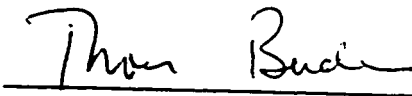


Palimpsest of American Identity: Zuni, Anthropology and  
America Identity at the Turn of the Century

by

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**For Jeff**

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## Preface

A painter I know paints extraordinary portraits of the barrier islands of Georgia. I first came to know her as she spoke on one of those islands about the time she had spent there one winter, studying the land with her painter's eye. She talked at length about the edges of things, and why it was that she was so fascinated by them. Since then I have come to see that what is truly interesting in landscapes is the places where things meet. Whatever forces are at work in nature express themselves sooner or later at the edges where the elements converge.

Her words set me to thinking about my own sense of history, and time and again I have come back, too, to the importance of the edges. The center, the mainstream of historical movements, are crucial, but there is something vital about the edges, too, something that tells us about the ripples such movements always set in motion, that undermines the assumption that at any given time there is only one important thing happening. The historical profession has swung, in my lifetime, from an almost exclusive focus on the center, to an equally insistent concern with all that exclusive focus left out. Now a

new kind of cultural history is, I think, trying to weave the two together. This is my contribution to that new kind of history.

I have here used a convention from the older school of historians, the biography. But I have, I hope, subverted that form to the extent that the individuals I have written about are not world-historical. I make no claim for them as movers and shakers, as authors, in fact, of more than their own lives and some anthropological monographs. But their lives, at the edge of historical movements we have come to identify as central, reveal the tensions, the doubts, the failures that, with the harmonies, certainties and successes, tell us not only what happened, but what it meant then, to the people who lived through it. I have concentrated my study on the edges of the lives Frank Hamilton Cushing, Matilda Coxe Stevenson and Stewart Culin lived, on the places where who they were and who they wanted to be met other forces, and on the ways they negotiated around resistance, sometimes bending, sometimes forcing accommodation. Their profession took them to a place, Zuni pueblo, where a modern industrial society touched an older agricultural one, and the transformations that took place along that permeable frontier were echoes of much

larger ones taking place much further away. They were carried along on the crest of cultural trends, but they also managed to stir up small ripples that reverberated back at the center.

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Chapter 1      Inscription Rock: Zuni as a Palimpsest of  
American Identity

This dissertation is about three people history has largely forgotten. Frank Hamilton Cushing, Matilda Coxe Stevenson and Stewart Culin, who crafted identities for themselves out of their anthropological work in an isolated pueblo in western New Mexico, are footnotes to the first chapter in the development of modern anthropology. At the same time, they contributed, sometimes by negative example, to the definition of the discipline and to its distinguishing methodology, fieldwork. With other anthropologists working with other Native American societies, they constructed portraits of the cultures they studied that reached an extraordinary number of people: readers of popular magazines, visitors to museums, and the crowds that swept through the grounds of the world's fairs that regularly offered up spectacle and amusement at the turn of the century.

Within those portraits and within the biographies of three of their authors the careful reader can discern a complicated dialogue that touches on much that concerned Americans as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth. This study has at its center the pueblo of Zuni, a small, agricultural community in the desert of

New Mexico. But it is a study in United States urban cultural history, an attempt to shed light on the sense of cultural upheaval some middle class Americans experienced as they sought to accommodate the new economic and social realities of a maturing national marketplace, new bureaucratic organizations and the new ideas about leisure, personal fulfillment and identity that began to shape their sense of themselves as the culture of consumption started to exert its powerful influence.<sup>1</sup>

Zuni pueblo served, not entirely willingly, as a laboratory for a generation of anthropologists engaged in defining a new profession and documenting the particulars of preindustrial society. Over the decades under consideration here, these students of culture produced an extraordinary body of literature on Zuni and collected thousands of artifacts for museum collections and exhibits. To the extent that a living culture can be preserved in these alienated forms, Cushing, Stevenson and Culin, members of the emerging discipline of anthropology, did a remarkable job of preserving Zuni.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds., The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880-1980 (New York, Pantheon Books, 1983), p. xi.

But the Zuni they preserved, necessarily frozen in time and removed in space, exists in strange relationship to the Zuni that remains in New Mexico today. For as anthropologists from American cities preserved the culture in one time and space, Zuni preserved itself in another. The culture the anthropologists (re)created looked a lot like Zuni, but both the means and ends of their endeavor existed not in New Mexico but in the urban centers of their own culture. Zuni itself is not the subject of this study, except insofar as it inspired the images of itself that anthropologists created for their own purposes. The subject is those images and those purposes. For the anthropologists, Zuni was a gold mine of artifacts and information, materials from which a specific culture and general ideas about culture could be deduced and reproduced. The Zuni were only one among many groups of indigenous Americans subjected to careful scrutiny by anthropologists defining their discipline. As an intriguing and accessible research site, the pueblo provided the subject matter, material and cultural, which turn-of-the-century anthropologists so avidly sought and which they transported and transformed for popular consumption. But it served both anthropologists and their audiences in much less tangible ways, supplying



these inhabitants of an industrial world with a stage set against which they could play out fantasies of preindustrial wholeness and cultural superiority. Within the stone and adobe walls of Zuni, these anthropologists pursued individual quests for identity and purpose. As they shipped back Zuni artifacts, brought Zuni visitors east and set up exhibits, they offered up, in contrasts drawn with these others, a new rendering of American social identity that served to reconcile the tantalizing and troubling realities of industrial, consumer society. In all of this, what the Zuni really were, what their culture really meant, was of secondary importance. As a part of popular culture in the United States, the Zuni were more important for what other Americans wanted them to be than for what they were.

Insofar as Zuni suffered this generalizing tendency and served as an already rich palimpsest on which other Americans wrote and rewrote their own stories, it is representative of the wide variety of indigenous but alien cultures existing within United States borders that professional and popular anthropology sought to appropriate and assimilate at the turn of the century. Ironically, though, it is Zuni's unique history that made it such a rich subject of study at the time and which

makes it so fascinating a place to site this inquiry into the anthropological imagination of urban Americans.

Among the main attractions of the isolated pueblo was its relatively extensive historical record. Zuni, with a legitimate claim to being the oldest continuously occupied town in North America,<sup>2</sup> was probably the earliest of the southwestern settlements visited by Spanish adventurers travelling north from Mexico. In 1539 a small party of Spaniards led by Fray Marcos de Niza ventured to the Zuni region in search of gold and other riches. They were driven by stories, perhaps rooted in Zuni mythology, of the "seven cities of Cibola," cities rumored to be encrusted with turquoise and filled with gold, silver and jewels. Though it is unclear whether Fray Marcos ever actually reached Zuni, some of his party did, and he returned to Mexico claiming to have seen these wonderful, opulent cities. A year later, he acted as a guide as Francisco Coronado led an expedition to conquer the cities and convert their inhabitants.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> c.f. A. L. Kroeber, "The Oldest Town in America and its People," The American Museum Journal, vol. XVI, no. 2, February 1916.

<sup>3</sup> This history finds its way into most studies of Zuni. In an 1869 attempt to identify the cities around which this

When the Spanish expedition reached Zuni in 1540, they found none of the wealth that had inspired their journey. Instead, they found at least six, perhaps seven, villages of farmers who had developed remarkable ways to exploit the limited water supply in an intimidating desert.<sup>4</sup> It is unclear how long these villages had been occupied, but they were well established in 1540. Zuni tradition traced a history linking the Zuni to the Anasazi builders of the ruined cities that dotted the region, cities that had reached their most vigorous growth in the twelfth century and

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myth grew, Lewis Henry Morgan reviewed the published records of travels to the area, including "Relations" by both Fray Marcos and Coronado, as well as U.S. Army surveys, and deduced that the seven cities referred to were the ancient ruins in Chaco Canyon. Since the cities referred to by the Spanish were inhabited when they were first contacted, and Chaco had been abandoned at the end of the thirteenth century, most recent scholarship (i.e. Keith W. Kintigh, Settlement, Subsistence and Society in Late Zuni Prehistory (Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1985), p. 5-6) identifies the six or seven Zuni villages that existed in 1539 as the source of the myth and the focus of Spanish interest. The story of a town encrusted with turquoise, rich in jewels and dependent on gold and silver vessels "for they have no other metal" is excerpted from Fray Marcos' account (A Relation of the Reverend Father Friar Marcos de Nica, touching his Discovery of the Kingdom of Cevola or Cibola. 1539. Hakluyt's Collection of Voyages. Vol. III. London. 1600.) in Morgan's review. Lewis Henry Morgan, "The 'Seven Cities of Cibola,'" North American Review, vol. 108 (April 1869), p. 457-498.

<sup>4</sup> Kintigh, Settlement, Subsistence and Society, p.96-97.

been abandoned at the end of the thirteenth. Zuni settlement may have overlapped that of these older cities or started up in the century or so after their demise.<sup>5</sup>

The Zuni and the Spanish coexisted relatively peacefully for a century or so. In 1680, in anticipation of Spanish reprisals after the pueblo uprising, the Zuni left their villages and their Spanish mission church, and reoccupied, for a time, mountain caves that had sheltered their ancestors, offering the protection of sheer cliffs and narrow, easily defended entrances. Achieving a less bloody peace with the Spanish than had many of the other Indian societies in the area, the Zuni rebuilt their village on the ruins of one they had inhabited before their flight, accommodating Spanish religion and political domination at the outer edge of their own religious and political traditions. As Spanish interest in the area waned in the eighteenth century and then outside interest disappeared almost entirely after Mexican independence in 1821, the Zuni continued to live an isolated existence, incorporating vestiges of

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<sup>5</sup> These traditions have been confirmed by recent archaeological research. c.f. Kintigh, Settlement, Subsistence and Society, p. 1-2 and passim. For the debate on the continuity of settlement in the older cities and Zuni, see Kintigh, p. 5.