

UCLA

Regeneración Tlacuilolli: UCLA Raza Studies Journal

Title

Bárbara O. Reyes' *Private Women, Public Lives: Gender and the Missions of Californias*

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/61k09622>

Journal

Regeneración Tlacuilolli: UCLA Raza Studies Journal, 1(1)

ISSN

2371-9575

Author

Gonzales, Gregorio

Publication Date

2014

Copyright Information

Copyright 2014 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

PRIVATE WOMEN, PUBLIC LIVES: GENDER AND THE MISSIONS OF THE CALIFORNIAS. By Bárbara O. Reyes. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009. 231 pp. ISBN 978-0-292-72347-4

Exploring the complexities and functions of gender, class, and agency within the California mission system during the nineteenth century, Bárbara O. Reyes's *Private Women, Public Lives: Gender and the Missions of the Californias* both complicates and clarifies how hierarchies of power and space were manifested within and between these positionings. Reyes launches her analysis by examining the roles that Catholic mendicant missionary orders (e.g. Jesuits, Dominicans, and Franciscans) played in constructing and asserting patriarchal, racial, and gendered spatializations of the mission system, and its ramifications in colonial California. In the second half of the book, Reyes shifts her analytical lens to the individual narratives of Bárbara Gandiaga, an Indigenous woman, Eulalia Callis, the wife of elite California governor Pedro Fages, and Eulalia Pérez, a mestiza woman and llavera, or 'head housekeeper,' for the Mission San Gabriel. Through their respective narratives, Reyes brilliantly demonstrates how racial and class positionings influenced the ways in which each woman experienced, accessed, and asserted agency within the various layers of colonial California's hybridized governmental-ecclesial mission system. In effect, rather than simply focusing on "women's resistance strategies" as the sole method of counter-hegemonic practice, she successfully illustrates how women equally constructed and interacted with, as much as they were subjected to, colonial power hierarchies—arguing that women were "agents *and* subjects of the Spanish colonial frontier." (Reyes 2009:11) Reyes clearly finds this discursive confluence of race, gender, and class to be the most ideal space to examine the contours and fissures of Spanish colonial patriarchal structures.

Drawing from a constellation of archival and oral history sources, the three respective narratives emerging from the book detail how spatial and gendered constructions dictated each woman's accessibility, interaction, and agency within the patriarchal system of the missions. Reyes's tracing of the 1806 murder trial of Bárbara Gandiaga reveals how missionary-generated 'socioracial hierarchies' overtly restricted Indigenous women's spatial access to legal recourse. Her detailing of Eulalia Callis's experiences of false imprisonment by missionary officials surrounding her petition to divorce colonial governor Pedro Fages depicts social status as incapable of overcoming the imposition of legal and spatial limitations on women regardless of legal capacity. Reyes's last description of Eulalia

Pérez's life as a llavera, or head houseperson, of Mission San Gabriel provides a unique glimpse into how her capacity to derive, access, and assert forms of power and agency is premised on her functioning within the mission system. In essence, Reyes illustrates how colonial patriarchy was imposed upon, and utilized by, women as a form of regulation and a source of agency. Other strengths of this book include her usage of appendices to detail her source base. Reyes's description, transcription, and translation of court records and testimonios exemplify a conscious effort to make sources otherwise buried in a distant archive readily accessible to the reader. Additionally, her composite critical, historiographical, and gendered analyses of these documents provide the opportunity for the voices of these women to emerge from the text.

Although Reyes provides invaluable insights into the dynamics surrounding colonial and ecclesial impositions of gender-bound spatial norms operating in colonial California, there appears to be minimal engagement with similar scholarship. In particular, Miroslava Chávez-García's *Negotiating Conquest: Gender and Power in California, 1770s to 1880s* (2006), Deena González's *Refusing the Favor: the Spanish-Mexican Women of Santa Fe, 1820-1880* (2001), and Ana María Alonso's *Thread of Blood: Colonialism, Revolution, and Gender on Mexico's Northern Frontier* (1995) pursue similar intersectionalities of gender and power in the Spanish colonial frontier. A greater discussion with Chávez-García's work in California, González's work in New Mexico, or Alonso's research in Chihuahua would add context to how these hierarchies of power were being created, asserted, and challenged throughout the northern Spanish colonial frontier.

Yet, Reyes's book pursues a very distinct path of analysis by integrating the case studies of three women spanning the socioracial and socioeconomic hierarchies of colonial California, and particularly how these women were both sources and subjects of colonial patriarchal power. In fact, it is this very particularity that gives the book such strength. Its innovative methodological approach to source materials not only provides an alternative lens to view these narratives, but gives the reader the opportunity to explore the documents and narratives for themselves. In all, *Private Women, Public Lives: Gender and the Missions of the Californias* is highly recommended for students and scholars interested in exploring the complex narratives of gender and race within colonial Latin America and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

GREGORIO GONZALES

University of Texas at Austin