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# Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant: On the Border between Provence and Pueblo

Diane Prenatt\*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Marian University – United States

## Abstract

Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant (1881 - 1965) may be best known as a friend of the American novelist Willa Cather, about whom she wrote the insightful *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (1953), still a rich resource for Cather scholars. Sergeant was a fascinating figure in her own right, however: a social activist and journalist who began writing for the *New Republic* at its founding in 1914, and who worked among the Pueblo Indians of the American Southwest for the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the 1920s and '30s.

Sergeant was a self-described "Gallopophile and nomad," highly conscious of living a hybrid life as a self-supporting professional writer in New York and Boston, but whose imagination and political conscience were fed by "foreign" experience. As a journalist, she traveled often to France, including a 20-month stint as the French correspondent for the *New Republic* during World War I. Fluent in French, she was an intimate of Parisian and Provençal writers and artists.

In this paper, I examine an episode from Sergeant's Provençal travels, in which she donned the ethnic costume of an *Arlésienne* as an elaborate prank on the poet Frédéric Mistral, founder of the *Félibrige*. I link this episode to her later work in the Santa Clara and Santo Domingo pueblos, where she was a privileged observer of rituals like the Corn Dance. Her writing about both indicates a radical understanding of otherness and a highly developed awareness of the tension between ethnicity and nationality as sites of personal identity construction.

Sergeant was an analysand of Carl Jung's and a regular participant in his seminars. She remained interested all her life in the psychoanalytical exploration of the self. Based on evidence in Sergeant's writing, I contend that these two experiences in Provence and the pueblos functioned metaphorically as she sought to redefine herself as an unmarried, professional writer outside the domestic conventions of her New England girlhood.

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\*Speaker