

LIBROS NUEVOS

By Nasario García

Expressing New Mexico: Nuevomexicano Creativity, Ritual, and Memory. Phillip B. Gonzales, editor. University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 2007. 319 pages.

Of the 11 writers featured in this anthology—including the editor—10 at present are, or have been, associated with the University of New Mexico. This connection may lead some readers to conclude that a local academic



environment yields to and therefore engenders myopic perspectives. I would disagree. The collection comprises several excellent essays. Some are scholarly in their treatment of the subject at hand; others are more personal in their focus on the arts, artists and the creative process.

The book is divided into five self-contained parts: “Continuities of the Volk,” “Performing Nuevomexicano Culture on Stage and in Film,” “The Art and Politics of Canvas Representation,” “Founders, Identity, and Contestation,” and “Culture of the Hard Life.” Each part consists of two or more articles with the exception of Part V, which only includes the fine essay by Alvin O. Korte titled “*El Desmadre*: Curse and Disorder.”

The concept of *desmadre* and its multiple applications—prevalent among the *pachucos* in Albuquerque during the 1940s and ‘50s—is nothing new to many of us. What may surprise some people is how the phenomenon today transcends the barrio and affects Hispanos across the social stratum. Korte’s poignant reminder drives that point home when he says, “*Desmadre* language is not relegated only to the streets, junior highs, jails and prisons but can be found in all walks of life, including university departments.”

To go at each other with a vengeance, incurring a veritable *desmadre*, regrettably, is still very much embedded in our culture, our psyche and society at large. A vivid example of *desmadre* is Phillip B. Gonzales’ fine summation of the controversy surrounding the celebration of Juan de Oñate’s 400th anniversary in Albuquerque. He brings to the fore points and counterpoints by *nuevomexicanos* (i.e., Spanish Americans/Hispanics/Hispanos/Chicanos) who bend, distort and even ignore historical facts to wreak havoc or *desmadre*.

The remaining articles provide a wealth of information—though not all of it new. They include a discussion of the *acequia* system and its tradition, a historical, religious and cultural study of the *matachines* and a look at how movies (e.g., *Salt of the Earth*; *And Now, Miguel*) depict *nuevomexicanos* at opposite ends of the political divide. An excellent essay is Enrique Lamadrid’s panoramic treatment

of what he calls “foundational *milagro* narratives,” miracles linked to history more than to personal experiences. His analyses are perceptive, the material engaging and the writing lucid and free-flowing.

If there’s a bone to pick with the editor, it is that in devising his so-called notable cottage industry of Hispanic culture scholars, he failed to include standard-bearers like Elba C. de Baca, Thomas E. Chávez, Pedro Ribera Ortega, Garland Bills, Abe Peña, Thomas J. Steele, S. J., and José Antonio Esquibel. The words of Tey Marianna Nunn, a contributor, ring true: “The Nuevomexicano/a artists [writers/scholars] who achieve major artistic recognition and success have done so often as a result of acknowledgment from outside the Land of Enchantment rather than from their exposure within state boundaries.”

Doña Tules: Santa Fe’s Courtesan and Gambler. By Mary J. Straw Cook. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 2007. 173 pages.

In this well-researched book, Straw Cook ferrets out new material and broadens our understanding of the inimitable María Gertrudis Barceló. The author dispels some of the myths and stereotypes that heretofore have characterized Barceló.



Born in Sonora, Mexico, Barceló over time was assigned a multitude of names, the majority of them unflattering, but none is more identifiable with her than the ubiquitous Doña Tules, indicative of the respect that she commanded from friend and foe alike. In certain corners, however, *Doña* no doubt was applied more with contempt and cynicism than admiration, primarily because of her gender and ethnicity but also due to her prominence in Santa Fe and beyond.

Renowned for her skills in the game of monte and known to have “participated in prostitution, mules, real estate, gold ventures, and trading,” Doña Tules possessed other qualities. Though a functional illiterate, she was intelligent, shrewd, vigilant, vibrant, charitable and a no-nonsense person who tolerated no drivel from the men, either Hispanic or Anglo, who conducted business with her. Independent-minded, she kept her maiden name throughout her life, perhaps an influence rooted in her father’s Catalan homeland (why else would she be called disparagingly Lona Barcelona?).

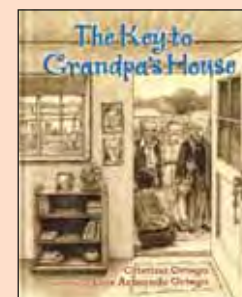
Doña Tules’ seemingly quirky behavior may not have been an intrinsic part of her persona. Rather, the unsavory side of people—especially newcomers on the Santa

Fe Trail and the U.S. Army—without doubt rubbed off on her, affording her some self-protection. Knowingly or not, she pushed for and defended women’s independence by guarding her own interests and rights.

True to her character, Doña Tules maintained control of her wealth and destiny up until the day she died. On the night of her religious wake, the mournful words and sounds of the *alabaos* (hymns of praise) bespoke of the positive aspects of her life. Even individuals with xenophobic tendencies, like W.W.H. Davis, were to come out of the woodwork and make praiseworthy remarks about Mexican people, obliquely referring to the late Doña Tules.

The Key to Grandpa’s House. By Cristina Ortega. Illustrated by Luis Armando Ortega. University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 2007. 24 pages.

Friendship and trust, human qualities that are never outmoded, ring true to life in this wonderful book for children. The concept of “*primorazgo*,” once prevalent among many rural Hispanic villages of northern New Mexico but now tottering between disappearance and survival, brings back pleasant memories. Whether you were a true *primo* (cousin) was of no consequence. What mattered most was the open-handed trust among friends and neighbors, the kind vividly portrayed in *The Key to Grandpa’s House*.



A key, symbolic of openness, is found under a gray rock as the story opens. Both rock and key are mentioned for each day of the week as different people come to Grandpa’s house in his absence. Though repetition is perhaps intended for positive reinforcement or emphasis, kids in grades four and up (per the recommendation on the book jacket), may find it a tad monotonous.

The sepia-colored illustrations of feeding farm animals, irrigating crops and dogs enjoying unchecked freedom are picture-perfect portrayals of rural life in northern New Mexico. A glossary of Spanish words with English translation is included.

So, learning from Grandpa what it’s like to have real friends may also teach our young children something about respect for other people’s property.



Nasario García is a native New Mexican. He received his doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh in 19th-century Spanish literature. His latest book is *Brujerías: Stories of Witchcraft and the Supernatural in the American Southwest and Beyond*.