

7-1-2016

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James Brooks

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### Recommended Citation

Brooks, James. "Southwest Talks: The New Mexico Historical Review Interview Series: Navigating the Landscape of Sorrow." *New Mexico Historical Review* 91, 3 (2016). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol91/iss3/6>

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## Southwest Talks: *The New Mexico Historical Review* Interview Series

Navigating the Landscape of Sorrow



JAMES F. BROOKS



Interview by Darren A. Raspa, *New Mexico Historical Review* Associate Editor

Eminent historian James F. Brooks has devoted his career to community engagement in the history of the Southwest. Bridging the gap between academic and

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James F. Brooks has held professorial appointments at the University of Maryland, University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), and University of California, Berkeley, as well as fellowships at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton and at the School for Advanced Research (SAR) in Santa Fe. In 2002 he became director of SAR Press, and between 2005 and 2013 served as president of SAR. He recently concluded ten years of service on the Board of Directors of the Western National Parks Association, which supports research, preservation, and education in sixty-seven National Parks, including Bandelier National Monument, Chaco Culture National Historical Park, and Channel Islands National Park. A Trustee of the Santa Barbara Mission Archive/Library and the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation, he also directs the UCSB Public History program, and serves as editor of *The Public Historian*. His most recent work, *Mesa of Sorrows: A History of the Awat'ovi Massacre*, is available in hardcover from W. W. Norton & Company and on Kindle.

public history, Dr. Brooks transcends the model that serious scholars must devote themselves to academic history alone. His first book, the prize-winning *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands*, achieves that rarest of feats—weaving gripping narrative through what was at the time unpaved scholarly territory. Dr. Brooks's latest book, *Mesa of Sorrows: A History of the Awat'ovi Massacre*, will undoubtedly both inspire new energy and scholarship in the field and, perhaps more significantly, draw widespread public interest. His work moves beyond the classroom and publishing house and into the community and seeks to remind us that all people, not simply the elite few, are participants in a great humanistic heritage. The unique gift of telling sophisticated and complex history through compelling mystery and character-filled plots is rare indeed in the often closed circuit, cloistered network of modern academic history. James Brooks not only achieves this feat, but thrives in broadening abstractions and in resurrecting the lost imagination that lies buried in history's roots. In the latest installment of "Southwest Talks," the *New Mexico Historical Review* is proud to join Dr. Brooks in his quest to open closed doors and transfer knowledge across the generations and into the community that resides beyond the ivory tower.

*NMHR*: You are known for your groundbreaking work in Borderlands history, anthropology, and the history of kinship, slavery, and violence in the Southwest. How did your academic training lead you to these areas?

**BROOKS**: I doubled-majored in History and Anthropology at the University of Colorado, mostly because I couldn't decide which I wanted to pursue in the long run. This gave me a base once I got to the University of California, Davis, and began working toward the PhD to continue blending the disciplines. I actually had more coursework in Anthropology than History, but ended with a doctorate in History. My lifetime of adventuring and exploring in the Southwest, especially in archaeology, and then a long decade as administrator and executive at the School for Advanced Research (SAR) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, further developed my sense that these are disciplines that need each other.

*NMHR*: Did your background and personal experience inform your initial academic focus? Does it continue to influence your scholarship in any way?

**BROOKS**: I grew up in a mixed racial family and have always been attentive to the complexities of such identities.

NMHR: Who or what are your personal and scholarly influences?

BROOKS: I had the good fortune to know and be guided by some of the great “old-timers” in Southwest archaeology and ethnohistory—Frances Leon (Swadesh) Quintana, David Snow, Dave Brugge—who always pointed me to the local complexities of “non-dominant frontiers,” which continue to fascinate me. Richard White’s *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), of course, was very important as I wrote the dissertation that became *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Betsy Jameson, Vicki L. Ruiz, and Joan Jensen were early and critically important mentors when it came to thinking about women and gender in Southwest history.

NMHR: In your recent book, *Mesa of Sorrows: A History of the Awat’ovi Massacre* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), you depart from the larger history of captivity and Native-European relations in the Southwest you illustrated brilliantly in your acclaimed *Captives and Cousins*. How did you move from this topic to one more specific to Hopi tribal memory?

BROOKS: The archaeologist Ruth Van Dyke, who was among the class of resident scholars when I held a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship at SAR in 2000–2001, pointed me to the Awat’ovi story as an example of women being captured and exchanged (or rescued and redeemed, depending on point of view) after the destruction of that town in 1700. It provided a window into a much deeper and complicated story that I try to untangle throughout the book.

NMHR: How has your interpretation and framework evolved during the creation of this latest book?

BROOKS: Mostly I wanted to find a style and voice that would invite non-academic readers into a story that has floated around the fringes of Southwest history for a century. Working with my editor, John Glusman, at W. W. Norton, was like going back to graduate school, but in a different field. He taught me that my main task “was to make your reader feel smart, not [prove] how smart you are.” Good advice for all authors, I think.

NMHR: Did you receive assistance from the Hopi in researching this topic?

BROOKS: The Hopi Cultural Preservation Office (HCPO) led a tour for us at SAR in 2006, which allowed me to see how many different perspectives

could exist within the community. I revisited the site with HCPO in 2014, ground-truthing some of my observations, and twice shared the manuscript with HCPO before it went into print.

*NMHR*: In your opinion and experience, what is the relationship of a historian to a tribal entity? How much independence should a historian have in ethnohistory, generally, and when working with a painful episode in a people's past like the massacre on First Mesa, specifically?

BROOKS: The "massacre," which subtitle I resisted but was insisted upon by my publisher, in order to tie the book to Karl Jacoby's *Shadows at Dawn: An Apache Massacre and the Violence of History* (Brown University Press, 2008) and Ari Kelman's *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Harvard University Press, 2013), took place on Antelope Mesa, not First Mesa. Each historian or ethnographer has to find their own way, and their own relationships, with the people whose stories they hope to write. Tom Sheridan, Stewart Koyiyumptewa, and I participated in a public panel discussion at the Tucson Festival of Books in March 2016, in which we explored the process and insights that their collaborative editorial project *Moquis and Kastiilam: Hopis, Spaniards, and the Trauma of History* (The University of Arizona Press, 2015), and sole-authored *Mesa of Sorrows*, lends to our understanding of the period.

*NMHR*: How does tragedy shape both history and historical memory?

BROOKS: I think this is best answered by each reader of the book, if that's what you mean. I well imagine that there would be many different answers to your question. I sought only to offer one narrative, drawn from an array of evidence that seemed to me to provide a path toward understanding and forgiveness. It may, or may not, in the long run. Most books take a good ten years before their significance can really be understood. I suspect this will be the case with this one.

*NMHR*: Some have said that sorrow is something best left in the past. Why is it important to explore sorrow?

BROOKS: I've always liked what the great humanitarian Dorothy Day said about suffering: it opens up ancient places of pain that have been hidden . . . but suggests that one is getting closer to the truth, past the superficial and closer to the fundamental. I suggest in *Mesa of Sorrows* that the very essence of Hopi peace-seeking and communitarianism may be the consequence of remembering Awat'ovi.

NMHR: Does the physical landscape of the Southwest affect your work?

BROOKS: Spare, hard, and filled with unexpected beauty. What more could one want as a natural setting?

NMHR: What, in your opinion, is the state of the fields of Borderlands history, Native American history, anthropology, and the history of violence in the Southwest?

BROOKS: Each of these would deserve an essay. Borderlands history has plateaued, I think, since it became so popular that Borderlands erupted everywhere, and we haven't really harnessed the term to its best uses. I use the word only one time, I think, in *Mesa of Sorrows*, and then in a very specific geographic sense. We need to breathe and let new stories guide us. Native American history is robust and now being driven in good part by Native scholars—a very exciting time and yet, beyond the dominance of settler colonialism as an interpretive framework, hard to forecast a future trajectory, except for a powerful commitment to community-engagement. The field of violence studies, especially in anthropology, is robust and learning much from the “poetics” orientation that Neil Whitehead was bringing to us before his untimely passing.

NMHR: In your opinion, what topics are ripe for intervention by young scholars?

BROOKS: I'd like to see more family histories (in the microhistorical vein, capable of attending to scale) from the Southwest, that detail the way people experienced and made sense of their lives. To borrow from Steve Silliman, we need histories that range “from the short purée to the longue durée.”

NMHR: What are you currently reading? What book(s) is sitting on your nightstand? What is the most influential book you have recently read?

BROOKS: Let's see . . . Joshua L. Reid's *The Sea is My Country: the Maritime World of the Makahs* (Yale University Press, 2015), a terrific history that makes the connections between local inter-tribal complex politics and larger systems of trade, conflict, and resiliency. William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* (Random House, 1942), for writerly inspiration. Peter Nabokov's *How the World Moves: The Odyssey of an American Indian Family* (Viking, 2015), enormously painful from both the authorial and subjects' perspectives, and yet feels very much grounded in reality. One cringes and weeps in equal measure. Most recently, Edna O'Brien's *The Little Red Chairs* (Little, Brown, & Company, 2015), which is an exercise in working through trauma if there ever were one, with an uncertain resolution.

*NMHR*: Where is your current research taking you?

BROOKS: I'm working up a new writing project drawn from archival and oral-historical research I conducted in the late 1980s in the Purgatoire River Valley of Colorado, tracing three families from the mid-nineteenth century up to the Ludlow Massacre era. It's quite a jumble in my mind, but [includes] family stories that involve Indian slavery, Hispano migration and settlement, land grant conflict, Eastern European immigration, industrial coal mining and coking, and labor wars. It will be a trade book, again, since I think our biggest challenge is to recruit a non-academic readership to an appreciation of the Southwest. And probably a "next experiment" in creative nonfiction/fiction. Stay tuned . . .

*NMHR*: You are known for your involvement here in New Mexico for joining a cultural defense against fracking on the Cebolla Mesa in the Rio Chama Basin. What role or responsibility do historians have in actively participating in how our world unfolds?

BROOKS: I'm simply serving as a supportive partner to communities in the Chama River Basin who are trying to protect and preserve land, water, and cultural rights in the face of various external pressures—fracking is certainly one, but so many forms of uneven development surround the region that it's quite boggling. The folks at the Pueblo de Abiquiu Library and Cultural Center invited me to lend whatever expertise I may have gained over the last few decades to the cause, and yet I find I am learning more than I am giving, I fear. It's wonderful to be involved on the ground. All scholars ought to be so lucky.