
Visual Pedagogies in Verónica Riedel's *The Making of a Mestiza* (2005) and Rodrigo Abd's "Portraits of the Mayan Queens" (2011)

Pedagogías visuales en *The Making of Mestiza* (2005) de Verónica Riedel y "Portraits of the Mayan Queens" (2011) de Rodrigo Abd

EMILIA BARBOSA

Missouri University of Science and Technology, EE.UU.
ebarbosa@mst.edu

Resumen: El *The Making of a Mestiza* (2005) de Verónica Riedel y "Portraits of the Mayan Queens" (2011) de Rodrigo Abd describen sujetos históricos invisibilizados en el archivo colonial latinoamericano. Su rol en los procesos sociales históricos y actuales está oscurecido por las luchas de género e indígenas y la política revolucionaria y estatal. Estos retratos fotográficos de mujeres mayas constituyen archivos creativos con una función educativa que afecta la historia pública al decolonizar y re-educar la mirada. Sin ello, el archivo colonial continuaría invisibilizando temas, situaciones y lugares históricos. Al mismo nivel que las reparaciones históricas, estos procesos encarnan la dignidad y el protagonismo de las mujeres mayas y sus descendientes. Las pedagogías visuales piden a los espectadores ver más allá de lo representado, incluyendo las imágenes, los medios para producirlas y exhibirlas, los símbolos, las redes de poder involucradas y su impacto.

Palabras clave: Fotografía, archivo, pedagogía visual, contra-visualidad, reinas mayas

Abstract: The Verónica Riedel's *The Making of a Mestiza* (2005) and Rodrigo Abd's "Portraits of the Mayan Queens" (2011) depict historical subjects made invisible in the Latin American colonial archive. Their role in historical and current social processes is obscured by gender and indigenous struggles and revolutionary and state politics. These photographic portraits of Mayan women constitute creative archives, which perform an educational role affecting public history by decolonizing and reeducating the gaze. Left uncontested, the colonial archive would fail to acknowledge certain historical subjects, situations, and places. At the same level as historical reparations, these visual pedagogies embody the dignity and protagonism of Mayan women and their descendants. Spectators are asked to see beyond what is represented, including the images, the means of producing and displaying them, the symbols, the power webs involved, and their impact.

Keywords: Photography, Archive, Visual Pedagogy, Counter-Visuality, Mayan Queens

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Photography as *Process* and Materializing Cultural, Ethnic, and Gender Markers

Images have immediate impact and are often self-explanatory. They also tend to multiply faster than words, and taken together create and conserve narratives. Images become visual archives. Images of powerful characters, events, and places can be easily manipulated for propaganda and publicity, and implicitly create specific viewerships. In advertising, for instance, powerful imagery is conveyed to engage viewers by promoting certain behaviors, as in buying a product. In contemporary photographic production and the artistic handling of photography, similar issues with representation, spectatorship and consumption arise. Photography as a process involves investing objects and subjects with materiality, and empowering them with cultural, ethnic, and gender significance that ultimately results in attributing value to or re-signifying them.

In this article, I analyze how Verónica Riedel's and Rodrigo Abd's photographic portraits of Mayan women depict historical subjects often made invisible in the Latin American colonial archive.¹ With respect to the expression "decolonizing the gaze," several contemporary critics have agreed that there is a current need to rethink our approach to the colonial and colonialist visual imaginary. Walter D. Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Joaquín Barriandos, Christian León and many others in Latin America have theorized and embraced the decolonial turn as an analytical method that critically deconstructs the creation, dissemination, and sharing of knowledge through a model that persistently relinks the colonial past to contemporary structures of power that, in turn, reinforce certain hierarchies by discriminating against individuals based on distinct markers such as gender, race, social class and others. According to Barriandos, the coloniality of seeing establishes a "tactical counterpoint" between the other levels of coloniality such as the epistemological (knowledge), the ontological (being), or the body-political (body-machinal as defined by Ramón Grosfoguel) (41). Therefore, this "tactical counterpoint" would open a new field of analysis of the racialized visual machineries that emerged throughout the development of modern and colonial capitalism (41). Decolonizing the gaze, therefore, implies refuting those implicit logics of seeing inherent in the colonial and colonialist perspectives that include the representation of bodies, gender, and sexuality, amidst other markers of difference, adhering to strict aesthetic patterns and meanings. Because the coloniality of seeing is a historical mechanism that conditions and informs first perception, and then the conscience of the subject,

¹ Anna More and Bianca Premo define the colonial Latin America archive as those official compilations or repositories of processes, regulations, and life in "a period that covers anywhere from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries" (8). Furthermore, these scholars advocate for a compelling "opening" of this archive, so that it also comprises "write[n] histories or [old] stories of those who were not empowered by colonial administrations" (7). They equate this archive in general with the disputed "public" nature and the conspiratorial "control [of the official] historical narrative before it is even written" (7). Thus, their call to "open" the archive translates into "also understanding [the archive] itself as a historical institution built to serve a specific purpose and place contents in a specific order" (7). In this sense, both Riedel's and Abd's works constitute alternative means of further "opening" the colonial Latin American archive.

prioritizing certain aspects such as skin color, gender, and more, over others (see León 116), it is imperative to reeducate and confront the public in general with other forms of seeing the Other.²

“Where are Mayan women in the colonial archive?” is an important question that contextualizes my analyses of Riedel’s and Abd’s photographic work. Mayan women’s role in historical and current social processes is obscured by gender and indigenous struggles in tandem with revolutionary and state politics, even though markedly in distinct manners. Both Riedel’s *The Making of a Mestiza* and Abd’s “Portraits of the Mayan Queens” constitute creative archives that perform an educational role affecting general history with an emphasis on a public pedagogy focused on seeing previously neglected historical subjects. Their photographic works collectively contribute to decolonizing the gaze and re-educating the public about the historical presence, protagonism, and resistance of indigenous women and their descendants. Left uncontested, the colonial archive would fail to bring forth certain historical subjects, situations, and places in the present. Thus, art in general and photography in particular function as necessary attempts to relocate unquestioned assumptions and preconceptions about specific historical subjects. Operating at the same level as historical reparations by countering the established visibility of subalternized subjects, these photography collections embody the dignity and protagonism of Mayan women and their descendants. Riedel’s and Abd’s creative photographic archives are forms of displacing unquestioned assumptions and preconceptions of gender and ethnicity in contemporary Guatemala by decolonizing the gaze.

Creating informed and sensitive viewerships implies creating credible and verisimilar counter-visualities. Currently counter-visualities are identified as the potentially subversive acts of seeing or of representing historical subjects, situations, and places contrary to common expectations. I understand *visuality* as the consequent development of specific ways of seeing and representing created by successive exposure to institutionalized images, texts, and documents (as in the colonial archive) and *counter-visuality* as the act of proposing an alternative way of seeing or of representing historical subjects, situations and places contrary to common expectations, functioning in opposition to what is expectedly seen or represented. Nicholas Mirzoeff has defined *visuality* as “both a medium for the transmission and dissemination of authority, and a means for the mediation of those subject to that authority” (xiv). Counter-visuality’s method is comparative and its political commitment is to a “decolonial” framework that can use “the visual archive to ‘speak’ for and about subaltern histories [...] as opposed to simply being illustrative of them” (xiv-xv). Probing Mirzoeff’s definition, Sergio Martínez Luna explains how the author came to

² *Rabin Ajaw*, also known as *Rabin Ajauy*, translates from Maya Q’eqchi as “Daughter of the King.” This is a national indigenous festival in Guatemala that takes place every July in Cobán, the capital of the state of Alta Verapaz, in Guatemala. More than a beauty contest, Kerstin Sabene defines it as “focused on spiritual beauty, intelligence, leadership skills, and knowledge of cultural and historical [Mayan] traditions.” According to León: “Es así como se establece la profunda imbricación que tiene la visualidad con las jerarquías no solo geográficas, espirituales, étnicas, lingüísticas, sino también raciales, de clase, de género y sexuales” (116).

this terminology as a term from the turn of the 18th into the 19th century that identifies the possibility of historical visualization as a practice that includes information, images and ideas. These provide the subject able to articulate them with authority (see 24). Furthermore, Martínez Luna expands on the impact of Mirzoeff's groundbreaking notion of "the counter-history of visibility" and "the right to look." Thus in a colonial context, the power to see and the power to create images regarding what and how people, objects, places, and nature should be seen presupposed a "police-like detailing of each person's abilities, each person in his or her place and a place for everyone" (Martínez Luna 25). Beyond this state of things naturalized as desirable and orderly, "one can imagine other dynamics of the visual not destined without appeal to erect a panoptic power space from where to normatively prevent the possibility of reciprocity in the gaze" (Martínez Luna 23). Thus, Mirzoeff's proposal of "the counter-history of visibility" outlines a process of decolonization of the gaze that emerges directly in counter position to a colonialist form of visibility, which dictates and supervises all that can be said, seen, and displayed (see Martínez Luna 27). Drawing on Jacques Rancière's theorizations of identity logic, particularly when applied to photography, Martínez Luna concludes that what is at stake is the destabilization of any identity building project and the perceived similarities that intensify disagreement, dislocate names and categories' assignation, the abilities and the instances that the hegemonic order takes as representative of what it has itself deemed consensual (see 26). Likewise, contemporary processes of globalization and a counter-geography of modernity run parallel to this "counter-history of visibility" (28). The imperative here is the need to learn how to think "with and against visibility" (Martínez Luna 28). Considering how images have become our shared experience of the world, as viewers and critical receptors of photography we have to see through and against the powerful images of the colonial archive.

The Making of a Mestiza is a collection of embroidered monoprints that, functioning as a multivoiced *testimonio*, offers an alternative to the colonial visual archive. Whereas a multivoiced *testimonio* includes a multitude of stories and points of view in mostly oral form, Riedel's photographic collection has the same effect despite its clearly distinct materialization in powerful visual renditions of different women's stories. Her collection is characterized by a triple embodiment, comprising the photographs, their corresponding personal stories or texts, and the artwork on the prints. Leonor Gala describes Riedel's prints in *Mestiza* in the following manner: "A series of portraits of native people embellished with embroidery and collages, wrapped in colonial clothing and ornaments that retell the stories of those women that—five centuries ago—met with the first Spanish" (qtd. in Barbosa 126³). Mathieu Corp more explicitly refers to the way Riedel's collection of prints was created:

[...] on top of the digital photographs from which the portraits have been created and printed in linen, the artist embedded distinct materials that have been woven in or glued to it: sometimes plastic, but above all canvas, wood, clay, leather, gold and silver

³ My translation from the original in Spanish. All further translations from Spanish into English are my own, E.B..

thread, jute, feathers, jewelry, jade, and obsidian in particular, which she collected in different Latin American countries, the same way she did with the stories that refer to the names that the artist gave each of the women portrayed. (Qtd. in Barbosa 126-127)

The consumption of these portraits as visual signs of alternative or creative visual archives, leads me to conclude, with Jameson, that what we as spectators consume “is no longer a purely visual or material entity, but rather the idea of such an entity” (384). Therefore, in her portraits, Riedel is considering the referent “absent from the colonial archive” as a void that can necessarily be filled by artistic reinterpretation. She implicates the spectators in her visual performance by employing what Ariella Azoulay calls “a deliberate instance of framing, department” that is, an intended allusion to specific documents in art history (“Archive”). Thus, Riedel deliberately implicates the spectators by intentionally resorting to known art history tropes: for example, on the Western side, Elizabethan white lacy frills and collars, *Barroco de Indias* portraits of dignitaries, as well as glyphs, drawings, and decorative elements from pre-Columbian indigenous art.

Rodrigo Abd’s “Portraits of the Mayan Queens” provides an alternative mode of representation of indigenous women and their descendants. Abd’s portraits were taken using a nineteenth-century style wooden box camera that he bought in Afghanistan. As a photojournalist for the Associated Press, Abd often has the opportunity to cover current events in Latin America, such as the National Indigenous Queen of Guatemala contest when indigenous participants from all Guatemala compete for the *Rabin Ajaw* title.⁴ According to Abd, “shooting these pictures for a wire service implies a massive audience around the world” because the Associated Press, like many other news agencies, supplies syndicated news and images by wire to newspapers, radio, and television stations on a regular basis (Abd, e-mail to the author). With the 2011 edition of the *Rabin Ajaw* taking place in Cobán, the representatives of each region present themselves voluntarily in the national contest for a chance to represent all native Guatemala as a country (Abd, e-mail to the author). What spectators make of the foremothers’ existence as full historical subjects, as well as the way they acknowledge their descendants in the present as Mayan women, are questions not explicitly answered by the identity performances pictured in Riedel’s and Abd’s art.

In the Latin American colonial archive, indigenous and creole people were seen through hegemonic eyes, mediated through their oppressor’s means of representation, and often portrayed as savages or animals. The sources of such negative representations were often obscured by complex political and power structures such as those found in *casta* paintings. Historian Susan Deans-Smith theorizes how *casta* paintings were in essence imperial propaganda because these paintings depict colonial social life and mixed-race people in idealized terms: scenes of prosperity and domesticity, of subjects engaged in productive

⁴ See Kirmayer et al. for further consideration of historical trauma inflicted on indigenous people in the Americas.

labor, consumption, and commerce (“*Casta Paintings*” n.p.). *Casta* paintings were displayed in official public spaces, such as museums, universities, high-ranking officials’ residences and palaces, as well as in unofficial spaces when the owners of private collections would open their collections to limited public viewing. Representational issues in the *casta* paintings are well known and have been articulated since the 18th century. In 1746, Dr. Andrés Arce y Miranda, a creole attorney from Puebla, Mexico, criticized the *cuadros de castas* or *casta* paintings. Offended by their depictions of racial mixtures of the inhabitants of Spain’s American colonies, Arce y Miranda feared the paintings would send back to Spain the damaging message that creoles, the Mexican-born children of Spanish parents, were of mixed blood. For Arce y Miranda, the paintings would only confirm European assumptions of creole inferiority (Deans-Smith, “Creating” 169). Riedel’s photographic collection *The Making of a Mestiza* in particular dialogues with the colonial archive’s tradition of *casta* paintings and further questions its abhorrent depictions of indigenous women and the native subjects’ supposed inferiority.

Visual pedagogies are expressed in these types of creative archives by the way spectators themselves are led to create their own counter-visibility through their contact with the photographic art. The audience is asked to see beyond what is represented and shown, including the images, the means of producing and displaying them, the symbols, the power webs involved, and their impact. Both Riedel’s and Abd’s photographic portraits of the Mayan Queens promote a rhetoric of visibility that is akin with the very essence of photography as a form of inquiry and artistic intervention. Riedel’s photographs imbue Guatemala’s indigenous women and, by extension, their foremothers, with a corporeality that historically they have been denied. Thus, Riedel proposes re-reading history based on a strategic appropriation and hybridization of distinct iconographic archives, and by extension, Latin America’s syncretism and cultural hybridization. Specifically, Abd’s approach subverts the gaze through his uncanny manipulation of productive-collaborative techniques in which the Mayan Queens themselves posed out of their own volition for his nineteenth-century style wooden box camera. Rodrigo Abd’s “Portraits of the Mayan Queens” uses older technology that implies the same voyeuristic gaze promoted by the earlier foreign ethnographers who depicted indigenous people consistently as the Other, and which has not totally disappeared, but he intends to destabilize this type of gaze. In what he describes as a collaborative effort, Abd’s camera allows the Mayan Queens to present themselves as they deem fit, without any manipulation or staging by the photographer.

Regarding Riedel’s and Abd’s work, it is not so much the details contained in their images and narratives that matter, but the feelings they connote. Though most of the stories in Riedel indicate survival trajectories, in tandem with the embodiment in the images, what stands out in the prints is the expression of specific feelings such as joy, pain, longing, sadness, and satisfaction, among others. By giving these particular feelings a name and a face, both Riedel and Abd attempt to map the emotional toll of conquest and colonization, identity

and representational politics, and the lingering effects these can still provoke today. In this sense, their work demands an affective spectatorship, which in turn implies a civic impulse and the need to participate in public discourse.

Affective spectatorship is an approach described by Silvia R. Tandeciarz as “the process of making and consuming images [that] serves not only to reference affective experience, but also to activate or stage it” (135). Thus, by affective spectatorship I mean an organic response to the staging or representation of specific cultural realities through the nonverbal, non-discursive logos of emotions, feelings, and sensations. Whereas embodiment implies staging, affective spectatorship implies co-participation, and often a call to action in the form of a challenge I dare you! According to Tandeciarz, only with this call to action or spectatorship will art be meaningful and will the contractual nature of art come into play as an act of communication. Consequently, Riedel’s and Abd’s visual pedagogies imply the way the viewers forge their own means of seeing or counter-visibility through their contact with these creative archives. The overt invitation is to see beyond what is represented and shown, including the images, the means of producing and displaying them, the symbols, the power webs involved, and their impact on real people’s lives. Markedly, in Riedel’s portraits, besides the photographs themselves, she includes short narratives that accompany each monoprint and what she calls “interventions.” In Abd’s portraits, agency, pride and sense of place are rendered through the women’s long, strong stares facing the camera; thus, the subject’s behavior is central in this visual narrative.

Riedel’s Positive Anthropology in *The Making of a Mestiza*: Retelling Unseen Herstories

According to Roland Barthes, embodiment in photography means “I can never deny that the thing has *been* there” (Barthes 76, emphasis in the original). Thus, the Guatemalan *mestizas* in front of Riedel’s camera stand in for those who once existed (“the thing [that] has been there”), and as a photographic referent they express the author’s intention to materialize them as Latin America’s foremothers. Playing with the body’s ceremoniousness and with photographic portraiture as an art of the person, Riedel offers the images in *The Making of a Mestiza* as referents for a new appreciation of history. Her photographs not only become effective vehicles for the recollection of lives and repertoires made invisible, but they also enable spectators to learn about this re-discovered referent: the Guatemalan indigenous women and their descendants, the *mestizas*. *The Making of a Mestiza* obliges the spectators to relearn history, acknowledging the *mestizas*’ role and presence from colonial times to the present day. Implicitly, spectators recognize the common links between the colonial and contemporary hegemonic systems and the fact that memory is constructed and, thus, can be revised and reviewed. The Guatemalan foremothers stepping out of historical oblivion in *The Making of a Mestiza* prove that the past can be retrieved through the lens of artistic revalidation, even though there is no returning to colonial times.

Riedel creates distinct visual narratives in lieu of the iconography of the colonial visual archive, such as in the *casta* paintings, by transposing indigenous women's portraits where traditionally white and creole ladies used to be represented. In this manner, Riedel contests dominant hierarchies of knowledge established by a contemporary, residual way of seeing, inherited from the colonial archive, that subalternizes the historical Other. Even though Riedel's archive in *The Making of a Mestiza* is apocryphal, I contend that it promotes a positive artistic intervention as it extends the colonial archive past its limitations. By presenting these women as full historical subjects and allowing them to tell their untold stories visually, Riedel retells history from a previously absent angle. The foremothers are depicted as real women who often had to engage in original negotiations in order to survive the trauma of conquest and colonization.⁵ Some of them succeeded in surmounting the imposed social structure; others did not fare so well. The dominant note is the agency, determination, and dignity of the women depicted in their efforts to oppose conquest and colonization. The implication is that in Guatemala *mestiza* women have been present and active from the beginning. Nevertheless, I argue that Riedel's art is an imperfect form of rendering visible the real lives of Latin America's foremothers, women who most likely never felt like queens. The very notion of being a queen and the sense of nobility inherent in such ideology is not necessarily akin to the Mayan worldview and contemporary values.

Riedel proposes reading the *mestizas* as “‘queens’ capable of representing with honor and dignity the motherhood of Latin-American societies;” Riedel explained her motivations and how she wanted to strongly engage with another point of view about the conquest by wondering how native women reconciled carrying the blood of their conquerors (“*The Making*” 5-6). In essence, her point of contention is that not all women were victimized; they “‘fueled the emergency economy of the region through their services as servants, field laborers, sexual partners, and as mothers of the *mestizo* children” (6, emphasis in the original). Riedel gives these women a place of honor as “‘Queens” because in her view “‘they brought forth with their bodies and unconquerable spirits, the new Latin Americans” (“*The Making*” 6). For her revision of the colonial iconography, Riedel uses female models from her country's indigenous communities; in particular, she uses as a frame of reference the colonial portraits of dignitaries or women of high ranking in the colonial caste system (see Gala, qtd. in Barbosa 134). In her portraits of the *mestizas* we see, for instance, the frills or white lacy collars of colonial aristocrats.⁶

⁵ See Camus “for more on the evolution of the female condition in Guatemala. In terms of more recent cases of women's oppression, including during the crucial transition to democratic rule and historical reparations in the aftermath of the Peace Accords of 1996, see Patterson-Markowitz et al.

⁶ See photos: *Doña Carmen* and *Doña Leonor*. Images taken from Riedel, <http://www.riedelveronica.com/arte-1>.

Riedel weaves a complex and hybrid model when she juxtaposes these particular colonial referents with the rich indigenous adornments.⁷ The material aspect of the hybrid model of reference conflates several colonial historic documents such as maps, illustrations, and facsimile books with imagery from the indigenous codices, Mesoamerican glyphs, and indigenous ornaments. Embedded in the photographs, the indigenous elements juxtaposed on the Elizabethan style portraits invoke simultaneously the Baroque of the Colonial Americas and pre-Columbian art.

Although reinterpreting history is a potentially dangerous and destabilizing endeavor, Riedel's artistic practice promotes an ethnocentric view of indigeneity by conflating European aesthetics, visual rhetoric, and hegemony with indigenous *cosmovisión* [worldview]. Mary Louise Pratt developed the concept of "anti-conquest," which she defines as "the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (7). In her analysis of Alexander von Humboldt's creation of new systems of knowledge with which to measure, analyze and conceptualize the Other and American nature, Pratt concludes that knowledge about the Americas underwent a significant transformation following the writings of Humboldt in the early 19th century. Through his work, America was re-defined as young, new and ready for development, as a way to legitimize Europe's neo-colonial project. I contend that Riedel expresses a similar resistance to conquest sentiment in *The Making of a Mestiza*; in her own words, she "created the narrative of the experience of [native women of Guatemala's] great-great grandmothers," but she did so with careful attention to not repeat historical accounts of their victimization ("*The Making*" 6). Notably, Riedel also questions what "the stories passed on in oral tradition from woman to woman, from generation to generation" might have taught these women about their own identity and resistance; however, Riedel's explorations are markedly beyond "keeping true to historical accounts" ("*The Making*" 6). Riedel's play with mirrors, casting light on the contemporary descendants of foremothers, is an apocryphal rendition or a simulation of what their lives and passed-on family narratives might be as if they have had the power to voice them. In spite of this artistic exercise and the power of the images she presents, the stories behind them are precisely what might excite the viewers' minds into re-imagining by themselves such complicated negotiations between survival and trauma acceptance.

The degree of disagreement and the ambiguity over what conquest and colonization have meant for each one of these women renders the overall narrative effect in *Mestiza* verisimilar.

Accordingly, photography in *Mestiza* is a performance of empowerment that leads to the possibility of a counter-visibility. In her creative process, Riedel brings forward a focused collage effect by juxtaposing and conflating so many distinct visual iconographies and imageries. While *Mestiza*'s main strategy is a

⁷ See photos: *Cotz'ij* and *Cacao*. Images taken from Riedel, <http://www.riedelveronica.com/arte-1>.

triple embodiment condensed in the photographs themselves, the texts, and the artwork on the prints, the direct consequence is that *mestizaje* is at the core of Riedel's representations. Riedel asserts that as heroines, survivors, victims, but also players, the women in *Mestiza* display an active participation in the events that shaped their plausible lives as imagined historical subjects. The women's personal histories display ambiguity towards conquest and colonization, as each woman had to negotiate her future and livelihood resorting to different survival strategies. Each photograph is accompanied by a first-person story of survival, compliance, or rebellion. The degree of disagreement and the ambiguity over what conquest and colonization have meant for each one of these women renders the overall narrative effect in *Mestiza* verisimilar. Accordingly, photography in *Mestiza* is a performance of empowerment that leads to the possibility of a counter-visibility. Consequently, in *Mestiza*, Riedel is promoting a hybrid type of visual art that forces testimonial accounts to enter into an effective dialogue with interpretive ethnography. As a compiler, Riedel's voice is almost erased beyond those of the subjects she chooses to display and to celebrate as historical entities by their own right, and with their own importance. However, she is still the editor who guides the viewers through her display of alternative or subversive recordings in the Latin American archive.

Corp explains that what first interpellates the spectators is "the attitude and the dignified gaze of those women." Riedel resorts to naming all of her mestizas to further the process of drawing them out of anonymity as individuals and potential historical subjects. This strategy is also important because it gives emphasis to personal narrative over other types of archival evidence, particularly considering that these are stories of subalternity focusing on indigenous and mixed-race women. In Guatemala, women have been systematically oppressed due to their gender, ethnicity, and social status.⁸

Expanding on her triple embodiment and collage effect, Riedel incorporates into her printed photographs valuable natural elements like shells, feathers, and stones that were dear to indigenous aesthetics before the arrival of the Europeans. The collage effect is reinforced by the expert fusion of native and European aesthetics, ideas, and symbols, creating a transcultural visual space, or an atopic "space outside of space" (Codell 10). Riedel's aesthetic rendering of the *Mestizas'* pride, dignity, and self-confidence decolonizes the tridimensional quality of indigenous women's subalternity based on gender, ethnicity, and class, while promoting "an aesthetics of dignity and empowerment" (Ormond 8). This type of aesthetics is well rendered in Riedel's artwork, even though it complicates notions of identity, indigeneity, and authenticity.

Riedel's subjects, personified through the female models from her country's indigenous communities, provide the viewers with the opportunity to see another alternative historical framing, one that functions effectively due to its verisimilitude. According to Mirzoeff, "the right to look" names the act of "autonomy" that opposes visibility as the dominant authority of modernity by

⁸ The body can be read as a unit that produces meaning, but also as a unit that disseminates it at the same time, as a self-representational entity.

asserting, in the face of violence, exclusion, and negation the “right to the real as the key to a democratic politics” (4). In this particular sense, Riedel’s rhetoric of the visual is striking as political resistance to the global aspirations of Western empire and the visualizing technologies that have rendered those aspirations natural in ideological terms. An account of something as powerful as the visual regime of modernity in its global imperial compass is not neglected nor does it oppose what Mirzoeff calls the visuality of “oversight” (50) in reference to the plantation system in the Anglo-American-French imperial project. In Latin America, the visual archive is as strong as ever and currently still informs racial and ethnic identity politics. By giving visibility and a voice to these verisimilar historical characters, Riedel succeeds in effectively offering a counter-history or alternative visuality.

A closer look at Riedel’s *Mestiza* photographs illuminates the artist’s manipulation of conventions to offer a product that puts emphasis on strategic visibility. By strategic visibility, I mean the critical manner by which Riedel promotes an alternative anthropology for the foremothers by making them recognizable historical subjects with positive agency. Unlike the traditional *pinturas de castas*, the monoprints in *Mestiza* purposefully play with and display syncretism. In fact, according to Gala, “in *Mestiza* everything is about syncretism” (Gala, qtd. in Barbosa 134). These prints are identified not by number, but by the name and the short narrative attributed to the subject portrayed. In the exhibition’s catalog, each monoprint is shown on a full page, immediately followed by another one containing the portrayed subject’s name and her narrative. Even though coloniality’s violence is often implicit, neither the images nor the small narratives that accompany them explicitly refer to rape (*Doña Carmen*), prostitution (*Cacao* and *Ixchel*), or abjection and being treated as a commodity (*Doña Carmen* and *Cacao*). However, there is no fetishizing of violence in Riedel’s *Mestiza* for there is no blood, suffering bodies, or other elements that explicitly recreate violence. On the contrary, the violence in *Mestiza* is subtle and implicitly connected to the condition of coloniality. Riedel has made the editorial decision not to display open violence such as acts of torture, rape, or killing that are symptomatic of conquest and colonization. Accordingly, she prefers to contextualize each image and personal story in an effort to open the spectators’ imagination to other possibilities beyond the horrors of conquest and colonization in the mainstream visual archive.

Riedel’s artwork carefully manipulates the *Mestiza*’s body in direct reference to the title of the photographic collection as well as concomitantly to the subjects whom her artistic actions impact. Such manipulation influences the Other’s body both as the starting point or locus of production of meaning and as its dissemination.⁹ The bodies represented in Riedel’s *Mestiza* bear the

⁹ After a bloody civil war that lasted 36 years, from 1960 to 1996, Guatemala underwent a complex internal process of democratization of civil society. This implied the gradual surrender of arms and an historical reparations process related to the violation of human rights by the state army forces and the genocide of the Mayan people. Many issues persisted for decades to follow and only in the second decade of the 21st century some known individuals who committed genocide have been judged in court, as in the case of Efraín Ríos Montt in 2013.

mark of colonial history through memory and inscription and register history in the form of oppression, torture, and manipulation. Conclusively, Riedel invites the viewers to see distinct and identifiable patterns of domination in the colonial and neocolonial Latin American contexts, beyond the arbitrariness of the historiographical process and the dichotomy *vencedores/vencidos*. It is in the sense of overcoming and surviving, or even daring to say “thriving,” that the title of Riedel’s photographic collection is vital, because *The Making of a Mestiza* encompasses three processes that run parallel in order to pay tribute to the survival of Mayan and *ladina women*: the historical process of *mestizaje* (miscegenation), Riedel’s authorial process of creation, and the process of Guatemala’s transition into democracy.¹⁰ Such identity performances convey an original proposal by which Riedel re-reads history based on a strategic appropriation and hybridization of distinct iconographic archives, the pre-Hispanic and the Colonial, with the dominant note emphasizing Guatemalan, and by extension, Latin America’s syncretism and cultural hybridization. Ultimately, Riedel socializes affect through narrative and visual representation in an effort to invite viewers to collectively revise known Guatemalan history.

Abd’s Subversion of the Gaze in “Portraits of the Mayan Queens”: Manipulating Productive-Collaborative Photography-Making

Another form of artistic revalidation operates in Abd’s “Portraits of the Mayan Queens.” In the behind-the-scenes of the 2011 edition of the *Rabin Ajaw* contest that took place in Cobán, Guatemala, the Mayan queens’ portraits invite viewers to see them beyond the controversial issues with indigenous identity, authenticity, and representation. Oluwakemi M. Balogun contends that in beauty and cultural contests, “Gendered national identities are produced for specific audiences and constrained by the systems within which they are created” (364). In this sense, in Guatemala indigenous women are often seen as reproducing cultural values, and Elisabet Dueholm Rasch argues that such “Beauty pageants reflect how women are expected by cultural norms to be ‘bearers of culture’ and to physically and culturally reproduce ethnic groups and nations” (133). To that effect, Rasch considers “beauty pageants as performances that serve to transmit memory and a sense of identity” (134). On one hand, “[b]y mobilizing common elements of indigenous culture (language, dress, and spirituality), the Maya Movement claims access to economic and political institutions” while on another it claims specific indigenous rights (Rasch 135). However,

[...] being held responsible for cultural reproduction is not necessarily experienced as ‘subordination’ by Maya women themselves. Maya women often continue to identify

¹⁰ Symptomatically, as related by Jon Schackt in 2002 when he interviewed Mayan women in Cobán, one replied to his question of why indigenous women were never seen in a Miss Cobán type of beauty contest by stating that “an indigenous woman would never walk in front of a jury dressed in a bathing suit [because these] are considered indecent, since they expose all of the forms of the female body, including the hips and the legs, which normally are covered by the [traditional] indigenous attire [*corte*]” (117).

with this role parallel to access to education and working in human rights organizations, amongst other roles. Transforming gender relations in terms of work and education has not resulted in Maya women rejecting their identity. (Rasch 135-136)

Conclusively, in Guatemala, the organization of *Rabin Ajaw*'s pageants reflects the complex power play in ethnic and gender relations as identity markers.¹¹ Jon Schackt reports on how the strict modesty code of the Maya people in the rural regions of Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, has influenced beauty standards, even though many women might engage in their daily activities bare-chested; such displays would be unthinkable for a *ladina* woman in a public context (see Schackt 117).¹² These and other standards are pivotal in the ongoing discussion of Mayan identity and authenticity. Throughout recent decades, several Mayan Queens have used the *Rabin Ajaw* as a platform to protest against several matters such as genocide, murder, and community claims. A well-known and documented episode in Guatemalan history is the “rebelión de Las Rabinas” (Camus 47). More recently, the Guatemalan press has reported that several other Rabinas or Mayan Queens have publicly condemned government policies and made appeals regarding finding the whereabouts of disappeared community leaders.

According to Abd, the participants in the 2011 *Rabin Ajaw* competition range between 14 and 26 years old and they must demonstrate proficiency in their native language, and in Mayan traditions and worldview. In addition, they must also display awareness about mining and other threats to Mayan livelihood and resources, a nuanced view of gender roles, and leadership in their community (Abd, e-mail to the author). Abd states that what differentiates the *Rabin Ajaw* from other contests where physical beauty is the most important attribute of the contestants, such as in the Miss Universe contest, is that in the former, women must dress in the most appropriate manner to represent the indigenous women of their community and their traditional customs (Abd, e-mail to the author). Most importantly, the Mayan Queens must be leaders of their own people, meaning they must understand the dreams, challenges, and difficulties of all indigenous women in a markedly conservative and *machista* country such as Guatemala (Abd, e-mail to the author). Furthermore, and unlike what is common in traditional beauty contests, the panel of judges in the *Rabin Ajaw*

¹¹ “Which young women can represent Quetzaltenango Maya K’iche’ is determined not only by ethnicity, but also by class and family. How indigeneity is reproduced through the Umial Tinimit is to a great extent supervised by male family and cultural group members who belong to the Maya K’iche’ bourgeoisie. They safeguard the young women’s process of becoming Maya” (Rasch 144-145). “How they [indigenous women] do this is, in the main, defined by indigenous men. [...] these processes produce hybrid forms of agency that are best described as personal agency with a political element” (Rasch 146).

¹² “The display context of [the Rabin Ajaws] on stage renders its authenticity messages dangerously confused with the common meaning of the female breasts in the modern context of Occidental culture: sex and frivolity; it is really the opposite of the modesty image that expresses the indigenous experience of femininity and makes it unthinkable for any indigenous woman to wear a bathing suit” (Schackt 118).

not only values the participants' leadership skills, but also their commitment to the rescue and maintenance of Mayan values.¹³

Because the *Rabin Ajaw* is a site where the cultural meaning of Mayanness is represented and (re)produced at the same time, these contests host "complex struggles over power and representation" (Rasch 138). Frequently, in countries with indigenous populations, these types of contests have been understood as spaces of ethnic revitalization and where "authentic" culture is revalued (see Rasch 138). In a similar manner, Jon Schackt states how the *Rabin Ajaw* and other similar contests have become an important arena for the expression of Mayan identity and consciousness (see 109). However, Rasch emphasizes the fact that the political agency of indigenous peoples, often discussed regarding these ethnic contests, does not necessarily equal the political agency of indigenous women (see 139). In this line of investigation, Rasch presents conclusive evidence that the role played by the family and the powerful regional and local indigenous oligarchies¹⁴ is vital to understanding why, even though the contestants might contribute to questioning fixed notions of indigeneity and Mayan authenticity and promoting the political agency of the collective, they do not, nevertheless, challenge the patriarchal system (see 139). "It is evident that there is no contestation of the patriarchal system" (Rasch 153). Thus, the politics of the *Rabin Ajaw* is very problematic, and Abd's portraits allow for a certain voyeuristic look into what happens behind the stage, as described by Rasch: "The passive role of women as representatives of indigenous culture, and their active role in political and cultural engagement, are both part of how Mayanness is rehearsed backstage" (145). Nevertheless, as the contestants actively play a role in the cultural and political representation process of their people, which is mostly guided by elite indigenous men,¹⁵ and become aware of their own political rights and cultural identity as Mayan women (see Rasch 154). Consequently, the Mayan women that are the *Rabin Ajaw*'s contestants often integrate into their stage and media performances an element of new, indigenous awareness (see Rasch 155). This same element is clearly visible in Abd's portraits where the Mayan queens intentionally express their ethnic dignity and pride against the assimilated archival background of exotic imagery in past ethnographic representations of indigenous women by white male colonizers.¹⁶

¹³ See photo: Mayan Queen Ana Esperanza Gutierrez Chuni, 16, representing Palin, in Guatemala's Escuintla state, poses for a picture during the Rabin Ajaw National Folkloric Festival in Coban, Guatemala. Photo taken from Abd / Associated Press, <https://www.spokesman.com/galleries/2011/aug/18/guatemala-mayan-queens/#/15>. See photo: Rosa Lidia Aguaré Castro, 23, Mayan Queen representing Santa Lucía La Reforma, Totonicapán, poses for the picture during the Rabin Ajaw National Folkloric Festival in Coban, Guatemala. Photo taken from Abd / Associated Press, <https://www.spokesman.com/galleries/2011/aug/18/guatemala-mayan-queens/#/15>.

¹⁴ "It is also, in terms of socioeconomic relations, an elite enterprise that mirrors the way the Maya K'iche' bourgeois nation wants to be seen, remembered and represented" (Rasch 154).

¹⁵ "The authenticity demanded of the candidates [...] is of a reflective nature. [...] Paradoxically, [...] this means that the candidates are not that representative in regards to showcasing a country girl from the rural areas of their municipalities, who generally do not finish elementary education and get married at an early age" (Schackt 120).

¹⁶ See photo: Mayan Queen Matilde Teresa Bol Maas, 16, representing Lanquin in Guatemala's

Similarly, Gemma Celigueta calls attention to the fact that currently these women prefer to be identified as Mayan representatives (see 28). Deyvid Molina (see 91) argues that the *Rabin Ajaw* contestants also prefer to be called “representativas,” first, because the notion of “queen” does not exist in the Mayan languages, and, second, because they feel that once elected, they represent the popular vote. Correspondingly, the Mayan collective Tik Na’oj also calls the *Rabin Ajaw*’s contestants “las representativas,” further elucidating how these young women undertake affirmative action in favor of their communities (Tik Na’oj n.p.). Furthermore, and recalling the historical struggle for dignity and recognition, the same collective states how from folkloric and fairground objects in the past, currently the Mayan queens have become agents of political change at the communal and the national levels (see Tik Na’oj n.p.). What particularly calls my attention is the express reference to the role of the Mayan queens as guarantors of the process of “buen vivir” (Tik Na’oj n.p.). This focus on the Mayan *cosmovisión* is not always acknowledged in popular Guatemalan culture or seen as modern and contemporary by the *ladino* population.

The overpoliticization of Mayan identity politics and the felt communal need to re-signify contested spaces such as the *Rabin Ajaw* (Sabene n.p.) explicitly contextualizes Abd’s portraits of the Maya Queens. Following Barthes theorization of embodiment in photography, the Guatemalan indigenous women in front of Abd’s camera stand in for those who once existed (“the thing [that] has been there”). Abd’s photographs thus imbue Guatemala’s indigenous women and, by extension, their foremothers, with a corporeality that historically they have been denied while bringing forward his intention to materialize them as Mayan Queens. Furthermore, the ultimate issue in the ongoing debate concerning the Guatemalan Mayan queens in that of “authenticity.”¹⁷ Celigueta, citing Canessa, explains how the notion of “mayanidad” or Mayanness is basically performative and, in essence, maintaining the discourse at this level—in essentialist and unique terms—leads to conflictive representations (30).¹⁸ In her analysis of the historical evolution of the *Rabin Ajaw*, Celigueta follows a thematic timeline that starts with the “indias bonitas” contests, through the “reinas y princesas indígenas,” culminating in the contemporary “Las Hijas del

Alta Verapaz state, poses for a portrait during the Rabin Ajaw National Folkloric Festival in Coban, Guatemala. Photo taken from Abd / Associated Press, <https://www.spokesman.com/galleries/2011/aug/18/guatemala-mayan-queens/#/15>. See photo: Mayan Queen Heidi Sofia Chitop Grave, 15, representing San Miguel Uspantan, in Guatemala’s Quiche state, poses for a picture during the Rabin Ajaw National Folkloric Festival in Coban, Guatemala. Photo taken from Abd / Associated Press, <https://www.spokesman.com/galleries/2011/aug/18/guatemala-mayan-queens/#/15>.

¹⁷ “Identifying as ‘maya’ means overcoming the communal identification and that of the distinct linguistic groups. It means moving toward a national or people’s identity that identifies a common history and culture” (Celigueta 45).

¹⁸ “The *india bonita* contests seem to respond to a double influence that we need to specify. On one side, the *reinas* of the parochian feasts and the fairs, strongly associated with a specific location, and on the other, the regional, national and international misses, whose goal is to promote the unity of the nation versus that of the local existing diversity” (Kite, qtd. in Celigueta 32).

Pueblo [= *Rabin Ajaws*] como Representativas Mayas” (31, 35 and 40).¹⁹ In this manner, the *Rabin Ajaws* progressively became a site of contention, but likewise a highly visible vehicle for denouncing ethnic oppression and the Guatemalan state’s exclusion of indigenous people in national contexts.²⁰

Abd’s creative process using the nineteenth-century style wooden box camera that he bought in Afghanistan to photograph the participants in the *Rabin Ajaw* meant that the women had to sit still for several minutes gazing into the camera, “enabling a depth of engagement rarely achieved with today’s hectic technology” (Abd, e-mail to the author). The longer exposure meant that the encounter between the photographer and his models was forcefully more intimate and longer, in spite of the fact that as a technological limitation this also allowed for more elaborated poses and uncanny curated performances of identity. By uncanny I am referring to the natural poses and somewhat risqué attitudes that some of the women showcased as opposed to common displays of Maya women in media and visual circulation. These strange attitudes and positions would most likely be identified by a Guatemalan audience as an unexpected representation, whereas a more Western audience might not read this particular aspect of the photographs as anything but common.

According to Abd, the older technology gave the contestants the opportunity to be more assertive and to assume more leadership in the making of the collection of portraits that constitute this register (Abd, e-mail to the author). Thus, Abd reiterated that for him the Mayan Queens must be leaders of their own people. One of the contestants that he photographed for this collections, Rosa Lidia, expressed a similar view in terms of the power and agency that she felt as a *representativa* of her Mayan community: “The difference between the *Rabin Ajaw* with other competitions is that here there are no limits to express our ideas. Here we are free to carry our message” (Abd / Associated Press n.p.). Ultimately,

the way indigenous women navigate and experience the interlocking of gender, indigeneity and class is embedded [in] their identity as Maya K’iche’. Experiences of intersectionality are, thus, not only experiences of oppression, but also experiences of navigating difference and deploying agency in and through a process of ‘becoming’: in this case, *becoming a Maya woman*. (Rasch 153; my emphasis, E.B.)

The history of indigenous women’s revolutionizing the *Rabin Ajaw* contests is, in fact, a tale of women’s empowerment and in this manner, it should be considered as *Herstories* rather than as official history. Markedly, as it relates to women’s history and it is often interpreted from a feminist point of

¹⁹ “From the 1970s on, indigenous people—often leftist activists and community organizers—started to use the local beauty pageant to contest meanings of indigeneity. They demanded equality: the same amount of prize money and a change of names” (Rasch 137).

²⁰ “Days after the massacre perpetrated by the army in Panzós, *Alta Verapaz*, a daily newspaper, informed that a q’eqchi’ reina candidate was disqualified after she requested a moment of silence in name of the almost one hundred victims” (Acevedo 3).

view and/or relating to women's social advancement, this is pure indigenous women's territory. Regardless of how the historical knowledge about this important empowerment of women came to be, or who are the researchers that engage in its analysis and interpretation, what is vital is the understanding that it purposefully documents Maya women's coming into being or belonging. In this sense, Abd's photographs are artifacts that document an important historical moment. Furthermore, Maya women's journey from subalternity into full subjecthood is not over yet.

In 1978, as reported by Betsy Konefal, and in response to the Panzós massacre in Alta Verapaz, a then candidate to the Mayan queen distinction asked for a minute a silence for the victims, and was disqualified on a technicality [not having performed the traditional inaugural *son* dance, which typically opens the contest] (see Acevedo 3).²¹ Following this “rebelión de Las Rabinas,” indigenous women in Guatemala became the central protagonists of the country's demilitarization efforts, the fight for human rights, and the turn to democracy, particularly since the 80s of the twentieth century (see Acevedo 5). For instance, since 2001, and responding to the need for reform of the *Rabin Ajaw* in Cobán, the Mayan Movement in full force was able to change the name of the contest, which started to be called, in accordance to the norms established by the Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, Rab'in Ajaw. In addition, the indigenous proportion of the jury members and the contest significantly increased (see Celigueta 38). The Television chain Cadena PBC in 2018-2019 advertised the “Reina Indígena Nacional ‘*Rabin Ajaw*’” contests as the search for the “Leading Representative of the Guatemalan Indigenous Women” (“Bases de presentación”).²² The important themes for the candidates' individual speeches were the following: the media's role in the diffusion and practice of cultural values; sexual violence and human trafficking; importance and recognition of the sacred spaces of Mayan spirituality; the Mayan languages as a marker of cultural identity; protecting Mother Earth following Mayan best cultural practices; multiculturalism and interculturalism; and the importance of the political participation of indigenous women (see “Bases de presentación”).²³

Another example is the current insistence on a certain capacity for cultural and political action beyond embodying their community's ideals and practices

²¹ “In a country beset by poverty, violence, and migration, young indigenous women wield tremendous power in confronting social injustice. The Maya women who compete in the Rab'in Ajaw are educated and employed or are continuing their studies; they are the agents of change. Most of them have been discriminated against at one time or another for their ethnicity, yet they continue to be significant players in resistance movements calling for basic human rights in Guatemala” (Sabene n.p.).

²² “In practice, all the candidates' speeches relate to the topic of cultural and ethnic pride. [...] A considerable number of them denounce the repression and the discrimination that all indigenous people—and particularly indigenous women—have been submitted to since the Conquest [...] and some even denounce current social issues” (Schackt 122).

²³ “One of the greatest draws of the event is hearing the messages of the contestants; the opportunity to speak in public is what makes the Rab'in Ajaw an opening to the radical side of Maya women in Guatemala. Last year [2018], García Jiménez spoke eloquently about sexual abuse, a subject that most likely would have been taboo in this setting only a few years ago” (Sabene n.p.).

(see López García 189) and the intended goal of not only representing their culture “well,” but most importantly, *feeling it* (Celigueta 42; my emphasis, E.B.). Other common political themes tackled by the contestants are Mayan collective memory, particularly in the aftermath of the genocide, indigenous women’s rights, the rejection of exploitive transnational corporations operating in Guatemala, and the trial of the genocidal general Ríos Montt (see López García 189).²⁴ Currently, the election of the contestants is even more selective as a multitude of criteria are taken into consideration,²⁵ leading critics to conclude that being indigenous or passing for indigenous is no longer enough; true representation is expected in respect to the Mayan communal organizations and the ability to embody the aspirations of the Mayan people beyond set notions of what it is supposed to be (see Celigueta 46-47). However, as pointed out by Schackt: “In 1998, I heard the candidates’ speeches with a certain incredulity. These girls were between 15 and 22 years of age (the majority among the youngest of this age group). I doubted that they were such militants as they seemed to be” (123). Highly politicized candidates are probably not a standard either.

In high contrast to Abd’s work, in a recent photo essay emphasizing the evolution of the indigenous Mayan Queens of Guatemala,²⁶ photographer Julia Zabrodzka illustrates the adherence to contemporary technology by displaying two candidates taking a selfie. In addition, she reveals candidly the intimate humanity of the mostly teenage candidates by showing one of them yawning on stage during a time-consuming parade (see Kaftan and Zabrodzka n.p.). The vivid colors of her photographs contrast markedly with Abd’s black-and-white portraits of Mayan Queens. Abd’s vivid contrast of black and white characteristic of the older photographic technology he uses is dubious because it both reinforces and rarifies the presence/ historical existence of the Mayan Queens, thus making his alternative framing of indigeneity as distinct to that of the colonial archive problematic. Zabrodzka’s plates—which are closer to a photographic report than an exercise in portraiture—succeed, however, in providing the spectator with endearing glimpses into the candidates’ lives including the syncretic relationship contemporary Mayas have with religion, a mixture of their own *cosmovisión* or worldview and the teachings of the Catholic Church, the importance of wearing a *traje* and its distinctiveness, and the communal rituals and ceremonies. By

²⁴ “The contestants’ identification with the values and moral standards their community wishes to emphasize is what is valued: she [the contestant] should study, wear indigenous dress, and participate in the social life of the city; above all, she should publicly uphold her indigenous identity. This way, even though the point is to uphold community, ethnic, and national values, individual options that might suggest new role models are rewarded” (Celigueta 46-47).

²⁵ “The young women seize their time in the spotlight to express their personal views on important social, environmental, or political topics with grace and poise, delivering impassioned and articulate oratory performances” (Sabene n.p.). “Today, the Rab’in Ajaw is a widely anticipated event broadcast across Guatemala on national TV and covered by a multitude of media outlets. In its early years, the pageant was not without controversy” (Sabene n.p.).

²⁶ See Menjíjar and Drysdale Walsh for more on the particulars of different women’s groups in Guatemala from a sociological, political science, and historical perspective.

contrast, in Abd's photographs, the subjects' contextualization is left out of the specific framing of reference, which, in turn, can be understood as responding to how the young Maya women see themselves, with the implicit solemnity effect rendered by black-and-white photography. One cannot see what is part of one's reality as clearly as can the eye of another, or in this case, Abd's camera lenses. Unlike the defenseless vulnerability in the face of the incisive gaze of the colonizer's effort to document native people, the Mayan women in Abd's plates display face the camera with a sense of pride and belonging that were denied to their ancestors. The knowledge about visual imagery captioning via a photographic camera, albeit an ancient model, reflects the attitude and power poses that these women showcase in front of the camera. Likewise, their willingness to engage in this purposefully anachronic image creation sets them apart from the former instance of vulnerable capture by the colonizer's gaze; consequently, what emerges are powerful renditions of contemporary Mayan identity in overt dialogue with the official historical archive. By "opening" the archive in this collaborative image-making creation process, Abd succeeds in dislodging the expected visuality of Mayan women by generating a more complex and richer counter-visuality.

Conclusion: (Re)Enforcing Visual Pedagogies as Alternative Ways of Seeing the Other

In conclusion, while Riedel's photographic portraiture emphasizes a positive anthropology, Abd's conveys an alternative framing of indigeneity. *Mestiza* contrasts starkly with colonial iconography and the contemporary insistence on victimization, gore, and violence. Riedel retells history from a previously absent angle, and the foremothers are depicted as real women who often had to engage in original negotiations in order to survive the trauma of conquest and colonization. Thus, the dominant note is the agency, determination, and dignity of the women depicted in their efforts to oppose conquest and colonization. For his part, Abd subverts the viewers' gaze through his uncanny manipulation of productive-collaborative techniques: when given an opportunity, the Mayan Queens posed out of their own volition for his camera. The result is undeniable pride in origin and leadership, unequivocally translated in the women's long, strong stares directly facing the camera and the photographer.

These two photographic collections foreground the benefits of visual pedagogies that breathe agency and visibility into disregarded historical subjects. In this article, I analyze how both artists' photographic works are engaged in a concerted effort to decolonize the gaze. By decolonizing the gaze, I am referring to the way art can deconstruct the same colonialist logic that gripped indigenous women's bodies, gender, and sexuality as a space of conquest and invasion. Thus, both photographic collections allow for visual creation to emerge out of the same Eurocentric model in response to the contemporary decolonial turn. By emphasizing the pedagogical insistence of these works, I underline the fact that the gaze can also be educated and that such artworks are

able to function, precisely, as powerful tools for criticism and imaginative (re) creation, opening the possibility of knowing new historical subjects previously often forgotten, neglected, or simply made invisible, as in the case of indigenous women and their descendants in Latin America. In *Mestiza*, Riedel engages with a tradition of resistance that dates back centuries. Rather than being merely absent characters in someone else's narrative, her *mestizas* pose as problematic historical figures who had to contend with several challenges in an era of rapid, and often brutal, change, the first years of the conquest and colonization. Thus, the foremothers' role as bearers of a new race is consequently re-envisioned by Riedel through photography and the accompanying short narratives that appear alongside each monoprint. In the final analysis, Riedel's implication is that, in Guatemala, *mestiza* women have been present and active from the beginning of modern history. Abd intentionally considers the indigenous queens as individualized subjects by providing the means for these women to present themselves as historical subjects. The Mayan Queens representing themselves through his lenses constitute the vital link that unites the past and present.

Nevertheless, these visual pedagogies are still problematic due to issues in representation that they also implicitly promote. In Riedel's work, there is an ethnocentric view of indigeneity that conflates European aesthetics, visual rhetoric, and hegemony with an indigenous *cosmovisión* [worldview]. This aesthetic option means that the indigenous element is never really in the foreground by itself. In addition, the African element of the mixed Latin American and, by extension, Guatemalan culture is markedly absent. In Abd, issues of representation are also significant; even though the photographs are the result of a collaboration between the photographer and his models, there is a nagging sense of juxtaposition of the historical presence of Maya women and the colonizer's rarefication of them through an insidious, domineering gaze. The effect of the stark contrast of black and white provided by the anachronistic technology is questionable not as an artistic choice but as a means of unintentionally reinforcing a certain way of seeing that is also found in the colonial archive. Thus, Abd's alternative framing of indigeneity might seem to be unintentionally glossing over that of the colonial archive, even though I am more inclined to think that it actually distinguishes itself from it based on the frontal portraiture of the Mayan women as they appear to a Guatemalan audience. Such portraits could be unequivocally deemed resolute and defiant. Nevertheless, the way the Mayans Queens present themselves to the camera can provide room for their image to be mass consumed as an exotic commodity, particularly considering their dissemination via the Associated Press, the news agency for which Abd works. In closing, Abd's insistence on seeing the *Rabin Ajaw*'s contestants as Maya Queens instead of *representativas* following the more contemporary terminology and understanding of their social and cultural role also leads to the conclusion that he may intend to market and sell his

portraits as photographs of women participating in the global image economy. This seems to conflict with his intention of providing these women with a visual space for self-expression that is by no means manipulated by Abd.

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