

Remarks for presentation and booksigning of IN THE COUNTRY OF EMPTY
CROSSES. Frank Waters Room, Zimmerman Library, UNM
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A. Gabriel Meléndez

In the years since Professor Arturo Madrid began to write this book, it's been my good fortune to attend a couple of formal readings of his memoir IN THE COUNTRY OF EMPTY CROSSES. These have been great experiences for me, hearing by installments Dr. Madrid's re-tracing (what he calls a recorrido), his recollection (a gathering up) and his remembrance against the general "dismemberment" of the story of the Hispano protestant community in New Mexico. The segments I heard piqued my interest as they already announced that once completed the book would be an honest account of this long-neglected aspect of Chicano life in the borderlands. Like many of you here today, I looked forward with great anticipation to reading the full arc of this rich history. The near absence of attention on matters bearing on religiosity in the Chicano community in Chicano Studies texts has always seemed a deep irony to me. This has troubled and perplexed given the scrupulous religious orthodoxy that has always been present and still today pervades large segments of the Mexican American and Latino community. Over the years it has also been my pleasure, despite all the know admonitions to avoid talking about religion with friends to have engaged in conversations with Arturo on the subject of the spiritual convictions of our common ancestors. These conversations have always proven to be the source of profound intellectual rewards for me. I can only hope these exchanges served at a minimum to keep the topic lively for Arturo.

First off, *IN THE COUNTRY OF EMPTY CROSSES* is an attractive and elegantly styled book, one that sports a look that matches the lyrical and elegant prose it contains. The cover suggests the look of the old ledgers of the kind once used in the very communities Arturo. Such books, familiar to scribes and bookkeepers were among the few places given to record the momentous and mundane activities of village life across northern New Mexico. In the old ledgers births, baptisms weddings, and burials were recorded and, as Arturo found when perusing the 1884 – 1890 minutes of the Spanish Presbyterian Church of Las Vegas, there too, were the very entries that note, “the names of some the earliest Hispano converts to Calvinism” (including the name of Arturo’s great-grandfather, Albino Madrid). So whether by design or happenstance the packaging is right for the content. In addition the book is graced by page after page of some of the most poignant photos of our colleague, Miguel Gandert. The images tell their own stories and form the visual “*countrapunto*” or counterpoint to the text.

Most telling of the work is how it strives to illuminate historical continuity and the shared experience of upland, Hispano villagers, --those folk, historian Charles Montgomery likes to call *los paisanos*-- and not by asking who where these people when they entered the land (at the time of so-called “*entradas*”), but who did they become over the generations and why did they decide to conduct their lives by the light of their decisions and by their convictions?

Of this transitional generation Arturo observes, “As such they found themselves between two worlds: one that was hostile to them because they were apostates and one that kept them at arm’s length because they were manifestly “other.” Recalling his *pariente*, Albino Madrid, he writes, “In becoming a protestant Albino Madrid participated

in the splitting of what had been by and large a homogenous community of Hispanos. Theirs must have been a trying existence, suspended between their historical community and their new found community of faith, which although it included family and friends was inextricably linked to the new society.”

Writing about your immediate ancestors, about the generation of your parents and grandparents is by any measure one of the hardest tasks a writer can take up for the obvious reason that you are writing about *familia* and familia never forgets what is said about familia. So, I applaud Arturo for centering his history on the generations that lived through that immense period of transition for Mexican Americans that followed the arrival of the U.S. in this region in 1848. These are the key generations; they are the ones, I believe, that have most to do with our present condition as U.S. Latinos. Arturo’s look at this historical period leads one to the internal dynamics of the day-to-day affairs of community and how these shaped so much of a *Nuevomexicano* socio-cultural and religious disposition. The success of the book, what make it a powerful and moving account and not simply dry sociology or history is that the lives of the Hispano Protestant community are drawn from Arturo’s own memory and from stories handed down to him. Insight is thus bound to introspection and introspection is culled out into life narrative. Arturo’s eloquent descriptions are poetic and beautiful; he provides lucid renderings of a people’s *querencia* or deep connection to the land (that this may sound romantic does not make the deep attachment to *la madre tierra* any less true). Finally, largely because of this careful and elegant style, places familiar and places lost to memory come alive in the ambling of the people who once lived there. At every turn readers are rewarded with sensory evocations of gurgling *acequias* the scent of yerbabuena, flor de manzana y

albercoque (albericoque), cut alfalfa in the fields (while this too may appear to be romantic; it does not make it any less true that sensory gifts and beauty of every kind laced the lives of *manito* communities living in close relationship to the land). *Profesor, gracias por tu libro.*