mestizaje desde abajo is mestizaje from an Indigenous starting point and not one of recovering Indigenous heritage. Unlike the US variants of mestizaje, innovated by trailblazer Gloria Anzaldúa, it does not find its coherence through the organizing principle of blood quantum and miscegenation, actual or metaphorical. Nor is it engendered by national borders, as in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* (2007). Rather, it is desde abajo, *from below*, arising from the Indigenous people and places under the oppression of the state and outside the purview of the national imaginary. Below, I expand this concept and move away from socioeconomic contexts to think deeply about the contested and subaltern forms of mestizaje in use by Indigenous cultural producers to create, in my analysis, gendered decolonial imaginaries. I extend the concept of mestizaje desde abajo to consider how Indigenous visual artists capture the ways in which gender and indigeneity are knitted together to offer a decolonial model layered through Indigenous kinship ties.

This essay focuses on Zapotec visual cultures, specifically the photography of Zapotec photographer Citlali Fabián and her 2018 series *Mestiza*. Her work grapples with internal migration, intimacy, relationality, and belonging through a decolonial mestizaje framework unmoored to colonial visions of race—what I refer to as *mestizaje desde abajo*. Fabián’s use of *mestiza* abandons the biologized notions of *mestizaje* altogether. Instead she has developed a “*mestiza* photographic method” grounded in an Indigenous worldview and facilitated by the long exposure times of the wet plate collodion photographic process. Capturing the daily lives of Indigenous Zapotecs in Oaxaca, Mexico, her work emphasizes women who are rooted in their Zapotec identities but also move between Oaxaca City and their Zapotec towns of origin. Such internal migration recalls the spirit of Anzaldúa’s “new *mestiza* consciousness” and its epistemological shifts across geographies. Indigenous migrations, even on a seemingly small scale, open up a radical space in which to think about Indigenous liminality through pueblo-city migration routes as a kind of *mestizaje desde abajo*.

On a summer afternoon in 2018, I met Fabián for lunch during a visit she made to Los Angeles to document transnational Zapotec families and communities. The venue was a classic Los Angeles Chinese restaurant, loud and bustling with frenetic but organized energy. It was a family affair with my siblings—including all our children—joining us; it was not a typical research interview. We were eager to hear about Fabián’s whirlwind year, so we kept the children quiet with quick refills of food and gentle hushes. I had seen previous images from her ongoing project. The *New York Times* had just featured her new portraiture series *Mestiza* on their photojournalism blog *Lens* under the title “Portraits of *Mestiza* Women in Mexico, as They Wish To Be Seen” (Nieves 2018). As a Yalalteca myself, I devoured the images and the various layers of self-representation that the images invoked. The affective power of Fabián’s photography reminds me that the Indigenous gaze is shaped by the absence of Indigenous images in the archive. The first few lines of the article describe Fabián’s upbringing in Oaxaca “immersed in her indigenous culture—and photography.” Fabián, like her people, the very Yalalteca/os she was photographing, has “deep roots in Oaxaca, descending from the Zapotecs in the Sierra Juárez mountains”

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Figure 1. Citlali Fabián, *Untitled*, 2017. View from the main church bell tower in Yalalag, Mexico. Image courtesy of the photographer.

(Nieves 2018). Thus my family's connection to Fabián and her work ran deep. All of us around the table originated from Yalalag and we shared a bloodline as well; we were "family" as Yalaltecos and as kin—tías, tíos, primos, primas (fig. 1).

Yalalag, an Indigenous village with a population of about 2,100, rarely if ever receives this kind of global attention (Gutiérrez Nájera 2007). Also significant, Indigenous women photographers seldom receive the kind of support needed for visibility on international platforms or for exhibiting their work. Thus Fabián, as an Indigenous photographer documenting the lives of Zapotec women, worked within a context I could not escape as an Indigenous woman myself and a member of the Yalalteco diaspora in California. The *New York Times* write-up described Fabián's *Mestiza* series as



Figure 2. Citlali Fabián, Regina, 2018. From the *Mestiza* series. Baby girl wrapped in a rebozo and surrounded by corn husks. Image courtesy of the photographer.

“moody, chiaroscuro portraits of indigenous women and girls from Oaxaca, taken with large format cameras, [that] are both intimate and universal. While indigenous Oaxacan culture is celebrated by photographers from all over the world, Ms. Fabián wanted to capture its power” (Nieves 2018) (fig. 2). I saw myself in the wide-toothed smiles and almond-shaped eyes of the Yalalteca/os looking out from the pictures; I could place myself

within landscape of our pueblo of origin; but I found the title of her series, *Mestiza*, perplexing. On the surface, mestizaje is a framework that gives the *Mestiza* collection of Oaxacan, Yalalag, and Zapotec images the character of a millennial archive full of historic, cultural, and political contradictions. Mestizaje is the well-documented phenomenon of the racial mixture of Spanish and Indigenous peoples in the wake of colonization; it does not signify indigeneity. The logic of mestizaje transformed Latin America as it birthed the idea of modernity and a new kind of citizenship in the postindependence and revolutionary periods. Indigeneity was a part of those formulations, but it was constructed as a hinderance to that progress. And yet there we were, with a Zapotec Indigenous photographer, now with global exposure, whose portraits of Indigenous women, pictures unlike any I had ever seen, displayed the power of indigeneity under the banner of mestizaje.

The question of “Why ‘mestiza?’” echoed in my head. The juxtaposition of firmly rooted Zapotec indigeneity with the colonial-given mestiza of the title drives me to excavate how Indigenous people deploy mestizaje to situate Indigenous knowledges, bodies, archives, and womanhood. What did Fabián’s formulation of mestizaje force me to rethink about how Indigenous people are racialized and assert their own self-representations? And more significantly, how might Fabián’s articulation of mestizaje present Indigenous women as agents of their own emancipation? Employing the concept of mestizaje desde abajo/mestizaje from below, this essay grapples with the very idea of a “decolonial mestizaje,” a mestizaje that is not defined by the state but claimed and remade by Indigenous people and that ripples out with multidirectional temporal force. Fabián’s body of work, both the wet plate collodion method and the content of her images, opens up a space for a radical (re)imagining of Indigenous women in the visual archive of indigeneity and its futurities.

Unlearning Mestizaje

When invoked in the US context, the concept of mestizaje remains one of the most enduring frameworks for liberation, counterhegemonic discourse, and heteronormative critique for various marginalized communities, particularly US Latina/o/xs and Chicana/o/xs. Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*, first published in 1987, is at the heart of contemporary formulations of mestizaje in the United States, and her foundational work has shaped the last thirty-plus years of Chicanx and Latinx scholarship (Cantú 1995; Keating

2006; Pérez-Torres 2006; Saldívar 1997; Saldívar-Hull 2000). The formation and circulation of *mestizaje* arises from the origin story of Mexican national identity, namely the mythologized union of Hernán Cortés and La Malinche/Malintzin and the child she birthed. *Mestiza/o* entered the lexicon with the mixture of these two bloodlines, and as a racial imagination it engendered the emergent Spanish *casta* system, a hierarchical system of social classification based primarily on ancestry.

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa's poetic and theoretical innovation captures readers immediately. She charts the "new *mestiza*" and "mestiza consciousness" as the final stage in an ontological shift that begins with geography (the Texas-Mexico border) and broadens to reach multiple sites of "knowing" for Chicana/os: family/home, sexual, spiritual, linguistic, and poetic. *Borderlands* is integral to the transnational shift in American studies. "For Anzaldúa, the Borderlands—in both its geographical and metaphoric meanings—represent painful yet also potentially transformational spaces where opposites converge, conflict, and transmute" (Keating 2009, 9–10). While rooted in opposites, the "new *mestiza*" primarily gains coherence through the figure of the Indian woman and a pantheon of goddesses, symbols of indigeneity, and Nahuatl at every new site of a border. Rather than construct a "new *mestiza*" imaginary, Anzaldúa constructs a capacious Indigenous female body that contains the multiple epistemological shifts she names. It is this slippage—the unfulfilled promise of *mestizaje* and the shortcut to indigeneity—that is particular to US theories of *mestizaje* that must be unlearned.

Anzaldúa imagines an actual physical body, in other instances a metaphorical body, of indigeneity that stretches across national boundaries and back in time 500 years to the Malintzin. She writes in a section of *Borderlands* titled "The Wounding of the *india*-*Mestiza*" that the original wound was made upon the Indigenous female body: "Not me sold out my people but they me. *Malinali Tenepat*, or *Malintzín*. . . . Because of the color of my skin they betrayed me. The dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage, bludgeoned for 300 years, sterilized and castrated in the twentieth century" (Anzaldúa 2007, 44). Because the original wound was made upon the Indian mother's body, it is there that the healing of "300 years" of violence must be sought, Anzaldúa contends. But how is the "*india*" of the wounded "*india*-*mestiza*" body (re)constituted in order to be healed? For Anzaldúa, it is through Chicana/o/x identity becoming, in large part, an amalgamation of various "Aztecisms": Aztlán in the Southwest and in the face of the violence of

the US-Mexico border; Nahuatl in response to the “linguistic terrorism” of English; Aztec spiritual practices as healing for the “intimate terrorism” of Mexican culture; and female Indigenous goddesses as an invocation of the erotic. Thus, at sites of colonial and state violence, patriarchy and misogyny, and *any* silencing of *mestiza/o/xs*, Anzaldúa reasserts indigeneity as healing, but it is an indigeneity only accessed through *mestizaje*. Speaking to the resilience of the *india*-Mestiza, Anzaldúa continues, “The spirit of the fire spurs her to fight for her own skin and a piece of ground to stand on, a ground from which to view the world—a perspective, a homeground where she can plumb the rich ancestral roots into her own ample *mestiza* heart” (45). The power of Anzaldúa’s formulation of *mestizaje* is amplified by the multidimensional temporal futurities it offers. Not only does *Borderlands* offer a unifying aesthetic of indigeneity for the future (reified again and again in the “new” *mestizaje* imaginary); it reaches back to insert the new *mestiza* into a narrative archive of indigeneity, so that Chicana/o/xs can simultaneously imagine their indigeneity in the past and in the future.

And yet, the great epistemological *movidas* offered up by Anzaldúa in *Borderlands*, radical and transformative for Chicana/o/xs, become fault lines for contemporary Indigenous peoples—in particular, Indigenous Latinxs. At the heart of the ongoing debate around the meaning and impact of this Anzaldúa-style *mestizaje*, I argue, is the following question: How has *mestizaje* shaped indigeneity writ large for Indigenous people who are *not* recovering their indigeneity as Anzaldúa does in *Borderlands*? There is no metaphorical Indigenous body for Indigenous Latinxs that must be remade. While Oaxacan Latinxs contend with the *Borderlands* version of *mestizaje* in the United States, Zapotecs in Oaxaca and Mexico, along with all Indigenous populations, contend with another genealogy of *mestizaje* produced by the rise of the nation-state: a *mestizaje* that is a lot less generative, foreclosing Indigenous futures and all but ensuring the erasure of Indigenous peoples.

Decolonizing Mestizaje

How do we move beyond the frame of the “encounter” when viewing Indigenous photography? The discourse of encounters is an epistemological frame, represented through image and text, that privileges the non-Indigenous settler and continues to shape our engagement with Indigenous images. Linda Tuhiwai Smith reminds us in her foundational text, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, that non-Indigenous encounters with natives were instrumental

in producing the imperial gaze. “The significance of travellers’ tales and adventurers’ adventures is that they represented the Other to a general audience back in Europe which became fixed in the milieu of cultural ideas . . . images . . . and stories which told of savagery and primitivism, generated further interest, and therefore further opportunities, to represent the Other again” (Smith 2012, 8). These imperial and then colonial gazes were most violent in relation to Indigenous women, who were placed within Eurocentric formulations of gender and sexuality.

Edgar Garcia extends the encounter polemic further in his analysis of studies on Indigenous pictographs:

The problem is a temporal mismatch: whereas studies of the poetics of indigenous signs have focused on moments of colonial encounter . . . studies of the contemporary world poetry of the Americas have presupposed a modernity that is lettered, capitalistic, urban, and singular. The works that engage with the poetics of indigenous signs have focused on the past, while those that are situated in the present have focused too little on indigenous signs. This mismatch has had the unintended effect of archiving the indigenous while normalizing mestizo and hybrid cosmopolitanisms as world historical vanguards. (2020, 4–5)

While pictographs are not photography, I am inspired by Garcia’s focus on the visual cultures of Indigenous people. I turn to Fabián to examine how she contests the colonial gaze and “temporal mismatch” by going inward—into herself, her family, her pueblo, and its people—to build an Indigenous-centered photographic practice. To understand her use of the polemical “mestiza,” I focus on Fabián’s photographic method, on her own positioning as a Yalalteca in relation to her subjects, and on the very meaning of photography as detailed in her artist statement and conversations I have had with her over the last few years.

In the website description of her photo essay *Mestiza*, Fabián (2020) draws our attention to how *mestizaje* is formulated across two axes, the nation and white supremacy.

Mestiza is a term to refer to people who shared half indigenous and half caucasian blood. An adjective used to consolidate the identity of a nation, based on the idealization that our mixed-race was favored from its white/Spanish heritage. The term as I see [it] is a volatile mark to show a distinction and race supremacy.

Here, Fabián uses the female-gendered ending “a” in *mestiza* to explain the architecture of the national and racist project of *mestizaje*. By invoking

gender while critiquing the racist blood logic of mestizaje, she reminds us of Maria Lugones's argument that "heterosexism [is] a key part of how gender fuses with race in the operations of colonial power" (2007, 189). The power of Fabián's formulation of mestiza is her use of it as an adjective. Mestiza is not a subjectivity, a sense of personhood, but rather a descriptor placed on Indigenous people, a modifier but not the subject itself. And yet in the opening of her statement, we find an Anzaldúa-inflected use of mestiza: "Beyond the color of my skin, my blood is *mestiza*, my way of thinking, the way I look, and the way people look at me . . . the condition that others pointed out in me, that today I take for mine" (Fabián 2020).¹ Her images are, seemingly, nestled here in the oppositional narratives of mestizaje: the Mexican state, legacies of Spanish colonialism, and Chicana feminism. Each of these narratives is shaped by non-Indigenous people. Thus Fabián eschews these uses of mestizaje, uses that are imposed from above. Rather, she crafts a mestizaje desde abajo/mestizaje from below, a contested, subaltern mestizaje, as it is described in Latin American scholarship (Hale 1996; Klor de Alva 1994; Mallon 1996; Marisol de la Cadena 2000; Wade 2010).

Mestizaje desde abajo is distinct from Anzaldúa's formulation, which gains its transformative power from the heteronormative blood mixture of mother and father. Rather, as Peter Wade explains, mestizaje de abajo points to quotidian uses of mestizaje by Indigenous people throughout Latin America:

Indigenous mestizos in the Peruvian Andes . . . identify as mestizos but do not disavow their Indigenous identities. To be mestizo, for them, means socioeconomic success and moral respectability; it does not signify the antithesis of indigeneity . . . people in the northeast of Brazil who identify simultaneously as mestizo and Indigenous challenge the official idea of mestizaje that dictates that mestizo requires a negation or elimination of indigeneity or blackness. . . . In Guatemala, young urban dwellers recognize their Indigenous heritage but reject both Maya and Ladina identities. (2010, 2, my translation)

The generative contradictions of this negation of indigeneity, urbanism, and upward mobility readily surface: how can an Indigenous people engage the discursive frame of mestizaje but not take it on as identity? While earlier uses of mestizaje desde abajo tend to focus on the upward mobility of Indigenous people and their changing socioeconomic status as a catalyst for their novel uses of mestizaje, I shift my focus to the cultural uses of mestizaje desde abajo. Specifically, the subjects, method, and purpose of Fabián's photography illustrate how mestizaje does not exclusively

function as a subject position, but the *misuse* of it can be harnessed to create a dynamic Indigenous world.

In her contribution to the National Geographic Storytellers Summit 2020, Fabián notes something counterintuitive about her still images: “photography captures change.” This is an especially striking remark because Fabián works in the wet plate collodion method, which requires prolonged periods of stillness to project the image onto a glass plate. The image is then etched onto the glass through a highly time-sensitive chemical process. It is a photographic choreography that depends upon the rigid and even frozen modeling of the subject. So how does this nineteenth-century photographic technology capture the dynamism of contemporary Indigenous people and, in particular, the lives of Indigenous women? Fabián (2020) explains: “Mestiza is a photo project to amplify our voices, the images of contemporary Mexican women. It’s a platform to make us visible in a way where the photographic act is crucial when it encourages us to give a part of ourselves to make it possible. That’s why I choose Wet Plate Collodion, a Nineteenth-century photographic technique to make these portraits.” It is precisely the stillness, the limits of wet collodion, that enables Fabián’s vision of decolonial mestizaje, a mestizaje reimaged by Indigenous people for their own use, placing Indigenous visions of self and kinship at the center of cultural production. This decolonial use of mestizaje I see at work in the *Mestiza* series resonates as a kind of mestizaje desde abajo (fig. 3).

Mestizaje endures as a necessary formulation for Fabián, as illustrated by the title of her project. But the mestizaje she depicts does not rely on blood mixture as the fulcrum of dynamism; rather, it is rooted in kinships, relations, memories, and pueblo that predate the image. She writes,

I call this a series of collaborative portraits of women in my life, in an exploration of our identity. The women in my portraits are friends and family, I chose them and asked them to participate because I was looking for people who I felt close to, people who I felt empathetic with. They are my mom, cousins, nieces, and friends. They put their time and souls in these images. I waited and I captured them. (Fabián 2020)

The “waiting” is the key to unlocking decolonial mestizaje. Furthermore, Fabián redefines the very meaning of the Indigenous photographic encounter by focusing on women with whom she has deep relationships, avoiding the novelty projected by the settler gaze. The decolonial mestizaje in her photography of Zapotec and Oaxacan women does not facilitate the reproduction of *casta* distinctions, since non-Indigenous people leave



Figure 3. Citlali Fabián, Eva, 2018. From the Mestiza series. Portrait of an Indigenous Oaxacan woman. Image courtesy of the photographer.

the equation altogether. Rather, Fabián's iteration of decolonial mestizaje is rooted in a mestizaje desde abajo, the mestizaje deployed among Indigenous people, borne of the longstanding kinships and intimacies she has maintained with her subjects. Only such deep intimacies make her images possible, precisely because the wet collodion method can require exposure

times from twenty seconds to five minutes for the images to be imprinted onto glass. Through the stillness, the photographer and subject must breathe together, maintain eye contact, and stay connected in order to produce such striking images; thus, *mestizaje desde abajo* is found in the collaborative process of making these images. A transformative process for the Indigenous photographer and subject, this is the *change* that Fabián gestures toward and that is locked into the gaze of the Indigenous women looking out at the viewers. Fabián's images offer an invitation to wrestle with *mestizaje*, but on Indigenous terms.

Indigenous Futures

Imagining Indigenous futurities requires that we contend with the erasure of Indigenous contributions to the archive. Like the ideological *mestizaje* that privileges the narrative of blood mixture as the origin story of the Mexican nation in order to produce a Eurocentric center, *mestizaje* functioned as an organizing principle for the archive. I would like to explore how Fabián's photography and method offer an indigeneity that imposes its own changes on the world and on the early archives of the nation, despite consisting of contemporary images. In order to do this, we must imagine an indigeneity that is not passive but imposes its vision on colonial machinations. Much like celestial bodies that have their own gravitational pull, Indigenous people, their cultural productions, and, most significantly, their migrations/mobilities grab and make and remake the very ideas of race, gender, language, kinship, music, and so on. Cultural transits of indigeneity follow and intermingle in the routes of *mestizaje* as shown here, not because *mestizaje* changes indigeneity but because indigeneity changes *mestizaje*.

I am struck by Fabián's wet collodion method and its affective power. It is an "old timey" method that invokes a historical archive that has disappeared Indigenous presence. Many photographers who did photograph Indigenous people in the United States and Latin America presented them as vanishing races and thus worked to produce "pristine" images of Indigenous people and culture (Lonetree 2019; Lydon 2014). Fabián's method inserts Indigenous people into a memory of the archive. In nineteenth-century silvery tones, her images remind you of who was left out of the archive when it was imagined. Those who were left out or pushed to the margins continue to haunt the archive, and using a century-old method to depict contemporary Indigenous women has the power to produce a futurity by critiquing their exclusion. She claims past photographic technologies to offer a vision on contemporary

indigeneity and future. As Garcia (2020, 4) asks in his own observations of pictographs, “How for instance, do pictographs give historical orientation and temporal form to the same colonial acts that would seek to silence them? . . . The sign, as particular locus of language and culture, offers a place in which to observe the transitive meaning making of indigenous cultures in indigenous and nonindigenous contexts.” The photographic image as sign opens up multiple worlds of Indigenous futurities, especially meaningful and necessary for the Indigenous viewer. Fabián seeks to document the multiple and varying resonances of indigeneity: “My hope is to show what captivates my attention from them and how they respond when we are open to dialogue, to create a representation of ourselves. To re-shape the image of our identity” (2020). Collectivity and dialogue among Indigenous women are foundational to our Zapotec pueblos, but also critical for Indigenous survivance as internal migration touches every Indigenous community.

In looking at these images again, I am moved by how Fabián transforms the markers of indigeneity: the corn husk collars and crowns, the rebozo (fig. 4). The physical features of the women—their brown skin, the penetrating gaze of the almond-shaped eyes, the bare breasts and small baby fists—are intensified by the tones of the wet collodion method. Fabián captures the women as they are, complex, empowered, and connected to their pueblos of origin, and boomerangs them into the archive that is yet to be. She offers us a view of the world from Yalalag, a town nestled high in the Sierra Norte mountain range of Oaxaca, where the mountains are mesmerizing, their grandeur always on display in the background of her images. The vistas of the mountain range, the silhouette of the peaks, the mist and clouds that settle into the valley below all have a tremendous affective power for Yalalteca/os living in the diaspora. The series is an affirmation of belonging, of being rooted in a place of mountains and clouds brought into relief by the interplay of shadows and light. It is here that her decolonial mestizaje emerges. This is why we look eagerly at Fabián’s images, to see beyond what is on the paper and hear the stories passed down from parents and grandparents about a specific place in the world where we originated. As the diasporic world of Zapotecs grows exponentially, the experiences of liminality multiply, beginning with an initial experience of migration out of the pueblo to Oaxaca City. The drive between Yalalag and Oaxaca City, a mere seventy-seven miles that requires many hours of mountain driving, is the first of many drives north. Fabián’s images of these women and of the pueblo document the millennial emergence of Yalaltecness and Zapotecness and help us imagine the multiple futurities of indigeneity.



Figure 4. Citlali Fabián, *Tania*, 2018. From the *Mestiza* series. Portrait of an Indigenous woman with a corn husk collar. Image courtesy of the photographer.

Notes

I finalized this essay as I cared for my father, who was recovering (we hoped) from a life-threatening bout of Covid-19. In January 2021, as I wrote at my parents' kitchen table in Los Angeles, our Zapotec community was ravaged by the virus and the loss of life was devastating. I kept writing through the despair and fear of losing my father and the collective pain of my community because my people always remind me to reach for the future when we will be once again dancing jarabes. A special thanks to Josie and Simón for their generous editorial support and to José F. Aranda and Priscilla Ybarra for their insightful feedback and pláticas.

1. The Spanish version of this text at one time appeared on her website: "Mas allá del color de mi piel, mestiza es mi sangre, mi forma de pensar, la forma en que miro y me miran . . . la condición que otros señalaron en mí, y que hoy tomo por mía."

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