HOME ON EARTH: WOMEN AND LAND IN THE RIO ARRIBA
Map 1 | Rio Arriba and northern New Mexico
TO THE DIVERSE PEOPLES OF THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY, AN ARID AND
perilous place stretching from what is now southern Colorado southward into New Mexico, the joining of fertile earth with water has meant nothing less than life. Over millennia, the northern valley, which the Spanish called Rio Arriba, has been a homeland to indigenous peoples—Tewa-, Tiwa-, Towa-, and Tano-speaking Puebloan peoples, Apaches, Navajos, Comanches, and Kiowas. In time, Spanish emigrants and the Mexican inheritors of cross-cultural intimacies would come to call the Rio Arriba home, soon to be joined by Americans of all kinds, and eventually by people from the four corners of the planet. Each group of inhabitants has brought a different understanding of the meaning of the place, and each has crafted a distinctive way of making use of what was at hand, even as the encounters among various peoples have shaped the lifeways of all who come to this valley.

The convergence of peoples along the Rio Grande has shaped both the land, on a grand scale, and that most intimate of spaces, the home. But we should be wary of reducing the idea of home to a sentimental symbol of warmth and comfort. Home is a value-laden term, and the realm of the household has meant vastly different things to the various peoples who have lived in what would become the American Southwest. For the women of New Mexico, home was anything but a haven in a stable world. Villages and nations fought over the right to make a home in this place. People joined together for defense, forged uneasy alliances, and created new families. In every case, women put their hands to the fertile and pliable earth to claim a home place, to sustain life, to make the present meaningful and the future a realm of human possibility.

CORN MOTHERS: STORING AND BUILDING WITH THE EARTH

For thousands of years, the American Southwest had been a place of people passing through. We have only archeological fragments and evidence left in the earth itself to help us piece together an idea of the first people to make this area their home, at least for a time, as they hunted and foraged across the region’s deserts and plateaus in pursuit of migratory herds of game animals. As we do today, they set the course of their lives by solving the problems posed by their surroundings. The women among them prepared specialized campsites for shelter and way stations for butchering and processing meat.
and hides. They developed unparalleled knowledge of the local terrain and animal habits, trapping small animals and gathering seeds, roots, and other wild plants to feed their bands. Although we tend to imagine gathering as a small-scale domestic activity, we should recall that this was necessary, backbreaking work under a blazing sun—too often for too little return. The foremothers of the Puebloans ranged large territories, and women’s harvesting, as much as men’s hunting activities, determined where bands settled. Small wonder that women worked to invent more efficient ways to feed, shelter, and nurture their families.¹

Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko captured Puebloans’ intimate connection to the earth. “Life on the high, arid plateau became viable,” she wrote, “when the human beings were able to imagine themselves as sisters and brothers to the badger, antelope, clay, yucca, and sun. Not until they could find a viable relationship with the terrain—the physical landscape they found themselves in—could they emerge.”² Scattered bands came together into the groups that archeologists labeled the Hohokam, Mimbres, Mogollon, and Anasazi. These peoples possessed distinctive material culture traditions and ways of living in the region’s deserts and plateaus. They developed far-flung trade networks and complex societies as they mingled and traded with people across mid-America, embracing new technologies that were spreading slowly northward and eastward. Women and men began to devote themselves to the earth in new ways: to grow corn, make pottery, and build with adobe. Corn would become the foundation of a new way of living with the earth.

Women guided the domestication of corn throughout the Americas, experimenting with wild corn seed to breed strains that yielded larger, more nutritious ears. The origin tales of Pueblo corn mothers recount women’s role in transforming hunting and gathering communities into agricultural people. In the Sia myth, the corn mother, Iyatiku, also known as Utset, led mankind from the underworld only to find that “their only food was seeds of certain grasses. . . . Utset desiring that her children should have other food ‘made fields north, west, south and east of the village and planted bits of her heart, and corn was evolved.’”³

By a.d. 700, women in the Southwest had learned to select the seeds that did best in their climate and had begun to develop hybrids adapted to desert soils and scarce water. They developed more elaborate tools—stone metates and manos engineered to grind the dried, hardier kernels of corn into an edible flour (figure 1). As farming claimed more of women’s time and energy, families began to build more elaborate dwellings near their fields. Agriculture increased specialization in men’s and women’s activities and gave new importance to households organized around female kinship.⁴ And as food, in turn, became more diverse, predictable, and plentiful, women’s health improved. Mothers were better able to survive the rigors of childbirth, children were more likely to grow to adulthood, and populations grew. The bodies of the people, and their capacity to survive and thrive, were intimately linked to women’s ability to learn from, adapt to, nurture, and claim the bounty of earth.
Corn, along with beans and squash, inspired the people of the Southwest to create and seek out new ways to store and safeguard all that they grew and made, as well as the things they acquired through trade. As the ancestral Puebloans relied more on agriculture, they also developed new companion technologies, creating tools to carry, store, and cook the things they grew. Some women added pottery making to their daily round of jobs—more work for them, but a great help as they processed and stored food. Earthen pots, unlike woven baskets, could withstand the higher temperatures needed to cook ground corn and beans. Women learned to locate and mine the best types of clay, passing their knowledge on to their daughters. They experimented with materials from sand to broken pottery shards to temper the clay so that it would not crack during firing. They produced functional and beautiful pots, crafting shapes that satisfied a range of needs: storing and preserving seeds, cooking, ritual use, and gathering water (figures 2 and 3). Over time, in each village, certain women and their families began to focus on making pottery. Their work found a ready and expansive market. Archaeologists working at ancient Puebloan sites have recovered a remarkable diversity of ceramics, the remnants of a spreading network of exchange among scattered peoples knit together by trade and family ties.

Women also used the gifts of earth to shape one of the most distinctive and enduring architectural traditions of North America, working together with men to provide shelter. They used the material closest to hand—earth—to construct walls. Drawing on techniques they had developed in making pottery, they built up adobe walls by applying handfuls of clay, with each layer allowed to dry before the next coat was applied. Their

3 | Cooking pot, a.d. 1000–1300, Ancestral Pueblo, San Rafael, New Mexico. Museum of the American West, Autry National Center; 89.120.2.
dwellings, which archaeologists call “unit pueblos,” were built with combinations of adobe, stone, and wood. They strung together rooms for storage, living areas for families, communal work areas, and religious spaces. Starting in A.D. 900, the great, multi-storied houses of the Anasazi appeared, signaling a new scale of organization around multigenerational extended-family households.

Centuries later, Spanish officers and priests would record their surprise at finding Puebloan women in the thick of construction work. Pedro de Castañeda de Najera noted in his report on the 1540 Coronado expedition that the Pueblo Indians of the Rio Grande “erect their buildings communally. The women are in charge of making the mortar and putting up the walls. The men bring the wood and set it in place” (figure 4). But if the Spanish were shocked, Puebloans regarded women’s building work as the stuff of everyday life and long-standing tradition. As Pueblo women told nineteenth-century ethnologists, their grandmothers and great-great-grandmothers had always built their houses in this way.

Women’s innovations in agriculture, pottery, and architecture had bound people together in new ways and transformed the human connection with the environment. By A.D. 1000, the ancestral Puebloans occupied a homeland spanning a diverse, patchwork landscape of small farmsteads, transient camps, and satellite villages radiating out from a few large cities. The first permanent settlers of the Rio Grande valley were one such satellite—small groups of farmers and traders colonizing the far eastern frontier.7

Women and men who had learned to survive by manipulating and managing what the land offered now moved to take greater control of their surroundings. They cleared land to create fields and learned to manage scarce water resources. To this day, we can see evidence of the canals, stone dams, reservoirs, and ditches that the ancestral Puebloan people built to divert water to fields. Men cut down trees and transported the timber remarkably long distances in order to provide roofs and fires for the expanding homes and kivas of the cities. The construction of Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon alone required some two hundred thousand trees.8

They were casualties of their own success. By the thirteenth century, Puebloan people were facing a serious deforestation problem as they denuded the land in their voracious use of wood for their homes, heating, and pottery making. When ancestral Puebloan farmers pushed their home places to the environmental limit, they faced an agonizing choice: die or leave. When fields became unproductive after a generation or two, the families that made up the village moved out. As archaeologist Stephen Lekson has explained, prior to the thirteenth century, “villages moved, coalesced, split, reformed in response to local situations and local environments.”9 Collapsed walls and rooms were left to decompose and enrich the soil for the next generation. While women built homes with artistry, layering bands of color and selecting stones for size and texture for aesthetic effect, they did not build for permanence. Walls were thin, prone to collapse, and easily eroded over time by rain. As cultural landscape theorist J. B. Jackson remarked, Puebloan homes “were easy to build and easy to abandon.”10

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In the end, in the face of too many people, too little water, and less and less arable land, the earth could not provide enough. Terrain stripped of trees and brush became more susceptible to erosion. And then came the devastating force of climate change. Water, always scarce, became ever more elusive as long-term droughts from A.D. 1130 to 1180, and between A.D. 1276 and 1299, withered the fields. Entire villages, decimated by hunger, disease, warfare, and violent competition for scarce resources, headed off in search of new homes.

**CONVERGENCE ALONG THE RIO GRANDE**

Try to imagine the mass abandonment of the Colorado Plateau and the great migrations into northern New Mexico in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The mind reels. What inconceivable suffering could have caused some thirty thousand people of the Colorado Plateau and San Juan drainage to leave forever the home places so painstakingly wrested from the earth? The great cities of Chaco Canyon, Mesa Verde, and Kayenta, once homes to thousands of people, stood vacant and naked to the hot sun and screaming wind as their inhabitants made their way, on foot, for hundreds of miles to the south and east. At the same time, remnants of the Mogollon people began moving north while newcomers, bands of migrating Athapascan people who would become the Apaches and Navajos, moved into the northwestern area of current-day New Mexico.

The peoples of the southern and western deserts also dispersed, moving into smaller ranchos or joining the rivers of humanity now converging along the Rio Grande and spreading through the surrounding valleys. The small farming settlements already established in the Rio Grande valley formed new, consolidated villages like Pecos and Arroyo Hondo. Looking to stake a claim on which to build new homes, the migrants traded, joined, and fought with the area’s original inhabitants.

With the enormous influx of people into their homeland, the Rio Grande Puebloans reinvented themselves. The convergence of peoples with diverse skills and often fractious interests sparked violence and adaptation, new weapons and tools, and innovations in pottery and architecture. Inventions such as the slab metate, spiral-grooved axe, and loom weights made women’s and men’s work easier and more productive. Women and men continued to make adobe buildings, but they shifted away from the unit architecture of the past toward more permanent, integrated adobe villages with multistory structures and large centralized plazas that included spaces for men’s weaving and women’s corn grinding. Changes in material culture and social geography both reflected and galvanized other, lasting changes, including transformations in women’s lives.

Starting sometime in the fifteenth century, the women who converged in the eastern pueblos began to express themselves in new ways, through the familiar medium of earth, experimenting with more painted pottery and sharpening their regional styles. The precise, linear black-on-white style of Anasazi painting gave way to a growing use of red, yellow, and white clay slips, new glazes, and designs drawn from nature (figure 5).
Art historian J. J. Brody has suggested that such innovations in pottery reflect women’s efforts to create unity out of diversity. Brody understates the matter. If the glorious pottery of the Rio Grande pueblos reflects cultures coming together in creativity, the history preserved in the quiet repose of clay was the product of diverse peoples’ uneasy proximity and endemic conflict, often marked by terrifying violence.

Migrating people quickly filled up the arable land, leading to competition for food and water. People joined together for defense and trade, forging uneasy alliances both cemented and disrupted by new contacts and innovations. The Rio Grande pueblos soon commanded the gateway to the plains and its buffalo herds, and by the sixteenth century the villages of Pecos, Taos, and Picuris had become the main points of inter-cultural trade. But being earthbound made Pueblo farmers vulnerable to their nomadic neighbors, and relations between Plains hunters and Pueblo agriculturalists ranged from the amity of trade, cooperation, and collaboration, to the uneasy interactions among unreliable neighbors, to the horror of war. Whether peace prevailed or violence broke out depended to some degree on the availability of game, the productivity of crops, the rituals of commerce, and the number of people competing for the land and
its bounty. On such uneasy ground, the line between trading and raiding was thin, sometimes to the vanishing point, and this disappearing line was often drawn in blood, as men old enough to make war were usually killed on the battlefield. Pueblo, Navajo, and Plains raiders took women and children as captives to be traded as slaves or incorporated into their bands and villages as servants or relatives. Violence—against both men and women—infused the commerce between valley farmers and traders and nomadic plains hunters.

For a woman facing the ever-present threat of abduction, home was anything but a haven in a stable world. Carried off or traded away to live and serve those not her kin, she brought with her skills that created the possibility of home in a strange, perilous place. As she ground corn or shaped a pot, built a wall, taught her mistress or her daughter how to find clay, or perfected a new ceramic glaze, she did the work of claiming a home she might be torn from yet again, a home that might never really be hers at all. But for all the insecurity of her predicament, her very presence, her transfiguring hand on earth, was at the center of a new way of life converging on the Rio Grande.

**WOMEN AND EMPIRE**

When Francisco Vásquez de Coronado and his soldiers arrived at the well-defended Pecos Pueblo in 1540, they entered a world already shaped by turbulence, dislocation, and dramatic cultural change. They came under the Spanish crown and Christian cross seeking gold, slaves, and souls, but the armies themselves—and the world they encountered—complicated their plans. They brought with them a tool of conquest that revolutionized life among those they sought to conquer: the horse. As settlers followed soldiers, the phenomenon that historian Ned Blackhawk has called “the equestrian revolution” galvanized a new era of conflict and adaptation, village to village, household by household. In this new world, frontier bloodshed was less often a matter of organized battles and more often a fact of the instability of everyday life.

Women—as wives, workers, and captives—held the key to creating sustainable communities, even as it seemed that the earth was snatched out from under them. As the line of Spanish soldiers moved up into the northern Rio Grande valley, the country they called the Rio Arriba, and fanned out from village to village across the countryside, the far-off empire redefined indigenous women as its subjects and staked its claim to their obedience through violence, threatened or real. Spanish accounts tell us that Pueblo and other indigenous women did what they could to shape the encounter, using what leverage they had over food, gifts, and sex. But they faced heavy odds. As the Franciscan friars recorded with disgust, Spanish soldiers routinely brutalized Indian women. In 1598, when the soldiers under Captain Don Juan de Zaldivar invaded Acoma, seized its food supplies, and raped a village woman, the inhabitants struck back. The Spanish army retaliated with lethal force. By the time the soldiers were done, some eight hundred Indian men, women, and children lay dead. Over five hundred women and children were
taken captive, as officers sentenced all surviving men and women over the age of twelve to slavery. To quell future resistance, soldiers cut one foot off each man over the age of twenty-five.¹⁶

The Spanish invaders assailed women’s bodies, and the tribute system they imposed assaulted the foundations of female power and legitimacy: land and corn. Under the encomienda system, the crown awarded agents of the empire the right to demand tribute in the form of the Indians’ resources and labor. The Spanish expected yearly payments of tribute, to be meted out in grain. In response, Pueblo women created a new type of vessel, to hold a half a fanega, the Spanish unit of measurement used to collect tribute. Each of these vessels, now known as ollas, could hold about a bushel of grain. Soon these new types of pots replaced seed jars and other early-type storage vessels whose forms had been in use for centuries.¹⁷ When villages were unable to meet demands for corn, hide, or cloth payments, men and women were forced into service as field hands, cooks, maids, carpenters, gardeners, and weavers. Imperial officials and missionaries sought to impose a new working order, forcing women to weave and men to build homes. Where women had once been in charge of a family’s seed and fields, missionaries put men in charge of farming. As missionaries intervened to regulate marriage, warfare and sex with Spanish colonists disrupted the Natives’ clan lineages and earlier matrilineal land rights.¹⁸

The Spanish empire’s first attempt to control the colony of Nuevo Mexico through war and tribute ended in failure. In 1680, in one of the largest and most successful indigenous resistance movements in the history of the Americas, the Pueblos expelled the Spanish conquerors from their lands. Although the revolt did not stop Spanish armies or Spanish customs from ultimately coming into the region, it did change the terms of encounter. When the Spanish returned to the Rio Arriba in 1692, the iron fist of military might broke ground for an arduous scheme to establish small agricultural settlements. The dream of gold gave way to the hope for more modest returns from agriculture and livestock—a conquest of encroachment, spearheaded by families. The politics of conquest became a politics of earth.

The Spanish government believed that families would provide a stabilizing force on suspect terrain, a permanent population with a stake in defending the empire’s volatile northern frontier. Spanish recruiters enticed women of New Spain by offering goods and wages, along with cash to pay off debts and purchase supplies. These women risked everything in the name of conquest, with the hope of improving their lot in life. Vastly outnumbered by men, women nonetheless took part in successive waves of migration and colonization as wives, workers, heads of households, and servants. Many of these women were relatives or servants of soldiers or officials, and they tended to be poor, Christianized mestizas, of mixed Spanish and Indian heritage. In his 1763 painting From Mestizo and Indian, Coyote (plate 1), Mexico City painter Miguel Cabrera illustrated the complex cultural mixing that created mestiza families in New Spain and the northern frontier. In this idealized painting, he showed a tattered family at the bottom of the
Spanish *casta* system, a racial hierarchy measured by one’s degree of Spanish blood. It was just such families on the lower end of the system who most often chose the arduous journey and a difficult, dangerous life in new country on the far northern frontier, where they depended on suspicious, often hostile local people for labor and food.

These families brought with them new ways of living on the land. Ex-soldiers and their families could become stakeholders in communal grants, where they received the right to a small field, a house, and the land immediately surrounding their homes. The crown subsidized church and government services, and the community shared pasture and water. Spanish-speaking settlers soon created a distinctive new landscape of small family farms radiating in narrow bands from the rivers and ditches that diverted water to their fields and flocks. However, their ways of settling troubled Spanish authorities. In a 1778 report on affairs in New Mexico, Father Juan Agustín de Morfi criticized colonists who, he wrote, “flee from the company of their brothers and withdraw their habitations from one another, stringing them out in a line as fast as they can build them.” Although Morfi lamented the settlers’ preference for dispersal, they were responding, like Pueblo migrants before them, to the realities of the environment, securing their livelihood through grazing, irrigated farming, and trade.

The Spanish government had returned a portion of land seized from the Pueblos as a collection of communal grants, but the Pueblos, weakened by disease and war, were too few to occupy or cultivate much of the land to which they were entitled. And even where they sought to stay, Hispanic colonists challenged their claims to the best river lands. The arrival of the Comanches and Utes into northern New Mexico early in the eighteenth century displaced Apaches and placed new pressures on Pueblo people. As bitter necessity forced Pueblo families to abandon their homes, Hispanic families moved onto the land. By 1700, only nineteen Pueblo communities remained.

On their small, seemingly remote farms, Nuevo Mexicanas and Mexicanos wrested a tough life from the earth. They built their houses as defensible fortresses and pooled the labor of family members and neighbors. Families raised cattle and sheep, planted European grains like wheat and barley along with corn, and introduced new foods like grapes, almonds, and peaches. Women planted fruit orchards and vegetable gardens and cultivated and gathered medicinal herbs. Women and children helped men plow, hoe, harvest, and herd. When men were absent, women took up the heavy work of maintaining their families’ irrigation ditches. Wives and daughters plastered their houses, baked bread, carded and spun wool, and cared for their families’ health, even as they prepared and stored food for winter: salted and dried meat, roasted and ground corn, dried fruits and chilies. The work never ended.

Despite the arduous life, Hispanic women had the right to possess the earth they worked, and they enjoyed other legal rights and privileges not available to their contemporaries in other European colonies. Under laws going back to the fourteenth century, married women had the right to own, sell, buy, and bequeath land as well as portable property—in their own names—to their daughters as well as their sons. Their wills
show us not only how much they valued their rights and possessions but also how they worked to ensure that their children would inherit all kinds of property, including land, orchards, buildings, and livestock, as well as such tools as digging sticks, hoes, axes, and plow points. They also clearly cherished their household goods. Many women brought with them and retained through marriage a dowry chest, whether plain wood board or deeply carved, that held textiles, clothing, jewelry, and coins (plate 2). This chest was often one of the few pieces of furniture in the household, and was passed
down from mother to daughter. The marriage chest, as valued and valuable as it might be, was but a symbol of much more extensive legal and property rights.

Why does it matter what women left to their descendants? To answer that question, think about the fact that real people do hard work, and consider the importance of the steel plow point. The wood plow the settlers brought with them was tipped with iron or steel and fastened to a handle that could be pulled by an animal or person. That iron or steel tip was a precious commodity on a frontier where worked metal tools were nearly impossible to obtain. In her 1747 will, Juanotilla, a coyota, a child from mestizo and Indian parents, living in San Buenaventura de Cochiti, passed on to her children such tools for survival: Spanish axes and hoes and an Indian digging stick. To her daughter she also bequeathed a horse, a saddle, and a steel plow point. In Santa Cruz de la Cañada, steel points were so valuable that the town’s officials controlled their distribution and allotted them only to women. Small wonder that Spanish-Mexican women regularly mentioned steel plow points in their wills. Moreover, they tended to bequeath those possessions to their daughters, even when they had surviving sons. When women mentioned plow points and livestock in their wills, they were recording the material wealth they brought to their marriages, the work they did on their farms, and their strategies for survival in a perilous borderland.21

CAPTIVES AND COUSINS

On June 3, 1779, José Martin brought his infant child, María, to the parish priest for baptism. María Gertrudis Martin was the illegitimate daughter of Martin and an unnamed Pueblo mother. A few years later José married María del Carmel, and young María was reared within their household as a servant alongside their legitimate children and at least one other Indian servant, a Comanche female. María later accompanied her half-brother, Servino Martínez, to Taos, where she worked in his home as his housekeeper until her own marriage. As an adult, she set up her household as one of the many genizaros, detribalized Indians of second-class status, who by the end of the eighteenth century made up almost one-third of New Mexico’s population. We can only wonder how María, and women like her, navigated the dangers, constraints, and opportunities they found on the frontier.22

Colonial encounters, whether peaceful or violent, were not something that happened “out there.” Rather, they took place in that most intimate of spaces, the home, in the form of the daily clashes and combinations of bodies and minds. Some women contributed to household sustenance whether they wanted to or not. The labor of captives purchased at trade fairs in Taos and Pecos remained central to Spain’s frontier economy. A large number of indigenous child “orphans” found their way into Hispanic households in the 1730s and 1740s. Some of these orphans were the products of rape or interracial unions, abandoned by their mothers and placed by the Catholic Church into Christian homes. Settlers purchased “rescued” Apache and Navajo slaves, often victims of Coman-
che raids, whom they brought into the household to be Hispanicized and converted. Two-thirds of these captives were women. As paid laborers and slaves, indigenous women worked side-by-side with Hispanic women, spinning cotton and wool for the family’s bedding and floors, cooking and preserving food, and keeping house.23

Rio Arriba women created complex and unreliable webs of dependency in the face of insecurity and violence. Hispanic mestiza women, themselves the children or wives of interracial families, claimed higher status than the captive Native women they commanded. But like Pueblo and Plains Indian women, they too were subject to kidnapping and enslavement, all too frequently finding themselves transformed from keepers of households to spoils of war. As Comanche raiding of the northern frontier escalated, many women became the victims of slave raids and were forcibly changed from conqueror to captive.

By the end of the eighteenth century, women’s new identities as New Mexicans took shape in a shifting homeland in which enemies, allies, and families had become intertwined. Rising levels of warfare, drought, and epidemics forged a new, often painful unity in the villages of the Rio Arriba. Equestrian peoples, including Navajos, Comanches, Utes, and Apaches, pushed into new territory and raided Hispanic and Pueblo villages alike. In 1779 the Santa Fe cartographer and military engineer Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco prepared several maps for the new governor, Juan Bautista de Anza. He recorded the large-scale violence and disruption of this period on one map by means of small images of ruined buildings indicating settlements destroyed by the enemy.24 Spanish farmers, also hit hard by drought and disease, needed their Pueblo neighbors as allies. During the Comanche raids of the 1770s, settlers sought refuge inside the walls of Taos and Picuris pueblos. In times of hunger and war, multiethnic families formed a common defense.

The intimate contact between Indian and Hispanic women shaped a convergent history. Pueblo women had to reach their own accommodations with the Spanish settlers who increasingly encroached upon their villages and lands, who wanted to claim their bodies and souls. New languages, new foods, new concepts of property, and new approaches to the sacred had taken root in the soil.

Women contributed in many ways to the rich material culture emerging in the Spanish/Indian borderlands. Indian women responded creatively to the heavy workload imposed on them by household and empire. Hispanic homes depended on Pueblo potters for ceramic ware, and Pueblo women found a ready market among the colonists for other new pottery forms, such as bread bowls, soup plates, and candlesticks. Pueblo potters took designs from Spanish embroidery and wall paintings and incorporated them into their painted pottery. Coiled baskets woven by Apache women appeared alongside Pueblo pots as essential household goods. Captives working in Spanish homes created new weaving styles that combined new materials with indigenous techniques. Navajo women incorporated Spanish traders into their networks, weaving Spanish-style banded blankets, longer than wide, which they traded to Spanish colonists for dyes, knives, and bridles (plate 3).
The Hispanic women who made the Rio Arriba their home likewise adapted to the exigencies of sharing a harsh place with those whose ancestors had occupied the terrain for millennia. Looking backward from the hindsight of the early nineteenth century, the American trader Josiah Gregg would observe that isolation had led the “early settlers of New Mexico to resort to inventions of necessity, or adopt Indian customs altogether.”

Women had carried seeds and botanical knowledge on the journey north from Mexico, but they needed to learn the particularities of New Mexican soil, plants, and climate in order to survive. Many added to their own repertoire new plants and medicines used by Pueblo women. Women incorporated the indigenous technique of weaving ixtle, a cactus fiber, along with Spanish colcha embroidery in their weavings (plate 4). The daily tasks of food preparation bore the unmistakable mark of Pueblo influence, from the use of new types of grinding stones to the inclusion of indigenous foods like purslane and chokecherries in families’ diets. Hispanic families sustained themselves with the foods
and skills they learned from Pueblo cooks. Even the very walls of their houses bespoke the convergence of peoples: men built with adobe bricks, as they had in Spain and Mexico, but the plastering and maintenance of adobe homes shifted from Hispanic men to Hispanic and Indian women.

By 1800, Hispanic and Indian families along the upper Rio Grande had come to an accommodation. Their economies, households, and families were interlocked through the exchange of women’s bodies and labor, the use of the Spanish language, the adoption and adaptation of Catholicism, and convergent technology and foods. Together, they had crafted new cultural identities reflected in such innovations as new styles of Pueblo pottery that combined European and Pueblo motifs, the distinctive Hispanic Rio Grande blanket, and new santo painting styles.26 Yet the upper Rio Grande region remained contested terrain, as first Mexico and then the United States claimed the land under new flags.

THE AMERICAN ENCOUNTER

In 1821, residents of Spain’s northern colonies became independent without much fanfare or bloodshed. The stirrings of revolution may have at first seemed remote to the people on the isolated northern frontier of New Mexico. More consequential for them, the Mexican government in that year lifted restrictions on trade with Americans. Women, who now made up half of New Mexico’s population, initially had much to gain from the opening of commerce, as traders, street vendors, and consumers. They welcomed and valued the metal tools, household goods, and bolts of cloth brought by caravans over the Santa Fe Trail and into the Rio Arriba.

A few intrepid American women, wives of traders, also made the journey into the Hispanic homeland. But more American traders and trappers, eager to take advantage of new markets, married into established Spanish-Mexican families and converted to Catholicism, as they found that the property and connections a Spanish-Mexican wife could bring were as important to success as talent, work, or luck. In the Taos Valley, the most common destination in New Mexico for American foreigners, the rate of intermarriage was particularly high. More than three-fourths of all church-sanctioned marriages between Mexicans and Americans occurred there.27

The traders rolling down the Santa Fe Trail brought Mexican women into the expanding sphere of American commerce, just as the market was transforming the way Americans farther east organized their households. To Americans in the 1830s and 1840s, home was becoming many things: the place where family members found food, clothing, and shelter; the domain of women’s work and the incarnation of men’s success; the locus of an ever-increasing array of consumer goods; the sentimental “haven” from the accelerating economic, social, and physical pressures of modern life; even the sacred space in which salvation-seeking became possible for rightly ordered families. In this heavily laden vision of home, American women were charged with spreading their moral authority at the very moment that the United States expanded its political domi-
nance into newly conquered Mexican and Indian homelands. Every recipe and dress pattern, every homily spoken or embroidered on a framed sampler, was, in a sense, a building block of the new empire.\textsuperscript{28}

As American women sought to create an empire of the home, they challenged the rights and potentially usurped the home places of Mexican women at the edge of the empire. When General Stephen Watts Kearny’s army moved into New Mexico in 1846, claiming the land for the United States, women who had been citizens of Mexico found themselves now subject to American laws. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo guaranteed the property rights of former Mexican citizens who chose to remain under the new regime, but Hispanic women of the Rio Arriba endured American conquest as a step backward. When Americans seized control of New Mexico, married women lost their rights under Mexican law to hold property in their own names, make contracts, and testify in court. The American legal system set up by occupying forces followed the English common law doctrine of coverture, most famously explicated by the English jurist William Blackstone: “When a man and a woman marry, the two become one in the eyes of the law, and the one is the man.” Under this principle, any property or wages inherited, held, or earned by a woman prior to or during marriage belonged to her husband.

When American officials refused to recognize women’s inheritance and the communal property rights embodied in Spanish and Mexican land grants, many Hispanic women sold their land and other property, hoping to recoup at least some portion of the value. Women had a right to their cash, but they could no longer hold title to land. As historian María Montóya found, women sold inherited property to husbands and other male kin, rather than attempt to hold on to it, and some women from wealthy Hispanic families who married Anglo men saw their holdings transferred to the sole control of their husbands. When we read women’s wills from this period, we can see the shift in women’s inheritance from assets in land, livestock, and homes to portable forms of wealth such as jewelry, furniture, and clothing.\textsuperscript{29} Hispanic women understood that the land beneath them had become a legal battleground.

Anglo men, supported by the new territorial government, quickly consolidated their wealth and power in the second half of the nineteenth century. American businessmen and lawyers, maneuvering within the U.S. legal system, allied with local elites, the ricos, to take control of land through litigation, fraud, taxes, and government seizure. By the time New Mexico entered the union in 1912, the land had become concentrated in fewer hands. The property system of the Hispanic frontier, based on personal connections, community rights, and patronage, gave way to an American regime founded on private property and individual ownership of land.

The Rio Arriba had sustained generations of Pueblo and Hispanic farmers, but by the opening of the twentieth century, they were having trouble hanging on. Both Hispanics and Anglos had used the land hard. Deforestation, runoff from timber and mining, and overgrazing had stripped the land of its ability to support its inhabitants. The quantity of available rangeland shrank under pressure from commercial ranchers and
a new generation of Anglo homesteaders. And in 1918, a severe drought strained already beleaguered families to the breaking point. Many of the new homesteading families found little profit in farming, sold their land, and moved on. Long-established Hispanic villages were abandoned for lack of water, and the fields of the Pueblos withered. 30 “We used to be celebrated for our vegetable gardens,” lamented Santa Clara leader Joseph Tafoya. “Now we can hardly raise anything worthwhile on these lands.” Pueblo populations became more dispersed as families moved to more distant fields or sought wage work in the cities and towns, on the railroad, and on migrant crews, returning to the pueblo only for ceremonies. 31

Homes based in agriculture rhythms were giving way to an economy fueled by railroads and tourism as populations flowed from the rural edges of northern New Mexico into Santa Fe, Taos, and Albuquerque. Civic efforts to increase tourism, supported by the railroad, propelled the growth and prominence of Santa Fe. From 1930 to 1940, Santa Fe’s population jumped from 11,176 to 20,325. 32

Pueblo women were pushed into further dependence on a cash economy fueled by a new industry: tourism. Some found jobs as domestic servants or service workers in the cities of Taos, Santa Fe, and Albuquerque. And some were able to call upon the earth once again, relying on skills that reached back to antiquity, to make a living in the new economy. When the Santa Fe Railroad arrived in New Mexico in 1880, waves of tourists took to the rails to “discover” the Southwest. By the 1890s, millions of dollars had been spent advertising New Mexico to Eastern tourists. What better souvenir of their trip into exotic country than a piece of pottery handmade by a Pueblo woman? Pottery making, which had begun to decline due to the popularity of American tinware and enamelware, revived. Soon potters experimented with smaller shapes and colorful designs that appealed to tourists.

Hispanic villagers also faced the reality of decline and dependency. Writer and home economist Fabiola Cabeza de Baca recalled the fading fortunes of her family in her 1954 memoir, *We Fed Them Cactus*. Born in 1894, Cabeza de Baca grew up on her grandfather’s farm on the llano estacado, or staked plains, near Las Vegas, New Mexico. As Anglo homesteaders and cattlemen flooded into the high plains, “where once the boundaries over which our cattle grazed had been the earth’s horizon, now we were being pushed in and in, until it became necessary to build fences.” Cabeza de Baca saw her family reduced from riding the range to catering to travelers: “Through four generations, our family has made a living from this land—from cattle and sheep, and lately by selling curios, soda pop, gasoline and food to tourists traveling over U.S. Highway 66.” 33

And yet, in spite of hardship, women did what they could to hang on to the land. They continued to come together to plaster and maintain the adobe walls of their homes (figure 7). Lorin Brown, a resident of Cordova, remembered how women took over planting when men left the villages seeking wage work: “There was no abandonment of the land. . . . During the long summers, the women tended their gardens and fields with perhaps more care than even their menfolk might have done.” 34 With the cash women earned selling produce or crafts, families managed to keep at least a remnant of their
land. And as women tended their farms and kept communities together, many of the stubborn villages scattered throughout the Rio Arriba somehow survived.

More women, however, chose to leave their villages and garden plots for jobs in town, cleaning houses or working in stores. As they moved away from their traditional sources of power, they looked for new opportunities in the emerging commercial and tourist economy.

NEW WOMEN IN THE LAND OF ENCHANTMENT

When California writer Charles Lummis traveled to New Mexico for the first time at the end of the nineteenth century, he praised a place he found steeped in the ancient timelessness of “sun, silence and adobe.” Lummis’s romantic image both missed and masked the turbulent history of the region. But the longing for serenity, timelessness, and beauty brought a new generation of Americans to the Southwest, including a host of adventuresome women seeking refuge from war and the clamor and strife of the machine age. The appeal of ancient earth and an alternative way of living close to the land sparked the creation of a new type of colony, led not by soldiers, or by farmers, homesteaders, and merchants, but by artists, writers, and reformers. To these twentieth-century immigrants, the red earth of New Mexico offered redemption and regeneration.

In the decade following World War I, hundreds of artists, writers, and visionaries, many from the East and most of them Anglos, journeyed to northern New Mexico to claim a home. Anglo women who defied convention in matters of love, family, career, and politics led the migration. In Santa Fe, an artists’ colony formed around poet Alice Corbin, her husband William Penhallow Henderson, and writer and feminist Mary Austin. In Taos, the arts community coalesced around Mabel Dodge, the socialite and salonnière who would scandalize her friends by divorcing her third husband and marrying a fourth, a man from Taos Pueblo, Antonio Lujan.

These women came to Santa Fe and Taos seeking personal and creative freedom. They looked to Pueblo and Hispanic villages for a democratic and transformative vision of home, art, and work. Single women like Elizabeth Shipley Sergeant and Mary Austin invested in the city as property owners, buying adobe homes and proclaiming themselves “mud women.” For many women, building in adobe expressed an alternative model of community, one in opposition to the nuclear family household, which allowed them to live integrated with the land. Austin discovered new horizons from her Casa Querida (“Beloved House”) at the foot of Cinco Pinatores Hill, where she could see “beyond the town, over and around into sheer desertness.” Here, she wrote, “something is drawn from the spaciousness of the country itself, as opportunity, as individual release.” Georgia O’Keeffe, a Wisconsin native who had achieved fame in New York, would find in northern New Mexico landscapes around Taos and Abiquiu the repose, light, and scale to create the work that made her the most celebrated painter in American history. O’Keeffe expressed the possessive urge that led her and others to claim the Rio Arriba as a new homeland: “When
I got to New Mexico, that was mine. . . . As soon as I saw it, that was my country. I'd never seen anything like it before, but it fitted me exactly” (plate 5).&nbsp;Anglo expatriates like Sergeant imagined the Rio Arriba as the home of primitive, natural, unselfish people tied to the earth. In her writing, Mary Austin defined land as “all those things common to a given region,” including the experiences “passed from generation to generation” that had become, in Austin's thoughts, a racial identity unique to New Mexico. Anglo women glorified what they saw as the preindustrial culture of the Southwest, even as they hired Indian and Hispanic women and men as servants, laborers, and models for their paintings. Professing a vision of harmony, they overlooked their own part as modern colonizers, perpetuating the inequities of the present. These “New Women” of the early twentieth century—progressive, well educated, unconventional—embraced a romantic vision of racial differences, and few formed close ties to the Hispanic and indigenous women whose families had called New Mexico their home for generations. But Anglo women were not alone in grasping new, potentially emancipating ideas about womanhood. As they flooded into New Mexico in search of peace and harmony, Native and Hispanic women also pursued new forms of independence and self-expression. Although women working with and on the earth had for millennia made their mark collectively and anonymously, this generation of diverse women would claim their place in the historical record as individuals.

In the decades spanning the two world wars, diverse women remade the physical, economic, and imaginative landscape of the Rio Arriba. Women once again claimed a home place through the medium of earth, in the form of adobe architecture and real estate. Historian Flannery Burke has noted the important ways in which the “Anglo arts community recast the home as the wider space of New Mexico.” They protected the Spanish-Pueblo past they admired not only in their poems and paintings but also through building permits, tax breaks, patronage, and preservation organizations like the Santa Fe Planning Board and the Old Santa Fe Association. Women founded, funded, and erected cultural institutions that directed the city's growth and identity. Working with each other and with male colleagues, they reshaped the cultural and built environment of Santa Fe through the vehicles of real estate, tourism, expositions, and chambers of commerce. They brought the trappings of modernity to New Mexico, guided by a desire to preserve remnants of an allegedly timeless past against the ravages of the modern era.

Amelia Elizabeth White and Martha White made their mark on Santa Fe through patronage and real estate speculation, mingling the language of progressive reform with the possession and pursuit of wealth. Graduates of Bryn Mawr, suffragists, and nursing veterans of World War I, the two sisters first purchased property in Santa Fe in 1923. A year later, with lawyer Francis Wilson, they formed the De Vargas Development Corporation with Amelia as president. Soon they were buying lots south of the city along Pecos Road, Camino Corrales, Garcia Street, Rancheros, and Camino del Monte Sol. For themselves, they purchased extensive property along Garcia Street, where they expanded the original two-room adobe home located on the lot into a complex of buildings, de-
signed by William Penhallow Henderson to express an alternative vision of home life based on community and mutual support. They mixed a family home with small apartments and gardens within a walled compound that paid homage to indigenous tradition and their own exquisite taste.

The White sisters continued to invest strategically, both to enrich themselves and to preserve Santa Fe’s adobe past. As early as 1936, they were buying up and selling off particular lots in an effort to protect the Santa Fe skyline, prevent overdevelopment, control road building, and sponsor cultural institutions. By 1946, the De Vargas Development Corporation balance sheets showed Amelia White as owner of more than 159,000 acres of prime Santa Fe real estate. Their efforts to preserve a romantic Spanish and indigenous past masked the reality of growing spatial segmentation in Santa Fe. As Anglo Americans claimed new areas north and south of the city’s oldest areas, Hispanic residents were forced out into areas to the east and west.

The sisters took advantage of the disarray and confusion surrounding New Mexican land titles, although they were doubtless aware of the cost to previous occupants. In a 1925 deal, Amelia doggedly pursued the purchase of fifty acres of land, which she described as “a hideous piece but we feel that it is most important to secure that tract. As for the poor woman who got stung with a bad deed, please buy her out, giving her a proper profit.” They justified their willingness to displace people on the grounds of landscape preservation and beautification. Once the deal was done and the original home razed, Martha White wrote that at last she could “rejoice [Santa Fe] is not going to turn into another shanty town.” Divided into lots, much of the original tract was sold to Anglo residents or held aside to “protect” the character of the city.

Even as they were ruthlessly cementing their claims to valuable lands in the Rio Arriba, the White sisters and other Anglo women engaged in paradoxical politics. While they disdained the “shanty towns” and “eyesores” of the present, they romanticized the purported timelessness of Indian earthworks, from pottery to adobe to reservation land claims. Amelia White lobbied for state and federal laws to protect Pueblo land and water rights, organizing the Eastern Association of Indian Affairs and serving on the executive council of the American Indian Defense Society. She also supported federal funding for Indian artists because she believed that the arts offered more economic opportunity for indigenous women than wage work could. As patrons, the Whites created new outlets for women’s traditional crafts, and they fostered the careers of Native women like the San Ildefonso/Cochiti painter Tonita Peña. Imagining themselves refugees from the grubby world of commerce, they were themselves agents of economic change.

The New Women of New Mexico were not just a flash in the pan, not simply the ragged western periphery of a generation of flappers that spread south from New York, finding personification in Zelda Fitzgerald, or eastward across the ocean with Josephine Baker. They were, instead, a force that would transform the social life, culture, and landscape of the Rio Arriba, embracing tradition even as they embodied modernity.

Consider the three-generation female dynasty of Eva Scott Muse Fényes, her daugh-
Eva Scott Muse and Leonora Muse in Santa Fe Plaza circa 1891, photographer unknown. Acequia Madre House, Curtin-Paloheimo Collection, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

These three women’s lives spanned 150 years, an era beginning with the discovery of gold at Sutter’s Fort and ending as the election of 2000 approached. Founding mother Eva Scott was born in 1849 in New York, the only child of a wealthy publisher and his pedigreed wife. Like so many elite families of the time, they accommodated the health problems of one member, and presumably the desires of others, by traveling to remote and scenic places. By the time Eva reached her twenties, she had traveled in Europe, the Middle East, and Central America. She had studied painting in Egypt and Europe and, on a trip to St. Augustine, Florida, encouraged imprisoned Indian artists at Fort Marion who had begun to make ledger paintings.

Eva was nearly thirty when she married dashing Marine Lieutenant William Muse in 1878. Her daughter, Leonora, was born the following year, but the marriage was troubled. By 1889, Eva determined on divorce. She took Leonora from Mare Island, California, to the dusty frontier outpost of Santa Fe, New Mexico, where she sketched, rode horses, bought a house, traveled across the territory, and waited for her divorce to become final (figure 8).
Eva was ever her own woman. In time she would marry Dr. Adalbert Fényes, a Hungarian physician and entomologist of noble lineage practicing—for reasons still unclear—in Cairo, Egypt. By 1896, the family returned to the United States to build an Orientalist mansion in Pasadena, California. Eva found a friend in the writer and ethnologist Charles Lummis, began to paint adobe ranch houses and missions, and developed a passion for historic preservation. Leonora, for her part, attended school and cultivated an interest in plants that would lead to serious study in ethnobotany.

Leonora married railroad attorney Thomas E. Curtin in 1903 and moved to Colorado Springs, Colorado. She became a mother soon after, but by 1911 she was a widow. She and daughter Leonora Frances moved back to Pasadena to live with Eva in yet another magnificent new home, a social center for the artists and intellectuals who were passionately documenting, collecting, and inventing what would become famous as the American Southwest.

The three women traveled all over the world, Eva painting, her daughter Leonora collecting and studying plants, and the granddaughter, young Leonora, coming to share her mother and grandmother’s passion for Spanish colonial and folk culture and arts and the vast desert landscape. In 1925, the three women, along with Mary Austin and Frank Applegate, helped found the Spanish Colonial Arts Society. Aesthetes, artists, and patrons of the arts, they were also savvy businesswomen who made shrewd investments in Western real estate. They returned often to New Mexico and, by the 1920s, were ready to settle more permanently in Santa Fe, where they shaped the city’s landscape with their forays in the local real estate market and sought the community of other New Women and New Men. In 1926, the three built a house at 614 Acequia Madre, which Charles Lummis called “the House of the Three Wise Women.” They had engaged a series of prominent architects (including Wallace Neff and William Penhallow Henderson) on the project, but fired them all, deciding that none understood what they wanted. In the end, they designed the Spanish Territorial Revival house themselves, incorporating not only gracious social areas and comfortable sleeping quarters but also individual
work spaces for each woman. Their home became the subject of countless sketches, letters, photographs, and even family Christmas cards (figure 9).

Eva Fényes died in 1930, leaving a legacy of thousands of watercolor paintings and countless photographs, a fortune in real estate and other investments, and a wealth of projects to preserve Spanish colonial and Native American crafts. The family’s connection to northern New Mexico deepened. Along with their close friends Edgar Lee Hewitt, Gustave Baumann, and others, these women deserve inclusion among those who created what historian Chris Wilson called the myth of Santa Fe. Leonora Curtin studied medicinal plants, interviewing curanderas in New Mexico for her 1947 book, *Healing Herbs of the Upper Rio Grande*, and with her daughter investigated the Arabic roots of Spanish words. She was a founder and the first president of the Santa Fe Garden Club and served on the boards of the Museum of New Mexico, the School of American Research, and Lummis’s Southwest Museum in Los Angeles. Her daughter worked closely with linguist and ethnologist J. P. Harrington to study the Navajo and Zuni languages.

In 1932, Leonora Curtin and her daughter Leonora purchased El Rancho de las Golondrinas, a historic working ranch south of Santa Fe. Despite the Depression, they had profits from successful investments in the stock market that they wished to convert to land. They raised cattle and sheep and restored the original adobe house, hiring a local woman, Doña Adelaida, and her relatives to hand plaster the walls using red earth brought at considerable expense from several miles away. La Loma, as the house was known, would become a retreat for the two women and their families. Aided by architect John Gaw Meem, they also began to restore and reconstruct historic Mexican buildings on their ranch.46

Leonora Frances Curtin would further champion traditional Hispanic craftwork, establishing vocational schools and, in 1934, subsidizing the Native Market as an outlet for Hispanic folk artists. In her store on West Palace Avenue, tourists could meet villagers demonstrating their skills while buying colcha pillows, tablecloths, or bultos, carved images of Catholic saints. Leonora wrote promotional brochures obscuring her own role.
Gloria López Córdova, Untitled (Nuestra Señora de los Dolores), 1990, cedar and cottonwood bulto. Museum of the American West, Autry National Center; 90.239.1.
as a middleman between the consumer and the indigenous craftsperson, advertising Native Market’s products as coming “from village to market to you.” By 1937, Native Market was providing income to more than 350 Rio Arriba villagers. At a time when land value was at its lowest, Leonora saw sustainability in the tourist economy. During the Depression years she subsidized the Market’s losses with her own funds. Many of the children and grandchildren of artists of the first Native Market continue to create art in the Rio Arriba today. Gloria López Córdova, a fourth-generation santero maker, continues to carve bultos from unpainted wood in the Córdova style pioneered by her family and the Native Market (figure 10).

In 1946, Leonora Frances married the Finnish diplomat Y. A. Paloheimo. The couple adopted four Finnish war orphans and split their time among California, Finland, and Santa Fe. In 1972, El Rancho de las Golondrinas opened—both as a living history museum and as the ongoing symbol of three generations of New Women who adopted, adapted to, and transformed the landscape of the Southwest.

**NEW MEXICO WOMEN: MODERNITY AND TRADITION**

For their part, indigenous women artists assuredly did not imagine themselves as remnants of the timeless, static past that so inspired their patrons. Neither did Hispanic women see themselves as quaint relics of a doomed way of life. Instead, they looked for ways to make a good living and to balance respect for the past with modernization. Hispanic villagers purchased kitchen ranges and sewing machines. San Ildefonso potter María Martínez used her income from the sale of her traditional pueblo pottery (plate 6) to buy an iron cooking range and a car. By 1924, Martínez was earning about two thousand dollars a year for her pottery, and pottery making had surpassed farming as the most important source of income in San Ildefonso village. As she devoted more and more time to her lucrative pottery practice, Martínez hired a Mexican American woman to help her with the housework.

Writer and government extension agent Fabiola Cabeza de Baca believed that preserving the Hispanic past offered a means to resist Americanization. She went to work for the United States government in 1929, when Hispanic farmers were rapidly losing land to the United States Forest Service, to the continued legal assault on communal land grants, and to environmental degradation. As much as she understood the ways in which modernity threatened the survival of Hispanics’ villages and their independence, Cabeza de Baca was also a firm believer in science and progress. In her view, the job of an extension agent was to bring to distant villages and rural households the benefits of new ideas and goods while respecting the value of old ways of doing things. She was far more sensitive to local traditions and more realistic about rural people’s choices than most government agents in New Mexico had ever been (figure 11).

Armed with the latest in kitchen equipment—the canning kettle, the pressure cooker, government bulletins, and her college training in home economics—Cabeza de Baca set
out for thirty years of life on the road. She helped hard-pressed families get access to canning equipment and sewing machines, and made information available to families not comfortable with English by speaking Spanish (and later Tewa and Towa), translating government bulletins from English into Spanish, and writing her own bilingual materials. Cabeza de Baca in turn heard stories she would treasure; collected folklore about herbal medicine, planting practices, and religious rituals; and learned much of what she would later recount about New Mexican cooking in her 1939 book *Historic Cookery*. She kept voluminous notes about remedies, rituals, and recipes and took palpable pleasure in cataloguing local knowledge, techniques, and skills, observing the mingling of faith and science.50

Cabeza de Baca envisioned a future rooted in the soil and the everyday experiences of people. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, she would join with Nina Otero Warren, Cleofas Jaramillo, and other Hispanic women to create a counternarrative in response to negative stereotypes of Hispanic character, and to combat the disappearance of village life, as dispossessed Hispanics were forced into migrant labor and the service economy or were forced to leave for jobs in burgeoning war industries.51 In 1935 these prominent Hispanic women founded the Sociedad Folklorico de Santa Fe, an organization dedicated to preserving the Spanish language and Hispanic folk traditions in New Mexico. Cabeza de Baca saw folklore as alive and collective. What had begun as “traditional expressions...

13 | Pueblo girls learning to use pressure cooker, 1930s, by Frances E. and Henry Prior Clark. Braun Research Library, Institute for the Study of the American West, Autry National Center; OP.160.
of unsophisticated groups of people . . . of unknown or forgotten origin, that are the personal property of no one,” were, nonetheless, “subject to modification while being communicated.” In New Mexico, Indian, Spanish, and Anglo traditions overlapped, even as they remained identifiably distinct. The state (and Cabeza de Baca herself) trumpeted its purported “tricultural heritage,” but new circumstances and people were creating new lore all the time. “The Beatles have created a modern folklore,” Cabeza de Baca pointed out, and “as the Space Age grows, our folklore will experience a new era of heroes, customs, traditions, and a new way of life.”

By pursuing a career as a professional artist, Santa Clara Pueblo painter Pablita Velarde rejected tradition, even as she chose to paint pictures of Pueblo daily life and ritual (plate 7). A member of one of the first classes of students at Dorothy Dunn’s studio at Santa Fe Indian School, Velarde remembered the boys ridiculing her: “Miss Dunn had to keep me beside her desk for protection. The boys were always teasing me[,] and sometimes they were mean. They didn’t want me in the class anyway[,] because they didn’t believe women should be artists.” She elaborated: “Painting was not considered women’s work in my time. A woman was supposed to just be a woman, like a housewife and a mother and chief cook. Those were things I wasn’t interested in.”

Velarde supported herself through a variety of “clean-up jobs” as nurse, maid, and part-time teacher when she first tried to sell her paintings in the late 1930s. Her big break came in 1939, when Dale Stuart King invited her to paint several large-size murals depicting Pueblo life for the Bandelier National Monument. She would use the money from that job to build a house and studio at Santa Clara, on land given to her by her father. In 1942 she married Herbert Hardin, an Anglo police officer, and moved to a house in Albuquerque, where she painted at her kitchen table and combined her art career with motherhood.

Velarde believed that Pueblo people could preserve their culture only by adapting to Anglo markets and tastes. Yet the earth remained a source of inspiration and an artistic medium. From Dorothy Dunn she learned to grind rocks and raw clay to create pigments for her painting, and Velarde continued to refine her technique. “I dig the dirt in secret places,” she wrote, returning to grind it in a hundred-pound metate with a ten-pound mano she salvaged from a Pueblo home in the 1960s. After many years of success as a painter, she affirmed: “I’m at a point where I can pass [on] some of my own expertise and some of my learning and my own feeling. . . . I’m satisfied with the work that I have done so far[,] and this is the way I want to leave my world when I go back to Sandy Lake and become a Cloud Person. I want the earth to remember me through my work.” She died in Albuquerque in 2006, having received the Award of Excellence from the Louvre as well as an honorary doctorate from the University of New Mexico; she left a large body of internationally acclaimed work.

In the face of the vast and rapid changes that brought dispossession and cultural loss, women like Cabeza de Baca and Velarde learned new languages, attended American schools, and embraced roles that defied local ideas about what women should do. Each
used imported institutions to create an unconventional life. And both worked tirelessly to preserve and revitalize lifeways rooted deeply in the earth of the Rio Arriba.

Earth remained a potent symbol for New Mexico women throughout the twentieth century. As different from each other as businesswomen Amelia White and Leonora Curtin, artist Pablita Velarde, and writer Fabiola Cabeza de Baca were, all these women traversed geographical, cultural, and social borders in order to imagine new possibilities for themselves as individuals. They did so by critically embracing the necessity of change and by believing in the possibility of common ground. To Anglo expatriates like Amelia White, adobe expressed community, self-expression, and a life integrated with the land. For artist Pablita Velarde, earth was a medium and a legacy. She viewed her paintings as instruments to preserve the memory of traditional Pueblo culture and as devices to educate non-Pueblo people about Pueblo life. For writer, historian, and extension agent Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, adobe was a symbol of a Spanish frontier past. For her, the future of New Mexico’s Hispanics remained rooted in the abiding connection of ordinary people with land, and in preserving family and home by using the new tools and products of American conquest.

The New Women of the Rio Arriba hoped to determine for themselves a future in harmony with the past. But their hopes were increasingly at odds with the powers of the global market. Romantic images of New Mexico’s preindustrial culture proved perhaps too marketable. By the mid-twentieth century, many New Mexicans had turned from
cultivating the earth to courting tourists. In 1922 Erna Fergusson and Ethel Hickey marketed “Koshare Tours” to visitors. Fergusson and Hickey sold out to the Fred Harvey Company, which rechristened the excursions “Indian-detours” and offered tourists automobile trips to the pueblos led by well-groomed, white female couriers. “So,” said Alice Corbin, disgusted with the commodification of Pueblo culture, “we’ve saved the Indians for Fred Harvey.”

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

In the Rio Arriba today, the earth is worth a fortune. Pueblo pots created by the descendants of María Martínez, Nampeyo, and other brilliant revitalizers of the ancient women’s tradition now sell for thousands of dollars. Sons as well as daughters of celebrated matrilineal clans hang on to their homes in reservation villages by selling clay vessels to people who would never dream of filling those pots with water, let alone putting them on a fire. Adobe houses in Santa Fe and Taos, once derided as the “mud huts” of primitive people, are being snapped up as vacation homes for bicoastal nomads who come to raid and trade, not on horseback, but via jet plane and rental car. Land once planted in corn or left for grazing has sprouted cul-de-sacs and for-sale signs. If you have to ask how much it costs, you can’t afford it.

Meanwhile, the long history of village life in New Mexico is, more and more, engulfed in the tidal wave of urban sprawl, suburban growth, and economic development. What were once rural communities clinging to the earth amid hard-hoed, carefully watered fields have become city neighborhoods (Albuquerque’s Barelas, Martineztown, Armijo), bedroom suburbs (Santa Fe’s Pojoaque and Tesuque), or homes to glitzy casinos complete with spas and championship golf courses (nearly every pueblo has them, or wants them). Those whose ancestors lived and farmed there find their claims to home once again threatened by rising taxes, battles over water, and skyrocketing property values.

Economic inequality falls especially heavily on the backs of New Mexico women. As of 2006, almost 20 percent of women in the state lived below the poverty line, putting New Mexico, among the fifty states, dead last in women’s incomes. In 2005, single mothers gave birth to more than half of all the babies born in New Mexico, a fact linked to the state’s high number of teen pregnancies. Combined with high divorce rates, this means most children in New Mexico are being raised by single mothers who struggle to care for their children in difficult circumstances. In New Mexico today, motherhood often interrupts women’s education, limits their job possibilities, and makes access to health care, child care, and even transportation a daunting challenge.

At the same time, women from many cultural backgrounds have embraced the opportunities that education and professional careers provide, and have begun to make their mark in every public endeavor. Women serve in roles ranging from tribal chair to state Supreme Court justice to congresswoman and governor, demonstrating newfound
power in a public realm long monopolized by men. Fewer women engage in the time-honored craft of house plastering, but many more own their own houses, buy and sell property, and earn their livings in every conceivable way. Women continue to play a notable role in the struggle over who gets to claim a home in the Rio Arriba, and they stand on all sides of every political, social, and economic matter. For every powerful and accomplished woman—every Heather Wilson, the Republican congresswoman, or Diane Denish, the Democratic lieutenant governor; every Sheila Garcia, car dealer and philanthropist; every Verna Williamson, first woman governor of Isleta Pueblo—there are hundreds, thousands, of women simply trying to raise the kids, pay the bills, find a measure of safety and dignity, and claim their piece of the earth in a beautiful but often unforgiving place.

Native American women often shoulder heavy burdens; nearly 75 percent of Indian children born in New Mexico have single mothers. But New Mexico’s indigenous peoples have a long history of surviving hardship. Native people today wield a variety of weapons—from the long traditions of their arts and crafts to the vast revenues brought in by casino gambling and the young tribal members with law degrees engaged in the battle to defend land and water rights—in their legal claims to home in the modern West. Daughters of the Pueblos, like Santa Clara sculptor-poet Nora Naranjo-Morse, carry on the fight for self-expression as well as self-determination. Naranjo-Morse’s non-traditional figures of mud women use humor and irony to comment on issues facing Pueblo people today. Her poem “Mud Woman’s First Encounter with the World of Money and Business” captures the poignancy of the artist’s predicament:

She unwrapped her clay figures,
    unfolding the cloth each was nestled in,
    carefully, almost with ceremony.
    Concerning herself with the specific curves, bends and
    idiosyncrasies, that made each piece her own.

Standing these forms upright, displaying them from
    one side to the next, Mud Woman
    could feel her pride surging upward
    from a secret part within her,
    translating into a smile that passed her lips.
    All of this in front of the gallery owner.

After all the creations were unveiled, Mud Woman held her breath.

The gallery owner, peering
    from behind fashionably designed
    bifocals, examined each piece
    with an awareness Mud Woman
    knew very little of.
The owner cleared her throat, asking:
    “First of all dear, do you have a résumé? You know,
    something written that would identify you to the public.
Who is your family? Are any of them well known in the Indian art world?”

Mud Woman hesitated, trying desperately to connect this business woman’s voice with her questions, like a foreigner trying to comprehend the innuendos of a new language, unexpected and somewhat intimidating.

The center of what Mud Woman knew to be real was shifting with each moment in the gallery. The format of this exchange was a new dimension from what was taken for granted at home, where the clay, moist and smooth, waited to be rounded and coiled into sensuous shapes, in a workroom Mud Woman and her man had built of earth too.

All this struggled against a blaring radio with poor reception and noon hour traffic bustling beyond the frame walls.

Handling each piece, the merchant quickly judged whether or not Mud Woman’s work would be a profitable venture. “Well,” she began, “your work is strangely different, certainly not traditional Santa Clara pottery and I’m not sure there is a market for your particular style, especially since no one knows who you are. However, if for some reason you make it big, I can be the first to say, ‘I discovered you.’ So, I’ll buy a few pieces and we’ll see how it goes.” Without looking up, she opened a large, black checkbook, quickly scribbling the needed information to make the gallery’s check valuable.

Hesitantly, Mud Woman exchanged her work for the unexpectedly smaller sum that wholesale prices dictated. After a few polite, but obviously strained pleasantries Mud Woman left, leaving behind her shaped pieces of earth.

Walking against the honks of a harried lunch crowd, Nan chu Kweejo spoke: “Navi ayu, ti gin nau na muu, nai sa aweh kucha?” “My daughter, is this the way it goes, this pottery business?”
Hearing this, Mud Woman lowered her head, walking against the crowd of workers returning from lunch. Nan chu Kweejo’s question clouded Mud Woman’s vision with a mist of lost innocence, as she left the city and the world of money and business behind.62

Naranjo-Morse’s Mud Woman may have lost her innocence, but the artist herself continues to produce strikingly original, sometimes whimsical work, exhibited in major museums across the nation. She lives in an adobe house she and her husband built in northern New Mexico (plate 8).

But after all, to categorize New Mexico women according to a three-part ethnic division is to accept a tricultural myth that has, for too long, misrepresented the deep history of the Rio Arriba as home. Anglos, Hispanics, and Indians have for too long pretended separation in the face of mix and flow and flux and blending. And today, people from Southeast Asia and West Africa, Ireland and Iran, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, and the Baltic claim New Mexico as a home they share. New Mexicans continue to work, play, fight, marry, and live with one another. Cultural diversity, still treasured, persists among the people of the Rio Arriba. But the future depends on embracing all the complexity of a convergent past. The earth of the Rio Arriba can be fertile soil or a parched and bloody terrain. If the people of northern New Mexico are to survive on an increasingly crowded, increasingly thirsty, increasingly greedy ground, they will have to learn to thrive together.
MARÍA E. MONTÓYA

WEDDING CHEST

We admire this late-eighteenth-century hardwood wedding chest (figure 16, plate 2), a spectacular piece of furniture, for its craftsmanship. It is not only durable and functional but also ornamental, with beautiful decorations gracing the outside of the box. The chest’s origins are unknown; it came to the Autry collection as part of a bulk acquisition with other Spanish colonial pieces from Spain and its New World northern frontier.

Although we do not know who owned the chest or what was kept inside it, we can speculate that it belonged to a woman. In all likelihood, she used it as a wedding or “hope” chest to hold her most personal and valuable belongings as she moved from the house of her father to the house of her husband. Before her marriage she would have filled it with the linens, dresses, and other textiles that she would later use in her role as a wife and mother. When she left the home of her family, she would also carry in that chest whatever jewelry and other portable wealth her father had bestowed on her to take with her into her marriage. If she were a young Hispanic woman of Mexican or Spanish descent—as we suspect, given the objects that were donated with it—she also would have taken into her marriage a piece of landed property that would help her begin a new life with her husband. Like the woman who once owned this chest, Hispanic women of means in early-nineteenth-century borderlands brought considerable assets into a marriage.

The history of the nineteenth-century American Southwest is littered with stories of American and French immigrant men marrying elite Hispanic women in Texas, New Mexico, and California. Young men such as Carlos Beaubien in Taos, New Mexico, and...
Edward Turner Bale in California realized that one of the most lucrative ways to attain property and social standing in Mexican communities was to marry into the most prominent families. In marrying Maria Paula Lobato in 1827, Beaubien gained access to one of the most prominent and wealthiest families in northern New Mexico. Bale married Maria Antonia Juana Ygnacia Guadalupe Soberanes, niece of the California governor, Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. Shortly after the marriage, Vallejo awarded Bale a seventeen-thousand-acre land grant, which included present-day St. Helena and Calistoga in the Napa Valley. Because dowry laws in Spanish and Mexican civil law allowed fathers to distribute their property equally among their children regardless of gender, Hispanic women, like their brothers, had the potential to acquire vast tracts of land and wealth. Anglo men with ties to larger markets and trade capitalized on this system and sought alliances that would furnish them with the social standing and property assets of their wives and their wives’ families.

The change in regimes after the U.S.-Mexican War and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, however, created a legal situation that made these marital relationships no longer as valuable. Once married, a woman covered by U.S. law now faced uncertainty regarding how much control she retained over her property, both personal and real. Of the many differences that distinguished the experiences of Americans and Mexicans during the first half of the nineteenth century, perhaps none was more profound than the way the two societies organized their legal systems. Their legal structures dictated how property was allocated, how people worked, and, in the case of women, whether they could own property. The law of coverture, which dominated American law throughout the nineteenth century, held that a married woman could not hold property in her own name. Any land she brought into the marriage through her dowry, inheritance, or by contract was also legally owned by her husband. Because of this legal change that swept across what would become known as the American Southwest, women had to re-think their relationships to their husbands with respect to their property, whether cash wealth, precious goods, or land. They even had to worry about their claims to their minor children, who by law belonged to the husband. Consequently, although this wedding chest may be the physical embodiment of what held women’s hopes and wealth, it is also metaphorical, especially in terms of what it represented for women as they made their way under the new American legal regime.

A number of wealthy women in New Mexico challenged this new social and legal regime as they attempted to keep control over their property. Eleanor Beaubien Trujillo, who was one of the six children of Carlos Beaubien and Maria Paula Lobato, acted in a deliberate and quick way to preserve her wealth. Upon Beaubien’s death in 1864, he bequeathed his interest in the million-plus-acre Beaubien-Miranda land grant to his children in equal parts. Eleanor’s marital problems, along with concerns about her status under U.S. law, convinced her to divest herself of her share of real property in the land grant. Eleanor’s husband was a notorious scoundrel who had been cheating on her with other women. Because he had come into the marriage with very little, Eleanor accused
him of squandering her property and money. Consequently, she sought a divorce, which the courts granted her without incident. Eleanor, however, wanted no complications in keeping her wealth from her ex-husband. She converted all her real property to cash by selling out to her sister and brother-in-law, Luz and Lucien Maxwell. With cash, Eleanor would be able to convert her property to portable wealth—such as jewelry—that she could then figuratively, if not literally, carry with her in her wedding chest to a new life.

More often than not, however, under coverture the outcome was not so positive for married women. In 1857, Mariana Martinez sued for the return of her dowry because she and her husband, Tomas Lucero, had separated seven years previously and had parted amicably. They had not sought a legal divorce, but both had moved on with their lives and were living with other partners. In fact, Tomas already had created another family by having two children with his new partner. He was, moreover, using Mariana’s dotal property (the dowry property she brought to the marriage) to maintain his new family. Mariana wanted the court to stop his spending and return her property and assets to her control. The court, however, ruled against Mariana, reminding her that the two were still legally husband and wife and therefore Mariana could “not during the conjugal association, recover from her husband her separate dotal property.” The New Mexico Territorial Court went on to say that “the administration of the dotal property belongs exclusively to the husband during the existence of the marriage.” The court then went on to further admonish her for the failed state of her marriage, and stated that her act of leaving her husband voluntarily was “subversive to the true policy of the matrimonial law, and destructive of the best interests of society.” She consequently had no legal claim to her property.

Mexican American women, particularly those with personal wealth, had every reason to be suspicious of coverture, as it further devalued their status in the paternalistic society in which they had grown up. The law of coverture severely limited a married woman’s ability to control her legal and economic destiny well into the twentieth century. Until the 1950s a married woman in New Mexico seeking a car loan was still required to have her husband cosign the application, and even today, women who buy and sell securities must have the signature of their husbands on legal documents.

In any case, given the recent ups and downs of the American stock market, maybe gathering up all our personal wealth in the form of cash and jewelry, putting it into a wedding chest, and storing it at the foot of the bed is not such a bad idea.