

BOOK REVIEW

Testimonios de Herederas: New Approaches to Theorizing the Archive

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Archives of Dispossession: Recovering the Testimonios of Mexican American Herederas, 1848–1960. By Karen R. Roybal. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. Pp 186. \$27.95 (paper).

In *Archives of Dispossession: Recovering the Testimonios of Mexican American Herederas, 1848–1960*, Karen Roybal situates pre-Chicano Movement Mexican American women as feminist figures who create and maintain archives with what she calls *testimonios de herederas*. Roybal reconceives of the archive as including testimonios and does so in a unique way that draws attention to landed Spanish/Mexican women instead of overlooking the importance of their testimony because of their class status. Rather, Roybal considers their identity as intersectional subjects to analyze how Spanish/Mexican women challenged colonial practices during, especially, US colonization. In *Archives of Dispossession*, Roybal both theorizes *testimonios de herederas* and engenders the archive.

Roybal builds on previous work about Spanish/Mexican women and land (dis)possession. As Roybal explains, scholars María E. Montoya, Deena J. González, and Miroslava Chávez-García all influence her work. Roybal demonstrates how Mexican American women shift their tactics for preserving herencia by creating their own archives to preserve their personal, familial, or community knowledge of land. Roybal does this not only by introducing lesser-known court cases in New Mexico but also by examining familiar

texts with a new lens—that is, by reading literary production by Mexican American women as testimonio. *Archives of Dispossession* should be placed in a growing conversation among scholars who are similarly reading literature written by women of color as testimonio, such as Jennifer Harford Vargas’s “Novel Testimony: Alternative Archives in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming Bones*” and Ylce Irizarry’s “The Ethics of Writing the Caribbean: Latina Narrative as Testimonio.” Roybal advances our understanding of both archives and testimonio in Latinx studies.

Chapter 1, “Mexican American Women’s Alternative Archive: Linking Testimonio Memory, and History,” stands apart from the subsequent chapters because of the testimonios, literally the legal testimonies, that Roybal examines, which differ from her theorization of literary production as part of the testimonio genre. In this chapter, Roybal demonstrates how Spanish/Mexican women in New Mexico create an alternate archive because of the subjective legal testimony offered by landed women and entered into the records of the US Surveyor General. Instead of simply critiquing landed women as elite or elitist, Roybal thoroughly analyzes these women’s “individual, familiar, and communal experiences with the land” (49). Ultimately, she proves that Spanish/Mexican women were land-owning both before and after the US-Mexico war and that they were powerful narrators of land tenure in New Mexico. Specifically, Roybal examines the testimonios of María Cleofas Bóne de López and María Gallegos y García to examine the land grant adjudication process in New Mexico and the role(s) of women. Even when women *did not* testify in court, Mexican American men spoke about the roles women played in helping them acquire their land. Roybal opens up a discussion that warrants further examination of women’s involvement in the land adjudication processes.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 focus on Mexican American women writers María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, Jovita González, and Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, respectively. Not only is each chapter distinctly different from the others, but the lens through which Roybal conducts her analysis has never been applied to these texts previously. Each woman writer presents an opportunity for Roybal to understand the different positionalities of landed women in California, Texas, and New Mexico. These analyses offer a valuable contribution to the fields of literary and ethnic studies because, as Roybal demonstrates, when read as *testimonio*, literary production can be analyzed as part of a “historical alternative narrative” (56). To do this, Roybal thoroughly discusses how different scholars have defined the *testimonio* genre. Relying heavily on John Beverly and the Latina Feminist Group, Roybal coins the phrase *testimonios de herederas*, or “female heirs’ inherited testimonies,” (18) which she uses to historicize the ways in which Mexican Americans were wrongfully dispossessed of their land.

Whereas all three authors have received considerable attention for their literary work, Roybal assumes a new approach for understanding Ruiz de Burton, González, and Cabeza de Baca’s efforts to maintain *herencia* by reading their works through the lens of *testimonio*. Chapter 4, “The Not So ‘New’ Mexico: Struggle for Land, Identity, and Agency,” is perhaps the most intriguing, as Roybal reconsiders Cabeza de Baca as a progressive author. Roybal recognizes the elite positionality from which Cabeza de Baca nostalgically writes, but she carefully analyzes the construction of an alternative archive that complicates gender, genre, race, and class. In particular, Roybal offers a brilliant analysis of Cabeza de Baca’s use of the character “El Cuate” to assume an androgynous voice and assert authority over male-identified topics as they relate to *herencia* and the preservation of

culture. For this reason, Roybal's chapter on Fabiola Cabeza de Baca rounds out Roybal's theorization of *testimonio de heredera* to reveal how Spanish/Mexican women create new archives in which to preserve stories, identities, and recuerdos.

Throughout the book, Roybal calls attention to other scholars, namely Chicanas, who initiated the scholarly conversation in which she engages. Specifically, aside from academics, Roybal gives credit to the women of the land grant movement who demonstrate how women remain active in 21st century conversations concerning land and herencia. Roybal ends *Archives of Dispossession* by reflecting on her experience living the theory about which she writes. This practice is grounded in her work with the women who "attended the meetings, who spoke up for their rights as land grant heirs, and who refused to be silenced when they spoke of their experiences" (128). This is an honest and overdue tribute to the women in the land grant movement, especially in New Mexico, who constantly negotiate their complex subjectivities for the sake of preserving their herencia. Roybal's *Archives of Dispossession* is an innovative and overdue examination of the interplay between gender, land, and testimonio, in order to better understand the complicated issues surrounding land grants and land tenure in the US southwest. Roybal's intervention propels the fields surrounding land grants and land tenure toward a promising direction.