Pueblo Cultural Bodies

This essay discusses the reproduction of cultural bodies and the fact that both Pueblo pots and Pueblo women were/are receptacles of desire and containers of cultural value for Anglo viewers, consumers, and scholars. Part of a larger project, "Mudwomen and Whitemen," concerned with the politics of reproduction, it addresses how and why a traditionally dressed Pueblo woman shaping or carrying a water jar has become the metonymic misrepresentation of the Pueblo Southwest.

The very first woman that made pottery, perhaps, set the vessel on her head and went to the spring for water. A procession of women have been walking about over the earth ever since with jars on their heads.

—Otis Mason, *Woman’s Share in Primitive Culture*

Women’s bodies—through their use, consumption, and circulation—provide for the condition making social life and culture possible... The exploitation of the matter that has been sexualized female is so integral a part of our sociocultural horizon that there is no way to interpret it except within this horizon.

—Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*

There are bodies and there are bodies. They are always, everywhere, intimately involved with the reproduction of culture and the politics of representation. In the late 20th century, bodies are frequently both clothed and marked with logo T-shirts. On my own, I sometimes wear one that I purchased in Santa Fe in the summer of 1990 and that is silk-screened with two Pueblo cultural bodies, a woman and a pot (fig. 1). I have learned that this design on my chest is in fact a nostalgic reproduction of a 1926 re-presentation of Pueblo life that appeared in a tourist brochure on southwestern Native Americans, published by Fred Harvey for the Santa Fe Railroad. If I had never been to the Southwest, either then or now, I would or should, as the cover of a recent tourist guide also attests, be lure by such lovely otherness if not erotic exotica (fig. 2).

Both Pueblo pots and Pueblo women were, and are, receptacles of desire for Anglo viewers and consumers. For over a decade, I have been working with

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Pueblo women and studying Pueblo potteries, which are and have been a primary mode of cultural production and reproduction. Again and again, I have found that to try to understand and interpret Pueblo ceramics and the discourses and institutions that have been constructed around them is to confront the paradoxical and politically charged situation that occurs when signifiers of stability (Pueblo women potters) become agents of change and cultural brokers precisely because the work of their hands embodies a synchronic essentialism and timeless beauty for postindustrial Anglo consumers. This essay presents this problem, which I have discussed elsewhere, in a pastiche of images, quotations, observations, and questions (see Babcock 1990, 1994a).

Whether in 1880 or 1980 and whether at Zuni or Acoma, Hopi or San Juan, a traditionally dressed Pueblo woman shaping or carrying a water jar or olla is the representation of the Pueblo (fig. 3). However, it is actually the metonymic misrepresentation of Pueblo culture, for in 1992, or even in 1922, few Pueblo women dressed like this or walked around with pots on their heads unless they were paid to do so. Yet, repeatedly in our representations of this Other reality, Pueblo women and/or Pueblo pots have been presented, not only as a synecdoche for that culture, but for southwestern Native Americans generally, as well as for the state of New Mexico and for the Southwest as a region. Examples of this metonymic madness are everywhere: from the advertisements of the New Mexico Department of Tourism, to T-shirts, to “Made in Taiwan” plastic
souvenirs. Along with—and long before—coyotes and saguaros, the olla maiden is unquestionably an icon of southwestern Otherness. It is a misrepresentation that Anglo America has coveted, bought, and sold, and in which it has invested millions (fig. 4).

These indigenous women and their pots have become primary and privileged signifiers in the hegemonic discourses that industrial America has produced about the Southwest for more than a century and in its reproduction of the reproduction of Pueblo culture for sale. But all too few scholars have considered issues of commodification or of representation and power with regard to the Native American Southwest; even fewer have taken gender dynamics into account, despite the fact that what is being consumed (looked at, exchanged, collected) are cultural bodies, female cultural bodies, clay bodies made and used by female bodies. And bodies, as the preceding images attest and as Homi Bhabha tells us in his discussions of colonial discourse, are “always simultaneously inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination and power” (1986:150).

The “timeless beauty” of clay vessels carried and shaped by the “warm hands” of Pueblo women bespeaks not only “the language of domination in which a colored female body serves as a site of attraction and symbolic appropriation”
Figure 3. “The Water Carriers.” San Juan Pueblo, ca. 1881. Photograph by William H. Jackson. Courtesy of Museum of New Mexico, neg. no. 86846.

(Clifford 1988:5), but also the inseparability of that body from the reproduction and representation of culture. In her 1980 essay “Matriarchs of Pueblo Pottery,” concerning four American Indian women who “have revitalized the pottery culture of their ancestors,” Susan Peterson described Hopi potter Fannie Nampeyo’s pots as “round” and “generous” with “voluptuous lips” (1980:55). Can we doubt that there is some ambiguity about Pueblo cultural bodies or that “in the language of occupation, women are receptacles and products of desire” (Trinh 1987:8)?

As Teresa de Lauretis has observed, “Woman is then the very ground of representation, both object and support of a desire which, intimately bound up with power and creativity, is the moving force of culture and history” (1984:13). Such insights are exemplified in the extreme in the representation of Pueblo culture. For, whether in a 1930s postcard of life “In Hopiland” (fig. 5) or in a 1980s Panorama souvenir slide of Hopi life, what is being fetishized is not simply an Other woman and an Other mode of production, but the very idea of reproduction itself.¹

After living for several years at Zuni Pueblo, Frank Hamilton Cushing addressed the National Congress of Mothers in Washington, D.C., in 1897. His subject was primitive motherhood, which he described as “the basis and center of every organization among man.” In what is unquestionably a high point in Victorian paternalism, he waxed eloquent about the “little Zuni mothers that [he] knew so well”: “these primitive child-women” “in the morning of man’s
Figure 4. “Comely Indian maidens, and aged squaws meet the train and sell their wares.” This image of Pueblo Indians selling pottery at Laguna, New Mexico, was reproduced both as a “Phostint” postcard, with the preceding caption, and as a five of clubs in “The Great Southwest Souvenir Playing Cards, made and published exclusively for Fred Harvey” in 1911. Image courtesy of Marta Weigle.

creation” who are most importantly “creators of being,” who give life to everything they touch, and who, he says, describe their pots as “the children of our hands” (Cushing 1897:21, 24, 42–43). In addition to images like this one of pottery making (fig. 6), well over half of the illustrations that accompanied Cushing’s “My Adventures in Zuni,” published in Century Magazine (1882), were of feminine and domestic scenes.

Consider, if you will, more than a century of images like this one in relation to Julia Kristeva’s insights concerning the maternal body in the Western psyche. “The mother,” she says, “occupies the place of alterity. Her replete body, the receptacle and guarantor of demands, takes the place of all narcissistic, hence imaginary, effects and gratifications” (Kristeva 1984:47). What does it mean that images of women carrying children and pots, fertile women with their hands in water, mud, cornmeal, and dough, have predominated in every photographic collection of the Pueblo in the past century? The peaceful, agrarian, domestic, aesthetic, feminine, productive, and reproductive Pueblo is presented to us again and again, both verbally and visually. Is this not a structure of domination, the production of “docile and useful bodies” (Foucault 1979:136)?

An Indian mother shaping Mother Earth and gracefully carrying her burdens was and is indeed something of a bourgeois dream of an alternative redemptive life. Historically, such imaging of the Native American Southwest is also an
Figure 5. “In Hopiland.” Image no. 5731 from American Indian Life Souvenir Folder published about 1930 by H. H. Tammen, Denver, Colo. Image courtesy of Karen Brennan.

imaginary transformation of an unmanageable native into a manageable one. At the very moment when this image of the "civilized," settled, and feminized Pueblo was popularized in late 19th–century discourse, "wild" nomadic Apaches were still killing white men and eluding the United States cavalry in these same southwestern spaces. Well into the 20th century, contrasting these "maids of Palestine" and farmers using "the digging sticks of Moses" with bloodthirsty savages or marauding "bedouins" was a common trope.

"A body is docile," Foucault tells us, "that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (1979:136). And "the gaze," or uninterrupted visibility, he also notes, is the technology of modern power. In Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad wrote that "the conquest of the earth . . . is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (1950:69). What better screen than these lovely, exotic images that seduce us into forgetting that the camera is itself a weapon of colonialism; that such aesthetic mystification is yet another manifestation of sensual, racial, and political asymmetry (Said 1985:103); that these postcards, books, slides, and now videotapes of Pueblo life that we carry home turn us all into "armchair conquistadores, affirming our sense of power while making the inhabitants of the Third World objects of spectacle for the First World's voyeuristic gaze" (Stam and Spence 1983:4).

As I have already suggested, Pueblo women are not the only cultural bodies who have been subjected to our gaze. Even more prominently fetishized are their vessels of desire, the mud their hands have transformed into "pleasing shapes." As early as 1540, Castaneda, the chronicler of the Coronado expedition, reported that Pueblo women made "jars of extraordinary labor and workmanship, which are worth seeing" (quoted in Foote and Schackel 1986:21). Then and now, the colonializer—the tourist—prefers to encounter other cultures through their objects without acknowledging "their makers as human individuals to be set on the same level as himself" (Todorov 1984:129). However, as Todorov goes on to argue in The Conquest of America, if

instead of regarding the other simply as an object, he [sic] were considered as a subject capable of producing objects which one might then possess, the chain would be extended by a link—the intermediary subject—and thereby multiply to infinity the number of objects ultimately possessed. This transformation, however, necessitates that the intermediary subject be maintained in precisely this role of subject-producer-of-objects and kept from becoming like ourselves. [1984:175–176]

Examples of such image maintenance abound, as do, not surprisingly, what can only be described as depictions of indigenous, "primitive" assembly lines. In addition to countless two- and three-dimensional representations, such Pueblo "subject-producers-of-objects" were and are repeatedly displayed in the flesh at fairs, exhibits, museums, and tourist sites, exemplifying what Said describes as "paradigmatic fossilization" (1985:94). For, as Judith Williamson has observed, "different systems of production which are suppressed by capitalism are then incorporated into its imagery and ideological values: as 'otherness,'
old-fashioned, charming, exotic, natural, primitive, universal” (1986:112). The set of instructions of Herman Schweizer, head of the Fred Harvey Company’s Indian Bureau, to the Hopi agent at Keams Canyon regarding the Hopis, including the potter Nampeyo, who were to be sent to the 1910 Land Show in Chicago is but one case in point:

I suggest that you try to get one family from Oraibi, the women to make baskets; and one family from Second Mesa, the women to make Second Mesa baskets; and a third family from First Mesa to make pottery. In addition to this, would like to have two girls that do their hair in ‘whorls.’ At least two of the men must be blanket makers or weavers of kilts and sashes. It is important that all of these Indians should wear their native costumes during the time they are at the exposition. The men should wear mocassins, velvet shirts, and bandanas around their heads while in the exposition building. They should not wear suspenders.3

Talk about suspending history. Can we doubt that these “subject-producers-of-objects” are less a representation of Pueblo life than of Anglo desire “to fix the Other in a stable and stabilizing identity” (Owens 1983:75), a feminine and fertile woman capable of “unlimited production.”4 In the same decade, Julian and Maria Martinez of San Ildefonso, who invented the famous black-on-black ware, were living at the Museum of New Mexico and demonstrating in the courtyard (fig. 7).

Woman as maker and user of pottery with man as helpmate combines not only exotic and domestic but aesthetic and utilitarian stereotypes of the Pueblo into one image of heterosexual romance as well as of cultural production and reproduction. And, “heterosexuality,” Luce Irigaray tells us, “is nothing but the assignment of economic roles: there are producer subjects and agents of exchange on the one hand, productive earth and commodities on the other” (1985:192). Should we be surprised that this particular image of “producer subjects” has been endlessly reproduced as the icon of Pueblo culture/ceramics?5

One of those commodities repeatedly reproduced in a reinforcement of heterosexuality in Anglo America’s representation of the Pueblo Other is the marriageable Hopi maiden with her distinctive nasumtah or hair whorls, representing squash blossoms and also described as butterflies (fig. 8). William Henry Jackson, the “Father of the Picture Postcard,” was one of many photographers to capture such an image. He first visited Hopi in 1875, and his entry into a Hopi house and encounter with Hopi women was described as follows by his companion, E. A. Barber, a special correspondent to The New York Times:

Following up a ladder to the roof on the second story, and thence to a third by a series of stone steps, we passed through a low aperture into a room on this floor. Here we were bidden to be seated on a raised platform at one side of the room. . . . Behind us a maiden was grinding corn in the primitive manner of the Moquis. Scarcely had we become seated when a beautiful girl approached and placed before us a large mat heaped with pee-kee. . . . She was of short stature and plump, but not unbecomingly so. Her eyes were almond shape, coal black, and possessed a voluptuous expression, which made them fascinating. Her hair was arranged in the characteristic Oriental manner, peculiar to her tribe, which denoted her a maid and which, although odd to
us, nevertheless seemed to enhance her beauty. We had entered abruptly and awkwardly enough, with our hats unremoved and our garments ragged, travel-stained, and dusty; but on the approach of the modest and beautiful Num-pa-yu, every head was uncovered in a moment, and each of us felt clumsy, dirty and ashamed of our torn garments and unshaven faces. [quoted in Jackson 1929:256–259]6

Regrettably I do not have Jackson’s photograph of this Hopi maid, Nampeyo, who was to become a famous and much-photographed potter and whose name is synonymous with Hopi and with Pueblo pottery. Years later, this same Nampeyo, now a married woman and a famous potter, was photographed by Edward Curtis, who raised the aesthetic mystification of the Native American to a high art (fig. 9). In the 1920s, the same Hopi bodies that some Anglo men were romantically, nostalgically photographing were stripped of their traditional clothing and forcibly dipped in Black Leaf-40, a sheep delouser, by others.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that the Southwest in general and the Pueblo world in particular is America’s Orient (Babcock 1990, 1992, 1994a). Like the Orient, these Pueblo maidens are, to quote Edward Said, “confined to the fixed status of an object frozen once and for all in time by the gaze of Western percipients” (1985:92). But more than simply partaking of the synchronic essentialism and paradigmatic fossilization that Said describes as characteristic of
orientalism, these southwestern objects of desire are frequently described, as was that Hopi maid, in explicitly Oriental terms. Philip Harroun’s photograph, which won a prize from Eastman Kodak in 1896, is entitled, “A New Mexican Rebecca” (fig. 10) Anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing recalled his first evening at Zuni in 1879 as follows:

As I sat watching the women coming and going to and from the well, “How strangely parallel,” I thought, “have been the lines of development in this curious civilization of an American desert, with those of Eastern nations and deserts.” [1882:197]

Susan Wallace also found much in the land of the pueblos “to remind [her] of Bible pictures” and described women carrying water jars as “maidens of Palestine” (1891:51–52). In the summer of 1890, anthropologist John G. Owens described an evening at Zuni remarkably like the one that Cushing witnessed:

Just before dark, the squaws all go to the spring to get an olla of water. I went over this evening to see them. It reminded me of the pictures of Palestine. . . . It certainly is a classic sight.7

Repeatedly, “travellers passing the Pueblo villages of the Southwest in the eighties were invited to recall the villages of ancient Egypt and Nubia, Ninevah and Babylon, rather than to study the remains of American aboriginal life; the people were ’like the descendent of Rebecca of Bible fame’ ” (Pomeroy
Figure 9. Nampeyo, Hopi. Photograph by Edward S. Curtis, ca. 1906. Courtesy of the Museum of New Mexico, neg. no. 21536.

Figure 10. “A New Mexican Rebecca.” This photograph of a San Juan Pueblo woman taken in November 1896 by Philip E. Harroun won a $10 prize from Eastman Kodak. Courtesy of the Museum of New Mexico, neg. no. 12422.
1957:39). The Mormons, of course, believed literally that Native Americans came from Palestine and were one of the “lost tribes” of Israel. Hence, the justification then and now for their civilizing mission in the Native American Southwest.

In many ways, tourism and a market for exotic objects has maintained Orientalism and aesthetic primitivism in a structure of domination more insidious than religious and military colonization. Beginning in the 1920s, the procession of Zuni olla maidens became a regular feature of the Gallup Ceremonial (fig. 11). The caption accompanying another image of these women, a photograph published by the New Mexico Department of Development, bears quoting in full:

Balancing a gaily decorated pot atop their heads is everyday work for these Indian woman natives of Zuni Pueblo, 45 miles south of Gallup, New Mexico. These Zuni women are dressed in their finest festive garb for the annual Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial, held each year at Gallup. The Zunis are excellent pottery makers and their pueblo remains little affected by the whiteman’s civilization. [Museum of New Mexico, neg. no. 4924]

For over a century, Zuni women have been visually and verbally trapped in the aesthetic primitivism of Anglo photographers, artists, and anthropologists. However, as various commentators on Pueblo life have observed—several much to their horror—by the 1920s, tin waterbuckets were a common and much-desired item among the Pueblos. While it was once true that “among all the pueblos the one type of pottery which universally prevails is the tinaja or water

Figure 11. “Zuni Pottery Maids, Indian Ceremonial, Gallup, New Mexico.” “One of the popular features of the Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial each August in Gallup, N.M., are the singing pottery girls from Zuni, shown here in a Ceremonial parade. At Zuni the girls became skilled in balancing the jars of water they dip from the river to water their gardens.” Postcard published by Keeley Agency, Gallup, ca. 1935.
jar” (Austin 1934:1), it is also true that “the non-Western woman [and the clay vessel that she shapes and carries] is the vehicle for misplaced Western nostalgia” (Ong 1988:85). And was, even by the 1930s, when Mary Austin made that assertion about the universality of water jars. In 1926, anthropologist Odd Halseth made the following observation regarding the successful pottery revival he encouraged at Jemez Pueblo:

Of more worth than money is the creative pride which again is coming into the lives of the Jemez people. Women with figures erect and with jars of their own making gracefully balanced on their heads once more wend their way to the springs, and the sight of some sister who still struggles, stoop-shouldered, with the burden of a tin water bucket in each hand brings smiles of realization to their faces. [1926:149]

Clearly, she is valued because she is, if only in his imaginary projections, outside history, outside industrial capitalism. I probably do not need to tell you that I have not found a single image of a Pueblo woman with a tin waterbucket. But even in, especially in, the late 20th century, there is a proliferation of olla maidens—for example, in figures 1 and 2—even on Anglo bodies and everywhere in the Southwest. Such contemporary images of “water carriers” and reproductions of images and reproductions of reproductions attest that representation is “an integral part of the social processes of differentiation, exclusion, incorporation, and rule . . . of domination and control” (Owens 1982:10). A bronze sculpture of olla maidens has recently been installed, with no protest of which I am aware, on the lawn of the state capitol in Santa Fe (fig. 12). Shaped by an Anglo artist, Glenna Goodacre, they have become a favorite photographic subject and are endlessly reproduced on postcards and greeting cards, as well as

Figure 12. Bronze olla maidens by Glenna Goodacre. State Capitol, Santa Fe, N.M. Photograph by Ken Raveill. Reproduced as a Smith-Southwestern Postcard. Reprinted by permission of Terrell Publishing Company.
in publications of the State of New Mexico and its Department of Tourism. Who could doubt that “women’s bodies—through their use, consumption, and circulation—provide for the condition making social life and culture possible” or that “commodities, women, [the Pueblo], are a mirror of value of and for [white]man” (Irigaray 1985:171, 177). Both Irigaray and this endless parade of “bearers of value” argue that patriarchal society is society functioning in the mode of “semblance” in that “the value of symbolic and imaginary productions is superimposed upon, and even substituted for, the value of relations of material, natural, and corporal (re)production” (Irigaray 1985:171). For more than a century, Anglo discursive formations and technologies of reproduction have transformed and commoditized the reproduction of Pueblo culture in the bodies of women and clay vessels from historical reality to aesthetic object to mythic vessels of desire. Or, as Walter Benjamin has observed, “in the inanimate body, which can however, give itself to pleasure, allegory unites with commodities” (quoted in Buci-Glucksman 1986:224).

Notes

1For further discussion of the reproduction of reproduction in our imaging of the Pueblo Other, see Babcock 1992.

2See Babcock 1994b for further discussion of imaging the Pueblo Other as different yet the same and of New Deal rhetoric conjoining handcraftmanship and assembly lines.

3Letter from Miller to Drummond, October 28, 1910, Department of the Interior correspondence, Hopi Agency.

4In “Orientalism Reconsidered,” Said remarks that “the Orient was routinely described as feminine, its riches fertile, its main symbols the sensual woman, the harem, and the despotic—but curiously attractive—ruler. Moreover, Orientals like Victorian housewives were confined to silence and to unlimited enriching production” (1985:103).

5For further discussion of this image and the privileging of heterosexual romance in inscriptions of Maria’s life and art, see Babcock 1994b.

6For more on the construction of Nampeyo as the Pueblo icon and the subsequent genealogical imperative, see McChesney 1993.

7Letter from John G. Owens to Deborah Stratton, July 20, 1890, located in John G. Owens Papers, Peabody Museum Archives, Harvard University. My thanks to Kit Hinsley, who is editing this correspondence and called this statement to my attention.

8See, for example, the statements by anthropologist Li An-che (1937) and by popularizer Erna Fergusson (1940), also quoted in Babcock (1990:405–406).

References Cited


