

MINORITIES RESOURCE AND RESEARCH CENTER NEWSLETTER

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A poetic essay:

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New Mexico—Three Cultures or One?

by Karl Kopp

Karl Kopp, a poet and writer, has recently moved to St. Louis, Missouri, from Albuquerque, New Mexico. He considers himself a New Mexican in spirit and remains strongly connected with the literati of the Southwest. In September 1982, he gave a reading of his poetry at K-State.

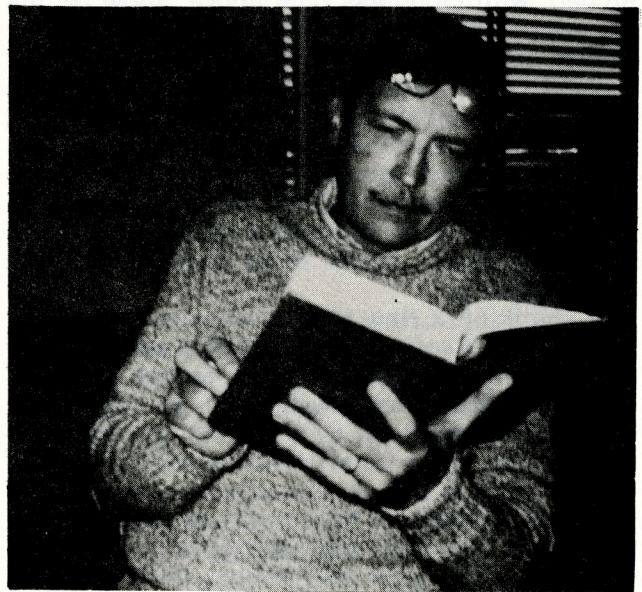
It's a cliché, almost, to point to the existence of the three major cultural groups of New Mexico as being somehow a good thing, an important feature of that uniquely powerful place. I'm referring, of course, to the Northern European or "Anglo" population—most recent on the scene; the Spanish or "Chicano" ethnic group; and to the "Indian" or Native American people (Pueblo and Navajo—with the Pueblos being the original inhabitants. Or at least they were there when Coronado and his expedition penetrated New Mexico from the south in 1540.).

And there they all are today—the Anglos in the highest economic and social levels of the culture; the Spanish—somewhat active politically and in business—but essentially occupying the middle to lower areas of the economy (including agriculture); and the Indians still for the most part fenced away in their villages, or "pueblos." There is harmony, or a blend, but this is most noticeable aesthetically—in the land itself, in its shape, in its spirit, in its art. The melting pot theory of human behavior—where all the people combine into one wholesome stew—does not apply to New Mexico.

But do these three cultures—with their obvious racial, economic, political, and even religious differences—signify anything in a deeper, more real sense? This is a question that I find most compelling. How do I relate to the others, for example—through my own culture and background—as a *result* of this experience, this encounter? How do I come to my self (which is, or should be, the aim of the artist, really) and to my audience along the way? Symbolically, it seems to me that the Anglo—so identified with mentality, or with rational prowess merely—could stand for the *Mind*, in a threefold diagram of the New

Mexico organism (and I realize that in setting up such a diagram I am verifying my own conditioning as an Anglo). The Hispanic identity in New Mexico seems to me closer to the *Heart*, or to the emotional nature. And the Indios, in their adobe towns, so passive in their historical response to their "conquerors" (of sword and cross, and later of machinery, filing cabinets, and red tape), so easily manipulated, seemingly, but—like the land itself—so impenetrable, so stubborn . . . don't they suggest the *Body*? Mind, Heart, Body. In a long poem of mine, "The Juggler" (Place of Herons Press, 1978), I first noticed this possible trinity, this symbolism (to me) of the place and of its human expression: "Spanish the heart ours the mind/the mind and numbers but only/the soul in the land uplifts."

But what of "the soul"? What animates this organism, binds the ligaments, however loosely, of these three cultures? What quickens us as liv-



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ing creatures in this place? What brings us here, keeps us here, keeps bringing us back here? I believe that it is the *light*, the particular living light of New Mexico, the outward and visible sign of an invisible spiritual presence (it's the "land of enchantment," remember). And it is a sensitivity to this light, among all of these cultural forces, that I believe you will find in the best writing and in the best art to come from this local association. One thinks naturally of Georgia O'Keeffe and of R.C. Gorman. But I think we find this sensitivity in the writers as well.

This phenomenon was brought home to me (literally) as, now in exile, I drove back to Albuquerque last January. I drove across Oklahoma and the Texas panhandle, a route I've driven often in my life, past all the monotonous milestones: the bypass around Tulsa, Oklahoma City, El Reno, Weatherford, Erick, Texola, Shamrock, McLean, Alanreed, Amarillo, Glenrio, TUCUMCARI. I remember coming back years ago to Albuquerque from the opposite direction, from Los Angeles, at night on the high mesa before the descent to the Rio Grande and the dark wall of the Sandías beyond. I was with someone who had a C.B. We listened to the bawdy jargon of the truckers as they anticipated the delights of the bars and the x-rated motels along Central Avenue. But as the lights of Albuquerque—the electric lights against the sunset came suddenly into view, even these lights, sparkling in that high thin desert air—came a silence to all the electronic racket. And then one trucker's voice, hushed, in real reverence, broke in: "You'll never see a more beautiful sight than that."

Well, the light . . . In the daytime, in January, it is especially fine—the subtle gold of it. Past Tucumcari the grasses yellow away to the horizon, crisp black junipers and their shadows starkly etched, with cloudless blue above, snow on the Sangre de Cristos far to the north. The monotony always ends for me at Tucumcari (going west, of course). Cuervo, Santa Rosa, Milagro. I can almost forgive the touristy rip-off places like Wagon Wheel and Clines Corners. Even the rest areas are enchanting. And, above all, the light—untrappable, delicate, cleansing. One can literally see more clearly in this light. Physical things. One can see one's self more clearly, more cleanly, too. And that's my point.

The light in New Mexico enables you (if you are looking, if you are awake to it) to see your *self* more clearly. It can purify, purge, reduce to the essential—a bleached cow's skull on the mesa, scoured, wiped clean by the wind. (Or the massive, superb, stone ruins of Quivira and Kaurai.)

And this is the way I always come back or return to New Mexico—from whatever direction. I've tried them all—from the panhandle treeless and squared off for corn and cotton; from "colorful Colorado" in the north—so much more green, more crowded, more obvious in its beauty; up

from Mexico in the south through the old brown pass; and from Arizona through the White Mountains (the way Coronado came) and up to Zuni. I come home. And I feel refreshed, clean.

It draws us all here, this light. Coronado confused it with gold—that old dream, that substitute for what really impels us. And he came hoping for advancement—political, social—and for adventure. And for greed. And for lust. (Like those truck drivers.) He came desiring, heart-full, as did so many of his men, as did the priests before him who told the tale. As did Columbus in the first place—driven by emotional tides, by the imagination, by a spiritual sense ("In the carrying out of this enterprise for the Indies, neither reason nor mathematics nor maps were any use to me; fully accomplished were the words of Isaiah . . .") And you can see so far in that clear light—hundreds of miles, even with my eyes behind their "corrective lenses," from I-40 to the Sangres beyond Santa Fe and on towards Las Vegas. "The eye here is dazzled/by distance Coronado glimpsed gold/and the grace it would give him/his lance or cross raised." (The Juggler)

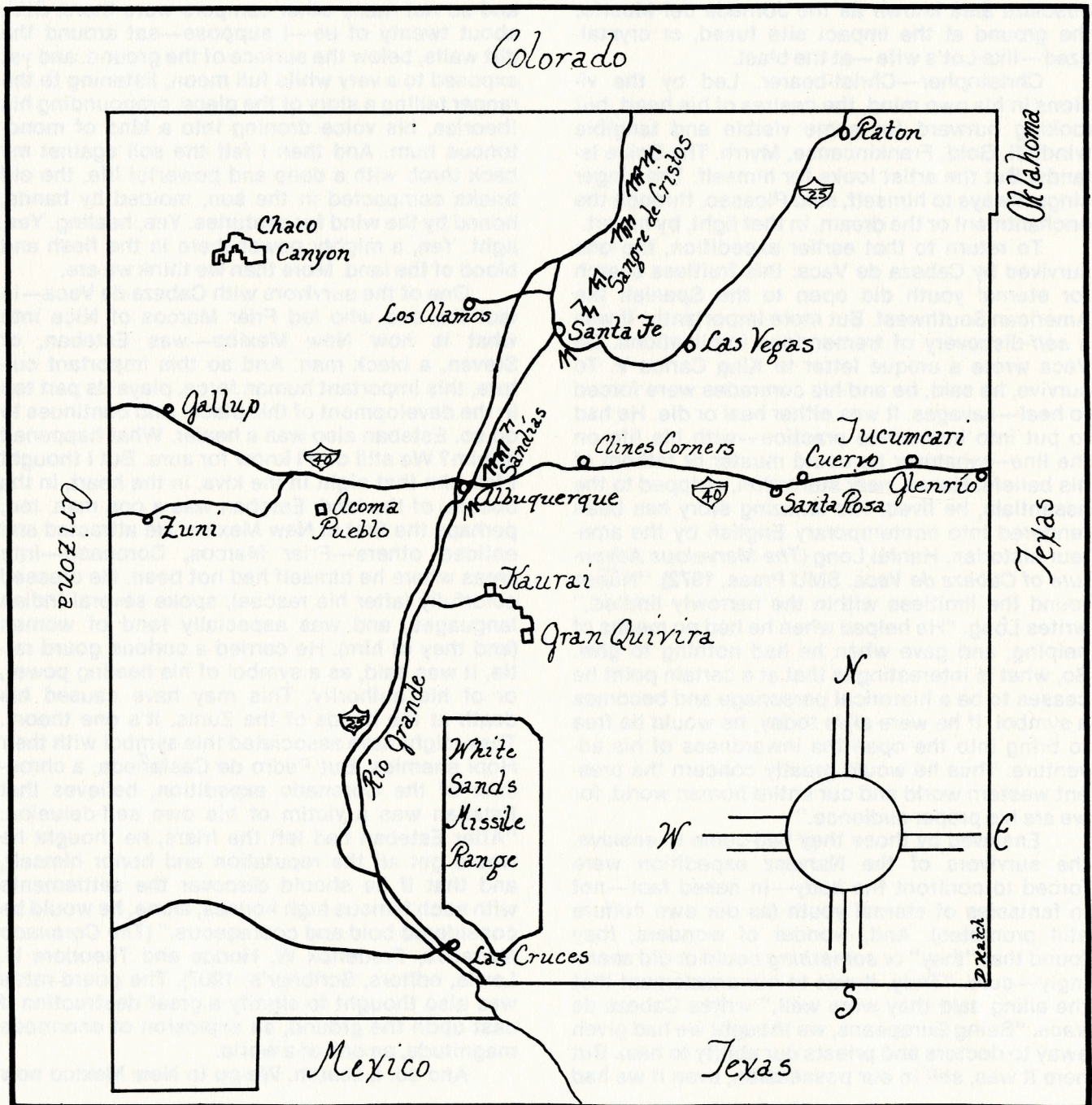
In a recent essay, "Fantasy and Artistic Creation in Latin America and the Caribbean," (*Afinities*, edited by Robert Bonazzi, Latitudes Press, 1981), the Colombian writer, Gabriel García Márquez, points to Columbus as an archetype of this kind of artist—lured by the light, driven by the emotions, to find the naked truth (in the persons of Carib Indians) and then to dress it up, magnify it. "There aren't any writers in our literature less believable and at the same time more grounded in reality than the chroniclers of the Indies. . . . The Diary of Christopher Columbus is the oldest piece of that literature," writes Márquez. "Columbus says that those who came to meet him on the 12th day of October, 1492, 'were naked as the day they were born.' Other chroniclers concur with him, saying that the Caribs, as was natural in a tropical place still untouched by Christian morality, went around nude. Nevertheless, the samples that Columbus chose to take to the royal palace in Barcelona were decked out with painted palm leaves, feathers, necklaces of teeth and rare animal hides. The explanation seems simple: Columbus' first trip, contrary to his dreams, was an economic disaster. He hardly found any of the promised gold, he lost the biggest of his ships, and he couldn't bring back any tangible proof of the enormous value of his discoveries, nor anything to justify the expenses of his adventure and the advantages of continuing it. To dress his captives as he did was designed as a publicity stunt. . . . Our history, since the discovery, has been distinguished by the difficulty of making it believed."

As was the case, perhaps, with the tale told by Friar Marcos of Nice, who may (or may not) have laid eyes on Zuni Pueblo (south of Gallup) before Coronado was inspired to pass that way. Friar

Marcos filled the minds of the Spaniards in New Spain—with tales of the seven fabulous cities of Cibola, cities of gold. He enflamed the heart even of old Cortez—with visions of another, an “otro Mexico.” New Mexico. He dressed up the truth, whatever it was—Land of Enchantment, the light so delicate, so pure, so beguiling.

Friar Marcos’ fantasy was sparked by rumors that sprang from the ill-fated expedition of Pámfilo Narvaez, who sailed from Spain to the New World in 1528. Márquez alludes to this expedition too, in the same essay, as belonging to “the literary delirium of the novels Knight-errantry.” He

says, “This is the only way to explain the excessive adventure of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, who took eight years to reach Mexico from Spain, across what today is the entire southern part of the United States, in an expedition whose members ate each other, until there were only five of the original six hundred yet alive. Cabeza de Vaca’s incentive, it seems, was not to find El Dorado, but rather something more poetic and noble: the fountain of eternal youth.” Cabeza de Vaca was almost certainly one of the first Europeans to tread the American Southwest. More about him, subsequently.



According to some versions of the story, Columbus' first words upon seeing land—the dream come true—were “Cosa Bella.” Beautiful Thing (and remember the use of this refrain in William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson*). After a month at sea, the beauty of land, fresh, pure, undefiled, even virginal. Feminine. And his heart responds. But then the jealousy, the hatred—also from the heart—for those who came afterwards. *His* was the dis/covery, the unclothing. But then the dressing up, and the rape. The naming, and the settling. The killing, and the converting. The damming. And in most recent times the experimenting, and the testing. The bomb, and *that* fantastic blaze of light. It’s reported that at White Sands, near the desolate area known as the Jornada del Muerto, the ground at the impact site fused, or crystallized—like Lot’s wife—at the blast.

Christopher—Christ-bearer. Led by the visions in his own mind, the desires of his heart, but looking outward for some visible and tangible windfall. Gold. Frankincense, Myrrh. The Spice Islands. But the artist looks for himself. The singer sings always to himself, said Picasso, through the enchantment or the dream, in that light, by his art.

To return to that earlier expedition, the one survived by Cabeza de Vaca: this fruitless search for eternal youth did open to the Spanish the American Southwest. But more importantly, it was a *self-discovery* of tremendous implications. De Vaca wrote a unique letter to King Carlos V. To survive, he said, he and his comrades were forced to heal—savages. It was either heal or die. He had to put into immediate practice—with his life on the line—whatever he could muster or fathom of his beliefs. Naked, near starvation, stripped to the essentials, he lived. His amazing story has been rendered into contemporary English by the amateur historian, Daniel Long (*The Marvelous Adventure of Cabeza de Vaca*, SMU Press, 1972). “Núñez found the limitless within the narrowly limited,” writes Long. “He helped when he had no means of helping, and gave when he had nothing to give. So, what is interesting is that at a certain point he ceases to be a historical personage and becomes a symbol. If he were alive today, he would be free to bring into the open the inwardness of his adventure. Thus he would greatly concern the present western world and our entire human world, for we are his proper audience.”

Enslaved by those they had come to enslave, the survivors of the Narvaez expedition were forced to confront the *body*—in naked fact—not in fantasies of eternal youth (as our own culture still promotes). And, wonder of wonders, they found that “they” or *something* could or did seemingly—cure. “Truly, it was to our amazement that the ailing said they were well,” writes Cabeza de Vaca. “Being Europeans, we thought we had given away to doctors and priests our ability to heal. But here it was, still in our possession, even if we had

only Indians to exercise it upon. It was ours after all, we were more than we had thought we were.” Their healings were accomplished through making the sign of the cross and chanting words remembered from the Bible. The cross, then, used in healing, unifying, and not to convert, or to impale in the ground. So, healing. And finding out (dis/covering) that we are “more than we thought we were.” The light, the purity, the art, brings us to that.

I remember once at Chaco Canyon, a moonlit night in one of the large excavated kivas, attending a kind of sound-and-light program put on by nature and by one of the more sensitive forest rangers. It was early spring, and therefore chilly, and so not many other campers were there. Still, about twenty of us—I suppose—sat around the dirt walls, below the surface of the ground, and yet exposed to a very white full moon, listening to the ranger telling a story of the place, propounding his theories, his voice droning into a kind of monotonous hum. And then I felt the soil against my back throb with a deep and powerful life, the old bricks compacted in the sun, molded by hands, honed by the wind for centuries. Yes, healing. Yes, light. Yes, a mighty power there in the flesh and blood of the land. More than we think we are.

One of the survivors with Cabeza de Vaca—in fact the one who led Friar Marcos of Nice into what is now New Mexico—was Esteban, or Steven, a black man. And so this important culture, this important human force, plays its part too in the development of this place. And continues to do so. Esteban also was a healer. What happened to him? We still don’t know for sure. But I thought I felt him that night in the kiva, in the heart, in the bosom, of the land. Esteban was a con man, too, perhaps the first in New Mexico. He attracted and enticed others—Friar Marcos, Coronado—into areas where he himself had not been. He dressed colorfully (after his rescue), spoke several Indian languages, and was especially fond of women (and they of him). He carried a curious gourd rattle, it was said, as a symbol of his healing power, or of his authority. This may have caused his death at the hands of the Zunis. It’s one theory. They might have associated this symbol with their Hopi enemies. But Pedro de Castañeda, a chronicler of the Coronado expedition, believes that Esteban was a victim of his own self-delusion. “After Esteban had left the friars, he thought he would get all the reputation and honor himself, and that if he should discover the settlements with such famous high houses, alone, he would be considered bold and courageous.” (*The Coronado Narrative*, Frederick W. Hodge and Theodore H. Lewis, editors, Scribner’s, 1907). The gourd rattle was also thought to signify a great destruction if cast upon the ground, an explosion of enormous magnitude, an end of a world.

And so, a search. We go to New Mexico now

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