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10. “Displaced” in Santa Fe: The Committee for the Preservation and Restoration of New Mexico Mission Churches and San Esteban del Rey Church at Acoma Pueblo; A Site for Global Tourism

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The preservation of historic buildings in New Mexico can be traced to the early twentieth century, when pioneering efforts to save the traditional architecture of the region generated widespread support. This paper addresses a series of connections between seventeenth-century Spain and the built environment in New Mexico. As Spanish Colonial-style buildings, particularly churches, fell into disrepair, a concern for preservation grew. In an attempt to preserve this architectural heritage, The Committee for the Restoration of Historic New Mexico Churches came into its own, developed by a group of eastern intellectuals, migrants to the small city of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Enamored by local cultures and the built environment, these modern travelers, captivated by their new adopted home, worked in concert with Hispanic and indigenous peoples to preserve these architectural landmarks.

The Beginnings of Historic Preservation in the U.S.

The roots of the historic preservation movement in the United States began with an interest in homes. Historic house museums developed as an enshrinement of the home sites and landscapes belonging to the nation’s founding fathers. The first historic house museum, formed in 1850, was Hasbrook House, George Washington’s headquarters during the Revolutionary War, located in Newburgh, New York. In 1856, a group of civic-minded women chartered the Mount Vernon Ladies Association and undertook the restoration of George Washington’s home, Mount Vernon. The MVLA became a model for similar private movements centered on household preservation in the United States for the next hundred years.

By the early twentieth century, private historic preservation efforts extended beyond home sites to residential districts, but they were still primarily

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focused on the “great men of history” myth. Automobiles and new commercial structures promulgated the widening of roads, the removal of street-side landscaping, and the outright destruction of homes and related structures. As a result, private (usually prominent) citizen groups rallied for the establishment of local preservation legislation and the protection of household buildings. The first local historic district formed in Charleston, but the movement soon spread to other American cities such as New Orleans, Louisiana (1931); San Antonio, Texas (1939); Winston-Salem, North Carolina (1948); and Natchez, Mississippi (1951). Archaeologically, this period was based on the idea that the architectural remains of dwellings lead to an understanding of the domestic behavior of the past. However, the choice of what to save was overwhelmingly centered on the remains of elite white men. It was not until the late 1960s that a focus on broadening historic preservation efforts on the basis of gender, race, and status began.

**Historic Preservation in the West and Southwest**

By the mid-1800s, private historic preservation organizations flourished in the East, Midwest, and South, largely dedicated to saving the structures of white, wealthy male individuals. During this time, a different phenomenon was
gaining momentum in the West and Southwest. A back-to-nature movement, a precursor to the Audubon Society and the Sierra Club, influenced some of the most expansive preservation efforts in the country. The establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 became the earliest endeavor on the part of the federal government to protect historically significant sites in the United States through congressional funding and oversight. Yellowstone signaled a new direction: it was a public effort, rather than a private one; it was a natural site rather than a material home site; it was a western site rather than an eastern one.

Other late nineteenth-century preservation efforts were focused on protecting sites of military or prehistoric interest. Civil war battlefields were acquired by the federal government, as was Casa Grande, a set of Native American ruins in Arizona. The preservation of Casa Grande was a significant endeavor because it became the first indigenous site set aside for protection in 1892. The effort to save Casa Grande was promoted by the academic archaeological community working in the area, rallying members of congress. This undertaking inspired a handful of similar endeavors to save monumental archaeological sites under the new Antiquities Act of 1906, including Petrified Forest and Montezuma in Arizona and El Morro and Chaco Canyon in New Mexico.

The Historic Preservation of Buildings in New Mexico

The Historical Society of New Mexico was formed in 1859. In 1869, New Mexico Territorial officials proposed the preservation of the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe. In 1880, the Historical Society began to organize for the Palace’s protection. However, this was an isolated effort. It was not until the 1920s that a group of Easterners, who traveled to New Mexico for their health, started a grassroots movement to preserve and restore some of the oldest buildings in the state.

What New Mexico lacked in major agricultural and industrial systems, it made up for in an abundance of sunshine and fresh dry air. Anglo-American migrants flocked to the region because it was publicized in both travel and health advertising as beneficial for rehabilitation from tuberculosis and other respiratory ailments. As a result, thousands of residential clinics, or sanatoriums, developed. One in particular, Sunmount Sanatorium, located on the outskirts of downtown Santa Fe, helped nurture an arts community that exerted a significant influence on the local built environment.

Sunmount Sanatorium was developed by Dr. Frank Mera and first began as Sunmount Tent City in 1903, advertised as a destination for both consumptives and tourists. Popular with wealthy Easterners who came west to “take the cure,” patients often took up residence for months—and, in some cases, years. One of the first converts to the regional architecture, Dr. Mera, designed his clinic in the Spanish Pueblo Revival style. The new clinic possessed all the traditional Spanish Pueblo characteristics: earth-toned adobe walls, vigas and portales, landscaped with New England-style gardens.
The picturesque environment at Sunmount delighted and inspired its guests. Dr. Mera encouraged his patients to engage in social, cultural, and artistic endeavors as a form of therapy. Many patients shared a common interest in local cultures and the built environment. Dr. Mera encouraged his patients to experience the unique landscape. As such, he organized field trips to historic sites around the region, where they were exposed to Pueblo ways of life.

However, it was John Gaw Meem, the highly noted New Mexican architect and historic preservationist who practiced in Santa Fe from 1924–1960, whose interest inspired the organization of a lasting statewide historic preservation movement. After contracting tuberculosis, Meem was advised to move from New York City to a dry, western climate to recuperate. Attracted by an advertisement for the Santa Fe Railroad, Meem headed for New Mexico, where he developed an interest in the indigenous architecture and early examples of its revival, while recovering at Sunmount Sanatorium.

**Development of the Committee**

In 1820, Mexico became independent of Spain and the traditional Spanish support of colonial churches built by the Franciscan friars ceased. Mexico took little interest in the upkeep of these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century mission churches and, by the 1920s, they were substantially deteriorated. In 1921, Meem met a group of prominent citizens from Denver who frequently visited New Mexico. They shared an interest in traditional arts and architecture of the region. Noticing the sad state of the local mission churches in New Mexico, they formed an organization called the Committee for the Preservation and Restoration of New Mexico Mission Churches (CPRNMMC). Garnering support from Meem’s Santa Fe and Sunmount connections—including writer Mary Austin, Dr. Mera, and artist Carlos Vierra—Committee members raised funds among their artistic and wealthy friends. The Committee attracted Denver architect Burnham Hoyt as technical director. Between 1921 and 1924, he inspected a number of the mission churches. In 1924, Meem took over as technical advisor, keeping in close touch with the Committee’s on-site representatives, who rotated over the years.

**The Committee’s Work at Acoma**

Over its initial eleven-year period, the Committee set forth on an impressive array of projects. It repaired the roofs of five mission churches (at the pueblos of Laguna, Zia, Santa Ana, and Acoma, and in the Hispanic village of Las Trampas). In 1929, the Committee purchased El Santuario de Chimayo, which it presented to the Archdiocese of Santa Fe with the guarantee that the building would be kept in repair in consultation with the Committee. However, the Committee’s most protracted work took place on top of a 350-foot high mesa at Acoma Pueblo, where repairs were carried out on the foundations and
walls of the six-thousand-square-foot mission church compound, San Esteban del Rey, as well as on the roof and both towers.\textsuperscript{6}

Some of the most interesting documents pertaining to San Esteban del Rey are the reports B. A. Reuter developed for the Committee in 1926 and 1927. In August of 1926, Meem hired Reuter to be the on-site manager of the restoration of San Esteban del Rey. In his reports, Reuter describes both the discoveries at the site and the technical methods of reconstruction accomplished during this period. His account also documents the attitudes and relationships of the people involved in the effort. The CPRNMMC collaborated with the pueblo to assemble work crews, and “Mr. Meem immediately wired the Governor of Acoma, and other important leaders, to ascertain whether or not the Acoma’s could again be gotten together for the undertaking…The Governor announced to us that they would cooperate.”\textsuperscript{7}

Given the complex nature of cross-cultural communication, it is no surprise that the relationship between Reuter and workers at Acoma weathered a few ups and downs. With a touch of irony, Reuter reports:

> I had very little knowledge of the customs and mentality of these Indians…Had I at that time understood their customs, I would have known that they wanted me to go home, and I could have saved myself a lot of useless argument…I was informed that they were going to have a series of holidays in which they would have their sacred dances, and that it would be best for all concerned, that I get “off the hill.”\textsuperscript{8}

In another entry Reuter shares:

> On the 8th of September the Governor and several members of his Council came to my room to deliver to me what they termed an agreeable surprise, by saying that they were going to give me a week’s vacation in which to see my family…and that there was really no need of my coming back until Monday, September 20.\textsuperscript{9}

Clearly, Reuter was invited to assist in the restoration of San Esteban del Rey, but asked to leave when the pueblo closed for ceremonial purposes.

**New Deal Initiatives**

The New Deal response to the economic crisis of the 1930s was a boon to historic preservation, concentrating the attentions of unemployed architects and historians on vulnerable sites across the country. Under the purview of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) hired young professionals as “cultural foremen” to work for the National Park Service history program. Of particular significance to the Acoma site was the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), which cooperated with the American Institute of Architects to hire more than a thousand architects through the Civil Works Administration to document the sites of deteriorating buildings. The HABS drawings and the Works Progress Administration (WPA)
guidebooks of the Federal Writers’ project directed community attention to architectural and historical landmarks, often providing the basis for preservation efforts—or in the case of Acoma, further preservation efforts. In 1934, HABS draftsmen documented San Esteban del Rey through an extensive set of measured drawings, which included site plans, elevations, floor plans and detailed drawings of construction elements and decorative features. While an 1881 report by Lieutenant John G. Bourke described the Mission church as “dilapidated” and turn-of-the-century photographic work documented a collapsed baptistery and eroded towers, the 1934 HABS work revealed an extensively repaired structure. For the HABS drawings followed on the heels of the Committee’s intense eleven-year restoration.

Cornerstones Community Partnerships: A Renewed Committee Works with Acoma

In the 1920s, the preservation work at Acoma was spearheaded by a concerned group of citizens from the Committee for the Preservation and Restoration of New Mexico Mission Churches (CPRNMMC) who worked at the invitation of the Acoma people. Their work became a crowning achievement for a small grassroots movement: they stabilized the San Esteban del Rey church, saving it from irreversible damage. By the 1980s, public concern for the church’s condition was at an all-time high, driven by two main factors. First, there was a clear need to repair and maintain the structure. Second, the idea of further developing the site as a tourist center to generate much-needed income was gaining momentum. The Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service Division of the Department of the Interior, through the New Mexico Historic Preservation Bureau, funded the San Esteban del Rey Historic Structure Report (1980) of the church and the attached convento. The report documents the original appearance of the structure through archaeological investigation and written descriptions dating back to 1692 and 1776; a summary of alterations; a report on the existing appearance and conditions; and, perhaps most importantly, a study on further recommendations for future preservation projects.

In 1986, Cornerstones Community Partnerships (CCP) was formed, very much as a successor group, inspired by the work of the CPRNMMC. Cornerstones was also based in Santa Fe and organized by a second generation of some of the members of the original group, including John Gaw Meem’s daughter, Nancy Meem Wirth. Committed to continuing the work of rehabilitating New Mexico’s mission churches, Cornerstones assumed the added responsibility of documenting and restoring additional pueblo sites. But unlike the CPRNMMC, Cornerstones operated in an age of greater awareness. For instance, representing the Cornerstones Restoration Project in the late 1980s, architect George Pearl demonstrates an even deeper respect for cultural
differences. In his “Statement of Intent to the Governor and Tribal Council of Acoma Pueblo,” Pearl writes,

We offer to join hands with you to accomplish the task…The non-Indians working on this project do not want to interfere in any way with private Indian religious doings, and we accept the fact that throughout restoration, work will have to stop for certain religious reasons.

In the same statement, Pearl also stipulated that “all workmen for the restoration will be hired from Acoma.”

For the preservation process to go forward, Pearl knew he had to supply not only reassurance, but employment for the people of Acoma.

Less than ten years after Pearl wrote these words, the Pueblo of Acoma asked Cornerstones to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the church. With financial assistance from the Andy Warhol Foundation, the structural condition of San Esteban del Rey was re-assessed. Armed with a detailed report, the Pueblo of Acoma and Cornerstones formed a community-based joint venture to address immediate and long-term goals for the continued preservation of this church. A youth training program in earthen conservation and restoration techniques was introduced. Other changes ensued in 1999 when the White House Millennium Council joined forces with the Save America Treasures program and the National Trust for Historic Preservation to develop plans for preserving San Esteban del Rey. By cultivating leadership among young people, both Acoma and Cornerstones can ensure that the structure of the church will be maintained. In the words of former Cornerstones program manager Dennis G. Playdon and Brian D. Vallo (Pueblo of Acoma), “The restoration process is not first about monuments, but rather about preserving the past as a present condition.”

Preservation and Global Tourism at Acoma Pueblo

Why did the Committee for the Preservation and Restoration of New Mexico Churches and Cornerstones Community Partnerships decide to devote so many resources to San Esteban del Rey? Why does a site like the Mission Church at Acoma command such attention? In short, one cannot look at this key site without considering Acoma Pueblo as a whole. First and foremost, the role of global tourism cannot be discounted.

In addition to his involvement with Cornerstones, Vallo was the Founding Director of the Pueblo’s Historic Preservation Office, the San Esteban del Rey Restoration project (SEDRR), and served as Director of the Sky City Cultural Center and Haaku Museum. He describes the early history of tourism at the pueblo. Beginning in the late 1890s, Acoma people opened the mesa in a semi-formal fashion to outsiders. To ensure privacy and control, tribal leaders commissioned Acoma women as “hostesses” to show tourists water cisterns, San Esteban del Rey, and some private homes, where they could purchase
hand-coiled pottery. During this period, visitors were composed primarily of archaeologists, ethnologists, and collectors who traveled to the mesa in search of signature pots decorated with strong geometric designs and portrayals of animals. Of course, once rail travel to Santa Fe and Albuquerque became more popular, the numbers and types of tourists increased, as did the production of pottery.

Starting in 1926, the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe Railroad and the Fred Harvey Company sponsored Indian Detours, a business that transported sightseers by car to Acoma and other pueblos. Middle-class tourists could step away from the train platform to watch social dances at local pueblos. This drew attention to both the pueblos and their churches. The growth of tourism in the Southwest has long been informed by the “allure” of native peoples, particularly Pueblo peoples. While the dramatic setting and mix of stepped, adobe buildings are met with appreciation, it is often the church that commands center stage at Acoma. This can be attributed to three factors: its massive size in relationship to other buildings, its location in a landscape defined by cliffs, and the complicated history it conveys—extending back hundreds of years. Upon entering this church, groups of tourists inevitably fall silent, struck by the giant beams overhead, the whitewashed walls, the altar and the simplicity of a few wooden pews.

San Esteban del Rey demonstrates the power of global tourism in New Mexico. Numbering over fifty-five thousand a year, tourists migrate from all over the world to hear a range of revisionist histories from Acoma tour guides. Each time, tourists are told of atrocities associated with the colonization of Acoma. United States history books rarely describe these events. Instead, stories of native peoples tend to be romanticized, especially in the Southwest, where “heroic” images of Spanish conquistadors on horseback are easily called to mind. Since the altar was built directly over the kiva—an underground space reserved for spiritual ceremonies—San Esteban del Rey stands as a conflicted site for both insiders and outsiders. The church is a symbol of past brutality and religious persecution.

In addition to its role as an architectural landmark, this church functions as a multi-purpose performance space. It is important to remember that this church is not a museum. As a place of worship for Acoma people, whether a Sunday mass, ceremonial dances, or memorial services, it is never static. Every time the threshold of this church is crossed, whether by tourists or Acoma residents, this structure assumes a different identity. According to Acoma native and former Secretary of Labor for New Mexico, Conroy Chino, the mesa represents a spiritual home. He states: “Acoma has always been a place where people go back…. [O]ur whole worldview comes from that place.” During feast days/religious events, relatives return to the mesa to observe ceremonies in extended family homes with other relatives. Whether traveling from the
surrounding reservation or from out of state, this represents another form of migration for the people of Acoma.

During the summer, at least thirty tours are conducted through this church every day. The size of each tour group is limited to fifteen and a conservative tally points to at least five hundred visitors a day. The first tour departs at 9 a.m. and the last one leaves at 5 p.m. After this, the mesa top is strictly off-limits to outsiders. Tourists are allowed to visit this site only in the company of a trained Acoma guide following a designated tour route. If a visitor wants to use a camera, a fee is charged. As tourists walk by the exterior of private residences, Acoma artists use this opportunity to sell traditional pottery. Tourists interact directly with artists, without the outside intervention of a gallery. These pots, both large and small, are carried as souvenirs to locations all over the world. This commercial exchange is unique because the artist enjoys all the proceeds. Acoma pottery continues to be highly sought after by collectors in a global market.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation designated the mesa of Acoma as the Twenty-Eighth National Trust Historic Site. This title is especially significant because it is the only Native American site included on this list. As such, tourists are drawn to make a pilgrimage to the place. Today, Acoma Pueblo claims about six thousand members and several extended families maintain permanent residency atop the sandstone mesa. By choice, Acoma is devoid of many modern-day amenities, such as running water and electricity. This pueblo—a name assigned by Spanish explorers to mean a village—is flanked by sheer cliffs. Some tourists are surprised to see an occasional generator used to power a space heater or a television set, fearing the “authenticity” of this site has been compromised. Traditions/lifeways are always in flux. As a tourist destination, San Esteban del Rey continually enacts a modern-day connection to seventeenth-century Spain. Work on the church began in 1629—only thirty-two years after Juan de Oñate took possession of New Mexico in the name of King Philip II of Spain. San Esteban del Rey Church was one of the few Spanish missions to survive the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, when pueblos formed a secret pact to retaliate against Spanish colonists and their unjust treatment.

To build the church, convento (the priests’ living quarters), and cemetery, Acoma men and women were forced to move tons of earth and stone from the canyon floor up the steep sides of the mesa. The sanctuary houses a collection of Spanish colonial ecclesiastical art: depictions of saints on canvas in combination with Pueblo designs, such as stylized representations of birds, painted on the walls by Acoma women. However peaceful, this sanctuary marks a particularly violent moment in time when Spain sought to colonize Acoma Pueblo by converting its residents to Catholicism and a life of slavery.

Historian Patricia Nelson Limerick’s words are certainly applicable here: “To my mind, the unsettled issues of conquest did not disappear, even if
tourists could not see them.” Indeed, this church remains a highly contested space. Acoma tour guides share the story of Spain’s occupation. Tourists, many for the first time, learn that in 1599, Don Juan de Oñate demanded that the people of Acoma be punished for defending their village. Acoma warriors killed thirteen Spaniards in defense of their village. Oñate sought revenge, ordering his soldiers to slaughter eight hundred villagers, enslave five hundred women and children and amputate the right foot of every Acoma man over age twenty-five. Although this horrific event happened over four hundred years ago, the scars are still fresh.

While Acoma Pueblo illustrates a history of colonial influence via seventeenth-century Spain, it also reflects a complex indigenous society. Indeed, Acoma people are more than mere victims of Spain’s practices of colonization. Sociologist Duane Champagne (Chippewa) points out that cultural exchange took place on both sides. He cautions that “many traditionally trained scholars do not study the ways in which American Indian ways of living, thinking and organizing societies influenced the many peoples who immigrated to North America from overseas.” As a site for global conversation, this church portrays a multitude of meanings.

It is estimated that over seventy-two men, women, and children lost their lives during the construction of this church. Due to the arid Southwest climate of Acoma, building materials, particularly wood, had to be hauled long distances. According to scholar Beatrice Chauvenet,

Tradition said its fourteen great roof beams, each about thirty-six feet long, were brought from the San Mateo mountains forty miles away, carried across rough terrain and up the three-hundred-and-fifty foot cliff to Acoma on the shoulders of men who never allowed them to touch the ground.

In looking at the desert ecology of Acoma, punctuated by cacti and other low-lying plants, the effort to construct this building can be equated to dragging the stone slabs to construct Stonehenge. The massive beams that hold up the two-story roof belie the reality that trees of any substantial size can be found in this area. Given the accounts of forced labor associated with this building, visitors are often surprised to discover this space is so revered by Acoma peoples. Indeed, this church illustrates a true synthesis of Acoma and Christian belief systems. Today, many Acoma people practice equal participation in Pueblo ceremonial events and Catholic services. They see no contradiction: examples of both belief systems occupy this space on a regular basis.

Pueblo people believe their primary relationship is with the land. This is where creation stories are rooted. For example, within the rich oral history of Acoma, rock formations serve as geographical markers. This is how elders teach young people to orient themselves, to construct a worldview. However, as a permanent man-made structure, San Esteban del Rey also plays an integral role in the day-to-day lives of Acoma residents. It defines a particular sense of
place. In the article “Pueblo Mission Churches as Symbols of Permanence and Identity,” architectural historians Kevin S. Blake and Jeffrey S. Smith offer this description:

A construct at once architectural, emotive and social, the structure of permanence is a material expression grounded in local landscape and integral to cultural identity. Such structures form place attachment because of what they represent, and they can serve as powerful sources of memory. Although permanence is measured relative to the human life span, it also is one element in an adaptive process over multiple generations.25

American Studies scholar Rina Swentzell (Pueblo of Santa Clara) stresses that adobe houses are not viewed as objects, but much like people, with a lifespan and a range of unique characteristics.26 In short, they are alive. This runs counter to beliefs espoused by many preservationists and architectural historians. Scholars in the field of cultural tourism, Mike Robinson and Melanie Smith, elaborate on this phenomenon:

There is a western tendency to fossilize cultures as heritage and to prioritize the built environment. There is something of a post-imperial obsession with physical symbols or legacies that represent the past (e.g. buildings, statues, memorials...). Indigenous peoples in neocolonial societies tend to describe their heritage more in terms of intangible, precolonial traditions or “essence of place.”27

While this church occupies a physical space, it also defines an “essence of place” for Acoma residents.

Since this church, like other mission churches in the Southwest, was built by hand with adobe, it resembles ancestral homes at Acoma. The transient medium of adobe—mud mixed with straw and dried in the sun—means that preservation is a constant concern. Not surprisingly, harsh elements, like wind and snow, exert a toll on earthen construction. Therefore, the families take time during the annual maintenance of the church in late August to re-plaster their family homes in preparation for the feast day in honor of their patron Saint Esteban. In this sense, there is little differentiation between private homes and San Esteban del Rey. This is one reason why Cornerstones, an outside organization, has been able to enlist the support and hands-on assistance of the Acoma people.

San Esteban del Rey mission church provides a complex view of global tourism, one marked by numerous forms of migration. Examples include Spanish explorers searching for cities of gold, preservationists from Santa Fe and other parts of the world, and by the Acoma people themselves, who navigate complex border crossings on a daily basis. In this village setting, the presence of outsiders is a mixed blessing. Although guided tours contribute to the overall economic well-being of Acoma, they also subject residents to a daily barrage of curious onlookers. Developing global tourism offers testimony to
the resilience of Pueblo peoples. Saving San Esteban del Rey has not only enriched the architectural landscape, but helped the people of Acoma maintain their cultural identity and their sense of place.

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NOTES
2. Taken by renowned photographer Lee Marmon in 1952, this photograph should be viewed in a broader context. Today, the cemetery in the foreground of this photograph depicts a restricted area at Acoma. Tourists—whether Native or non-Native are forbidden to photograph the cemetery. Since the advent of photography, images of Native peoples continue to be marketed to satisfy a “fascination” with all things Indian. For example, postcards featuring photographs of Acoma people—almost always unidentified—were sold as souvenirs to promote the Fred Harvey Company. However, since Lee Marmon, a photographer from the neighboring pueblo of Laguna, took this photograph, his perspective/intent was quite different. The relationship between cultural sensitivity and indigenous photography is multi-layered—issues to be questioned by all scholars who utilize this medium.
5. Ibid.
8. Ibid., (MSS 385, Box 4, Appendices 111, 1926) 2–3.
9. Ibid.
13. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 23.


