

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ETHNOGENESIS

*Race and Sexuality in Colonial San Francisco*

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With a New Preface

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“Found any gold yet?” the driver called out from the UPS truck passing by the excavation site. I’ve come to recognize these catch phrases about buried treasure and dinosaur bones for what they are: not evidence of the public’s ignorance about archaeology, but a tentative opening gambit in a conversation between strangers.

“Not yet,” I called back, trying to sound welcoming. “But we are finding some interesting things. Want to come take a look?”

In the Presidio of San Francisco, an urban park that is part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, public participation and interpretation are core components of our archaeological research (fig. 2). Since 1997, I have partnered with the Presidio Archaeology Center to bring university field schools to the Presidio to study the remains of the Spanish-colonial settlement for which the park is named. We excavate along well-traveled streets and jogging paths, in parking lots and the narrow yards surrounding decommissioned military housing (now rented out to civilian tenants). During a typical six-week excavation, our field school commonly receives more than two thousand visitors, some of whom volunteer in our field lab, becoming members of the research team. Our public program rests on two core concepts: an open site and a conversational approach. There are no barriers that keep visitors from entering the research area; they are free to come into our workspace and observe in whatever manner they prefer. Interactions between archaeologists and visitors follow the flow of normal conversations: the visitors’ questions direct the content and tone of



FIGURE 2. Archaeologist Bea Cox shows park visitors a recently recovered artifact.

the discussion, and the archaeologists share what we are doing that day and what we have found. Rather than giving a prepared speech, we focus instead on each visitor's interests as well as our own.

The content and length of these conversations vary widely. Some people are interested in the park's history; others ask about the archaeological process. Many have information they'd like to share with us about their own historical research, their genealogy and heritage, or their experiences with archaeology. We—the archaeologists—are often the object of fascination: who are we, how did we get permission to dig here, how much schooling do we have, do we get paid, do we like what we do?

For me, the most challenging interactions are those that turn to the topic of historical identity. Such conversations often start with the query, "So, who lived here?" or, more commonly, "Are you excavating Indians?" These straightforward questions have complicated answers. Yes, Native Californians lived here, both before colonization and also in sizeable numbers during the Spanish-colonial and Mexican eras. If the person seems particularly interested in in-

digenous history, I might mention how the colonial military brought workers here from throughout central California, so that in addition to the Ohlone Indians (the local tribe), there were Coast Miwok, Bay Miwok, Patwin, Yokuts, Salinans, and others at El Presidio de San Francisco.

And, I add, there were the colonists themselves. For some people, the term “colonist” is sufficient, but others will ask, “The Spanish, right?” Spanish by nationality, I answer, but from villages in what today is northern Mexico. Some are perplexed: “So, they were Mexicans?” You might say that—a mixed population, people primarily of Mexican Indian and African ancestry. The term “African” always gets people’s attention. “Were they slaves?” Not here, I respond, fumbling through a description of the large population of free black people in eighteenth-century northern Mexico, some of whom were recruited as colonists to California. And Mexican Indians? If I’m feeling expansive, I’ll trot out the historical anecdote recorded by one foreign (European) visitor to the early settlement, who reported that indigenous Mexican languages were spoken at the Presidio as much as Spanish was.

At some point in these conversations, I usually begin to feel uneasy. It is important to dispel California’s myth of Spanish conquistadors and put Mexican Indians, African Mexicans, and Native Californians at the center of California’s Spanish-colonial and Mexican history. Yet only two decades after arriving here in Alta California, the colonists, themselves formerly colonized peoples, ceased to think of themselves in these racial terms. Abandoning the *sistema de castas*, Spain’s colonial race laws, they embraced a shared colonial identity: Californio.

In these conversations about historical identities at the Presidio—with site visitors, at public lectures, in the classroom, with colleagues at the Presidio Archaeology Center, at academic conferences—I frequently find myself either without words or frustrated by the limitations of the words I do have. Social scientists have long demonstrated that the notion of “race” has no scientific basis,<sup>1</sup> so why do I persist in describing some of the people whose lives I study as “African” four centuries after they were taken from that continent, and two centuries after they rejected that designation? When a descendant of the colonial population pulls out a well-worn map to show me which villages in Spain his ancestors came from, how do I reconcile that conversation with the historical documents I’ve read that list his great-great-great-great-great grandparents as *mulatos* and *indios* from mining towns in Sonora, Mexico?

The only discernable “truth” about historical identities in Spanish-colonial and Mexican Alta California is that they were constantly changing. Other researchers have reached similar conclusions: “We were struck,” write Brian Haley and Larry Wilcoxon (2005:433, 442) of their genealogical research on colo-

nial families in Santa Barbara, “by how abundant and well documented identity changes in particular family lines were. . . . They cross supposedly impermeable boundaries. . . . Their social history demonstrates and explains identity’s continuous reformulation.” Such transformations lead us to ask how or why it is that certain forms of social identification came to be meaningful and accepted in particular moments, both historically and in the present day.

Colonization is one historical phenomenon that generates conditions under which existing patterns of social identification lose their relevance and new social identities emerge, both with consent and by force. From the fifteenth century onward, European colonial powers moved and relocated colonized peoples from one part of the globe to another in the service of the military, economic, and religious goals of their empires. The case of El Presidio de San Francisco, while rich in its specific historical context, is also relevant to considerations of global empire, diaspora, indigeneity, and colonial identification.

The importance of archaeological research on ethnogenesis is thus found not only in abstract theories of social life but also in these specific historical contexts. Archaeologists have often treated identities as stable categories (gender, ethnicity, race, class, or age) that can be used to sort people and the artifacts they leave behind into groups for comparative analysis. We have been less attentive to the permeability and mutability of these categories. We have been more concerned with how we can assign an artifact to a specific racial, ethnic, or gender group than with understanding the role of material culture and everyday routines as resources that people use to both stabilize and transform their identities. For archaeology to be able to contribute to a better understanding of the macro-historical phenomena that shape peoples’ lives—colonization, imperialism, the expansion of capitalism, labor regimes, consumerism, intercultural exchange—we must discover ways to talk about social identities that embrace change as well as stability, permeability as well as boundedness, fluidity as well as fixity, and social agency as well as social structure.

As an archaeological and historical investigation of ethnogenesis among military settlers who lived at El Presidio de San Francisco, this book presents the findings of over thirteen years of field and laboratory studies as well as archival and historical research. Most of the book focuses on this rich body of evidence and my interpretations of it. To begin, however, this chapter establishes a conceptual foundation for the study, first discussing epistemological and theoretical tensions in archaeological research on identities and then tracing the historical specificity and interdependence of specific tropes of identity (ethnicity, race, nation, class, gender, sexuality). The last section turns to the book’s specific subject, ethnogenesis, examining the relationship between my own use of this concept and its use by other scholars.

## Social Identity: Similarity, Alterity, and the In-Between

By taking identity as its central focus, this study enters a contested field. Not only do anthropologists and archaeologists fiercely debate what constitutes a particular identity, but there are also epistemological and political implications of taking “identity” as an object of knowledge. The research presented here examines the formulation and transformation of identities in what has come to be known as the post-Columbian “modern world” (after Martin Hall [2000]), in which identity practices were dramatically reconfigured through the intertwined development of European nationalism, imperialist expansion, global capitalism, and the Enlightenment cult of the rational, self-interested individual. “This kind of self-consistent person,” Katherine Verdery (1994:37) writes, “who ‘has’ an ‘identity’ is a product of a specific historical process: the process of modern nation-state formation.” She argues that “the idea that to have ‘identities’ is normal” is an outgrowth of the “ever-greater efforts by state-makers to keep track of, manage, and control their ‘populations.’” The constellations of identifications and social categories that adhere in present-day social life are indeed a partial legacy of statism, colonialism, capitalism, and individualism: such terms and categories were and continue to be met with, altered by, and woven into other practices of social identification and differentiation.

To study identity is to embrace paradox. As Stuart Hall observes, the recent explosion in scholarship on identities is conjoined with critiques and deconstructions of such inquiries, with a particular rejection of the notion of an integral, originary, and unified subject who “has” an identity. Despite the acknowledged limitations of the concept of identity, it has yet to be supplanted by new concepts that are better to think with. Identity is, then, “an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all” (Hall 1996:2). Indeed, the core question of this study—how was a heterogeneous population of colonized subjects transformed into a unified (although not uniform) colonizing force?—is unaskable without reference to the relations of sameness and difference that connote some form of social identity. It was through subject positions such as race, gender, sexuality, generation, institutional location, and geopolitical locale that such persons were able to forge claims to subjectivity and survival in their new situations as colonizing agents of the Spanish crown (after Bhabha 2004:2).

I understand identity as the means through which social subjects are constructed into relationships of taxonomic similarity and difference in comparison with other subjects. Consequently, identity is multiscalar. It is simultaneously personal and collective, generated through internal experiences and imposed from external disciplining practices and institutionalized structures. Identity is

generative, not passive, which is why we might wish to talk of identification rather than identity. Practices of identification follow and (re)produce the contours of power in social life. The desire to better understand how power is operationalized has perhaps inspired and sustained the current florescence of research on identities and personhood, not only in archaeology but also throughout the social sciences and the humanities.

Identities are suspended within the tensions between similarity and alterity, or sameness and difference. To identify is to establish a relationship of similarity between one thing or person and another, and self-reflexively to position oneself in such an affinity with others. In this sense, practices of identification call attention to perceived similarities and, in doing so, achieve an erasure or elision of other kinds of variability. These erasures of variations pose an internal threat to the stability of identities, requiring continual “work” (in the sense of the multifaceted deployment of social power) to maintain the coherence of relations of similarity. Much of this identity work occurs through attention to other relations of difference (alterity, exclusion, separation, othering), what is widely termed the “constitutive outside” that “forms the corona of difference through which identities are enunciated” (Meskell 2002:280).<sup>2</sup> What any hypothetical “we” may have in common, our identification with each other, may have as much to do with our perception of shared difference from a real or imagined “other” as with any intrinsic similarity among ourselves. Practices of identification must thus be understood as continually operating within that “difference which must be acknowledged, but also sameness which must be conceded” (Young 1995:92).

Studies of identity have increasingly interrogated this tension between alterity and similarity, drawing attention to the ambiguity and lack of closure that such tension brings to social identities. There has been a particular effort to trouble the binaries that lend the appearance of stability to categories of identity and otherness (for example, colonizer/colonized, white/black, or man/woman) along with related power-laden dichotomies that buttress such divisions (such as culture/nature, orient/occident, and so on).<sup>3</sup> Homi Bhabha calls special attention to hybridity, to the “‘in between’ spaces [that] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation” (2004:2), while Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) highlights the transformative potential of geographic and conceptual borderlands, and Stuart Hall exhorts us to develop “a new cultural politics which engages rather than suppresses *difference*” (1989:29). Others point out how hybridity and other markers of ambivalence (such as borderlands or “third spaces”) have been used to regulate and control social subjects rather than to liberate them (Chatan 2003; Meskell

2002; Mitchell 1997; Verdery 1994; Young 1995). The reactionary potential of hybridities and frontiers has considerable relevance to this study, for the military settlers who founded and lived at El Presidio de San Francisco inhabited such middle spaces of identity and location. Exploring the ways in which these ambiguously situated subjects navigated the politics of identity and empire contributes an important perspective to ongoing dialogues about the potentialities and limitations of life “in between.”

By examining a historically known instance of ethnogenesis, this study also contributes to the movement away from conceptualizing identity as something stable, categorical, and inherent to bounded groups and individuals. However, models of personhood and community that emphasize the partitive, situational, and contingent aspects of social identity should not be misread to suggest that identity is an “anything-goes” dimension of social practice. Although socially constructed, identities operate as “social facts” (Durkheim 1982). They become embedded in the organizational structures, histories, and procedures of institutions and other social collectivities. Consequently, identities come to have objective effects on the lives of social subjects. Even before birth, modern subjects are interpolated into particular modes of identification (race, gender, nation, kinship, and so on). Ongoing disciplines of identification are embedded within social interactions because identities are relational and depend on recognition and legitimation.

The challenge is to interrogate the interplay between the coercive and voluntary aspects of identity practices, and to do so with attention to specific historical contexts. This is especially important in studies of what Gavin Lucas has aptly named the “trinity” of race, class, and gender. Often mistakenly viewed as stable and universal aspects of social life, these categories of persons must be understood as “historical formations specific to the period being discussed” that “are not so much categories of analysis, but subjects of analysis” (Lucas 2006: 181, 185). One of the explicit aims of this book is to denaturalize and de-essentialize aspects of identity that are often experienced as fixed and stable. Tracing the shifting permutations of race, ethnicity, gender, and status in colonial San Francisco exposes the historical contingency not only of any given person’s “identity” but also of the underlying postulates through which social identities are constructed.

### Fluidity and Fixity

How can studies of historical identity navigate the tension between the fluidity and fixity of social identities? This study participates in the current moment’s fascination with the malleability of identities. From transnationalism, ethnogenesis, creolization, hybridity, and passings of all sorts to queerness, trans-