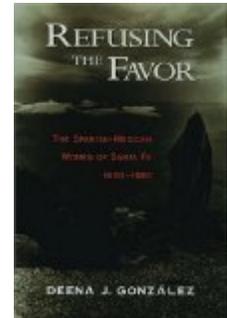


**Deena J. Gonzalez.** *Refusing the Favor. The Spanish-Mexican Women of Santa Fe 1820-1880.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. x + 186 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-507890-9.



**Reviewed by** Carmen Ramos Escandon

**Published on** H-Women (May, 2000)

Deena Gonzales focuses her work on the economic effects for women of long term industrialization and, more importantly, on women's cultural responses to the process of Americanization that took place in New Mexico after the United States took control of the territory -- issues still important for today's latino women in the United States. The common ground of both Latin American and Chicana women just a century ago proves fruitful.

Although referenced through New Mexico in the nineteenth century, similar processes remain in Latin America today: the displacement of women from traditional occupations through economic modernization, the emergence of new production forms, and rising inflation and increased commercialization (globalization?) of the industrial manufacture of local products. Gonzalez's work aims to rescue from historical obscurity a presence thus far neglected by Chicano historiography. However, the topic is not so foreign to Latin American historiography, thus the limited and specific focus of the book is not only its main contribution, but also its biggest weakness.

Gonzalez is an author with a mission: she wants to reverse traditional historiographical interpretations about the West, and specifically New Mexico. She wants to rescue the voice of the "other" (in this case, New Mexican women) by looking at Catholic Church Archives, Property Census records, and Spanish written sources. All of these sources allows Gonzalez to try to explain the historical reasons for the current "backwardness" of Mexican Americans in New Mexico.

In Gonzalez's perspective, one of the reasons for Mexican American women's lack of status was the increased participation of females in salaried jobs after the Mexican American War. While the point is well raised, her explanation of women's economic backwardness is a weak one since women were not paid well before the war, either. Thus it is important to look beyond salaries to discover the crucial economic changes in the area. A broader perspective of the economic shifts caused by the Mexican American War, besides increased Anglo land control, might have offered a deeper understanding of a process that is relevant for Latin American women even today: the increased

integration to a competing labor market and the effects of technology into their everyday lives.

In proving the negative effects for women of United States control in New Mexico in the early- and mid-nineteenth century, Gonzales blames the Anglo presence, and the new profit oriented mentality, for the deterioration of women's status. However, the limited focus of her research fails to explain whether the long term process of land privatization, increased industrialization, and wage dependency was specific only to New Mexico, or if it has parallels in other Latin American regions. The answer is probably yes, for similar processes were taking place not only in other border areas such as Texas, but also in various Latin American countries. While Gonzalez rightly points out that ninety percent of New Mexicans lost their land ten years after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, the information is not compared to other processes, such as Argentina after the Desert Campaign.

While New Mexico was part of the U.S. territory, the historical heritage of the area probably had more in common with other regions in the former Spanish empire than it did with New York. Thus, the lack of a reference to the overall Latin American experience weakens the analysis. Other times the scant reference is erroneous, such as translating the name of Spanish Medieval legislation *Las Siete Partidas* as the Seven Sacraments, thus confusing civil and ecclesiastical terrains (p. 93).

The second focus of the book, the comparative perspective focusing on the cultural contrast among the Euro-Americans and the Spanish-Mexicans in the area, is more successful. The terrain here is a slippery one, for New Mexico, long before the United States took over, had a degree of "Spanish character" that is hard to measure. The perspective could have improved if New Mexico was a contact zone, a place of interracial intercultural exchanges which produced a unique blend of anglo and hispanic character, values, and social

institutions. While Gonzales borrows Tzan Todorov's concept of "the other," she also takes issue with him on the basis that he "becomes his sources."

The book's main contribution is to rescue from oblivion some colorful and interesting female characters who embodied the creative duality of culture, customs, language, and attitudes such as the Mexican born Maria Gertrudiz Barcelo, a successful business woman who defeated mismanagement charges in the U.S courts. The use of court records allows Gonzales to take a detailed look at the contradiction of values and differences in the way the law is perceived and applied in the two societies. Thus illustrating the mechanics of the process of Americanization and cultural confrontation that took place in the nineteenth century and still does today.

Gonzalez also challenges the traditional perspective that mixed marriages led to upward mobility of the Mexican American women. She cites cases of women's strategies for using marriage as a survival tool, one which would allow them to adapt yet not necessarily prosper by an alliance with a Euro-American newcomer. The scarcity of interracial marriages, and above all, the similarity in religion and class background between marrying partners suggests a new perspective on the issue. Gonzalez strongly argues that intercultural marriages were not idyllic. They were not a means of cultural integration.

In the end, the author successfully achieves her goal of rescuing the voices of New Mexican Spanish Mexican women. In this innovative and controversial book Gonzalez portrays their perspective by giving these women a voice and a much ignored presence in the long term process of New Mexico's integration into the United States.

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**Citation:** Carmen Ramos Escandon. Review of Gonzalez, Deena J. *Refusing the Favor. The Spanish-Mexican Women of Santa Fe 1820-1880*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. May, 2000.

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