ABSTRACT

Pure Blood and Malleable Bodies:   
Myth-symbol complexes, Hispanic New Mexican Identity Narratives and the *Penitentes*

By

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*Los Hermanos de la Fraternidad Piadosa de Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno*, better known as the *Penitentes*, are lay Catholic confraternities, mostly found in the rural communities of mountainous northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. The dominant discourses about the tradition aver that it is Spanish and Catholic, with roots in medieval Iberian Spanish society. Subaltern or non-dominant narratives posit that there are Amerindian influences on the tradition, a position that the dominant discourse automatically precludes by understanding the descriptors used as indicating an exclusively Iberian Spanish, Catholic heritage.

This dissertation does not disagree with the classification of the Penitentes as both Spanish and Catholic. Instead, it reframes these apparently exclusive descriptors and challenges the dominant cultural narrative(s) by contextualizing and historicizing their usage. It posits that these descriptors, in how they are understood, obscure a multi-cultural, diverse and hybrid history. The study identifies “purity of blood” and “Spanish-Catholic” as fundamental myth-symbol complexes in both Iberian and colonial Spanish societies. By examining these complexes over the *longue durée*, it establishes how the meaning attached to these symbolic elements has changed over time. Additionally, it demonstrates how these myth-symbol complexes were manifested into socio-cultural doings that still have resonance today.

Drawing on ethno-symbolist theories as well as studies in collective memory, narrative, and identity, this interdisciplinary study traces the development of Iberian, and later, Colonial Spanish myth-symbol complexes from the era of the Visigoths onwards. In the process, it builds a picture of New Mexico as a diverse and multiethnic society whose very multiplicity has been hidden, obscured and forgotten as the meanings attached to the symbolic cultural constructs altered. Thus, by tracing the shifts in meaning that occurred in Spanish myth-symbol complexes over a long time period, this dissertation makes space for counter-narratives in both New Mexican and *Penitente* discourses.

Keywords: Myth-symbol complexes, *Limpieza de Sangre,* identity, collective memory, Visigoths, Spain, New Mexico, *Penitentes*