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Situational Identities along the Raiding Frontier of Colonial New Mexico by Jun U. Sunseri (review)

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Situational Identities along the Raiding Frontier of Colonial New Mexico. By Jun U. Sunseri. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. Pp. 218. \$60.00 cloth; \$47.00 ebook)

Jun Sunseri takes us on a very personal journey into the colonial borderlands of New Mexico in the eighteenth and early-to-mid-nineteenth centuries. Using spatial, material, and cultural analyses, he paints the picture of a borderland in which cultural appropriation illuminated survival strategies in a world where indigenous and mixed-race peoples engaged in fluid identity practices to survive and thrive in a dangerous colonial borderland. Sunseri argues that the material record can illuminate and explicate the lived experiences of peoples on the border and that places such as Casitas Viejas in north-central New Mexico, where there was a relative parity in strength between the presence of indigenous, mixed-race, and colonial Spanish, present a unique opportunity to study the archaeological record and illuminate the identity practices of indigenous and mixed-race cultures as it is reflected in the material record and spatial practices of the region.

Sunseri begins his journey with a uniquely personal account of the conditions under which he undertook his work. He betrays an acute cultural sensitivity toward the descendants of the people he studies, engaging them in his work and using their own history and cultural experiences to inform his effort. He begins by laying out the prehistoric and historical contexts which underlay the formation of the communities he studied. He portrays a borderland that pre-existed Spanish contact, one where sedentary agriculturalists, the Puebloan peoples, met with and negotiated lifeways with more mobile bands of indigenous peoples such as the Ute, Comanche, Pawnee, and Apaches. This cultural interchange formed a basis upon which the later Spanish colonists attempt to interpose their own cultural norms upon the existing and emerging people of the north-central New Mexican borderland. It is the fluidity of identity between indigenous and Spanish colonial that Sunseri attempts to explain through his study of both micro and macro material culture and landscape practices that form the basis of his work. Or, as he puts it, it is an “exploration of how the material practices of dynamic, situational forms of identity may be illuminated by the study of the static material and documentary record” (p. 41).

The bulk of Sunseri’s work involves the study of foodways and the use of topographic features to explain the ways in which these borderland communities engaged in cultural appropriation to survive. On the macro level, Sunseri studies the geography and built landscape features

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with an eye toward understanding what life was like in a borderland subject to sudden and deadly raids from a variety of external communities. At the micro level, he looks at the types, forms, and uses of pottery, down to the source of the clay with which they were created. He argues that this material record betrays a cultural fluidity, particularly regarding the ceramic cultural remains. The thrust of this part of his argument is that “foodways at Casitas have inherently diverse traditions of ceramic manufacture, use, and disposal that crosscut boundaries of ethnic affiliation” (p. 91).

Sunseri’s work is a hybrid of oral, written, and archaeological sources that prove very effective in helping him maintain his point throughout the book. It starts as a personal narrative of discovery that engages the reader with the subject from the outset. The historical and narrative nature of the book give way to a more scientific and minute analysis in sometimes overwhelming detail as he takes us through the material evidence in support of his thesis. In the end, though, his work is personal, innovative, and effective in its use of disparate sources, from scientific analysis to oral history, and provides the reader with a well-reasoned and supported argument for cultural fluidity and continuation on the New Mexico colonial borderlands.

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