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Review Essay

CHARLES MONTGOMERY, *THE SPANISH REDEMPTION: HERITAGE, POWER, AND LOSS ON NEW MEXICO'S UPPER RIO GRANDE*

Phillip B. Gonzales

Anyone having the vaguest familiarity with New Mexico's history will readily attest that the Spanish heritage is a staple ingredient in the region's greater cultural makeup. The idea that Spain left an indelible stamp on New Mexico is evident even today, as events related to the four hundredth anniversary of the Spanish founding of New Mexico readily attest. But as research specialists recognize, the complex of historical interpretation, civic iconography, and ethnic identity that comprise the Spanish heritage underwent its greatest bloom and expression in the decades between the 1880s and the 1930s, that is, in the context of the incipient "modern" society that emerged once the railroad began to impact the territory. Previous studies have given attention to particular aspects of the Spanish heritage.[1] Charles Montgomery's *The Spanish Redemption* provides the broadest accounting yet of the turn-of-the-century "revitalization" of the notion that the cultural and racial stocks of the long-resident Hispanic people in New Mexico were essentially Spanish in character.

The Spanish Redemption: Heritage, Power, and Loss on New Mexico's Upper Rio Grande. By Charles Montgomery. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. xvi + 338 pp. Halftones, maps, notes, bibliography, index. $50.00 cloth, ISBN 0-520-22971-1.) Phillip B. Gonzales is Professor of Sociology at the University of New Mexico. He is currently writing a book on the history of Hispanic politics in New Mexico, focusing on the Native Son movement and the politics of statehood from 1888–1935.

Eschewing historical "thick description," the author classifies his work as a cultural study. Linguistic forms constituting a symbolic idiom widely disseminated various notions of the native Hispano culture and history. Montgomery argues that the Spanish heritage's verbal and visual symbols served as "lenses" that "mediated between the objective facts and the constructed meanings of everyday life" (p. 13). In Montgomery's hands the Spanish heritage signifies a public vocabulary spoken by Anglo and Hispanic "elites" for the purpose of negotiating social relations in specific civic and political arenas. The Spanish heritage did not represent, the author emphasizes, an "authentic" cultural tradition but, rather, arose from a particular historical context. As the subtitle begins to tell, the book argues that the Spanish revitalization cannot be understood apart from the social subordination of the Nuevomexicanos starting earlier in the nineteenth century ("loss") and the corresponding rise of Anglos to economic and political supremacy in the territory and state ("power").

Chapter 1 may be the best single overview of how the former citizens of Mexico were relegated to second class status following the American conquest of the Southwest. Americans of various and sundry stripe invaded the territory, establishing the terms of economic and political rule to which the Nuevomexicanos would have perforce to adjust. Citing specific examples and masterfully comparing New Mexico's annexation to the American conquest of California, the narrative traces the contours of subalternity that came to shape life among Hispanics and that affected the upper-class *rico* and the subsistence farmer alike. Also provided is a description of New Mexican society in the colonial and Mexican periods. That society, predating U.S. conquest, became an implicit benchmark for some of the cultural, racial, and historical claims that the Spanish revitalization would make in the early twentieth century.

The meat of the book examines the construction of Spanish heritage in five major sites. Representing overlapping chronological stages, chapters are devoted to electoral politics (1900–1920), Santa Fe's mission-based architecture (1904–1920), the Santa Fe Fiestas (1919–1936), the Spanish colonial arts movement (1924–1936), and southwestern regional writing (1928–1938). In each arena Anglos and Hispanos figure in the work of painting a regional Hispanic heritage for public consumption, sometimes in mutual agreement, more often in some contention or other, but always against a backdrop of Hispanos rapidly losing economic or political ground. Native Americans and "Mexicans" also make their appearance not as active agents in the revitalization but as "imagined" entities for the imagemakers to disparage, ignore, or

disclaim. The consistent theme across the domains is the aggressive insistence of key Anglos—people such as Ralph E. Twitchell, L. B. Prince, Edgar Lee Hewitt, Mary Austin, Frank Applegate, and others—that *they* be the ones to take the lead in crafting the public portraits of New Mexico's Hispanic culture, race, and history.

From an extensive set of primary and secondary sources, the author eruditely lays out a richly textured, highly insightful series of essays. Some claims—for example, that the classic nomenclatures "Spanish-American" and "Hispano" were popularized in the heat of partisan party politics—will be provocative. That argument may find its challenge in a contextual study of Aurelio Espinosa's early writings, should a scholar rise to the undertaking. For what it aims to do, however, *The Spanish Redemption* is a tour de force of analytic anecdote, hermeneutic interpretation, archival excavation, and biographical referencing.

One of the book's chief virtues is to show the variety of paths taken in building Spanish heritage. Distinct components of a putative Spanish colonial legacy commanded attention in particular situations. Thus, the classic conquistador icon appeared most strategically in the political domain, Hispanos embracing it in an effort to convince everyone, themselves most emphatically included, that they were the equal of the dominant Anglos even as they were rapidly losing their historical dominance of New Mexico's electoral process. Anglo politicians, looking to the East, fashioned their own conquistador heritage to make New Mexico palatable to the powerful interests deciding the question of statehood for the long-suffering territory. In another corner, the crafts of the humble village folk (the *paisanos* as Montgomery habitually and somewhat anachronistically labels them), rather than the conquistadores, were valued among the Anglos developing the field of Spanish colonial arts, their incentives stemming as much from their own material interests as from their charitable inclinations. In still another circle, the literary imagination fixed its gaze on the old village ways to rail against American cultural homogenization and yearn for the days of a morally satisfying traditional community.

Montgomery plays off the familiar refrain of tourist dollars motivating the Anglo interest in things Spanish. However, he presents the complexity of its contextual field. Thus, as they shaped Santa Fe's version of mission architectural style, Anglo civic leaders were forced by Hispano politicians to focus on the Hispanic, not the more popular Indian, designs and motifs. Exacting some revenge, however, these Anglo tastemakers ultimately came to dominate this

face of regional identity. Anglos were not always of a single mind when it came to innovating the public culture of local communities, often competing over how to represent the "Spanish" tradition and, just as importantly, over who was qualified to do the representing. The Fiestas provoked an especially intense row over what symbols to privilege in the annual reenactment of the reconquest of New Mexico by Vargas, the Hispanos themselves pitching to control the commemoration on their own symbolic terms.

While Montgomery presents fresh stories in all these respects, his theoretical bent has a more familiar ring. Following a well-trod reactive path, he argues that the entire ideological complex of Spanish heritage, in this view, turned on a reflexive shunning of "Mexican." So fiercely did Americans stigmatize things Mexican that Mexican culture simply could not serve as the basis for defining an acceptable southwestern regional tradition. Montgomery is careful not to overassociate with the scorn that Carey McWilliams heaped on Spanish "Fantasy" heritage, occasionally pointing out, for example, when something featured by the revitalization had actual foundation in traditional Hispanic culture. Nevertheless, in the best McWilliams tradition he thoroughly examines the Anglo imagination that drove the revitalization and that sprang from a stubborn denial—by those who should have known better—of the Nuevomexicano's links to a greater Mexican legacy.

In Montgomery's final analysis, "Spanish culture," "Spanish history," and "Spanish-Americans" were exalted primarily to avert the out-and-out racial conflict whose potential always lay just below the surface of intergroup relations. As early as the 1940s Carolyn Zeleny observed that competing Anglos and Hispanos managed some dangerous tensions by establishing an uneasy "accommodation."[2] Montgomery expands on his thesis with layers of factual backing. He observes that enhancing the Spanish heritage came at the cost of "masking," "cloaking," and "diverting attention from" the problems that otherwise plagued the paisanos and more privileged Hispanics. Such a mechanism of avoidance served the Anglos well, for, as they fertilized a Spanish glory and served up the palliative to the Hispanos, they simply buttressed their position of dominance in New Mexican society. On the other side of the coin, the notion of "redemption" signified a purely symbolic recompense, particularly for the Spanish American "elites." As they witnessed their families' land and historic role as community leaders being stripped away, the likes of Nina Otero-Warren and George Washington Armijo could at least assuage their feelings of loss by parading as proud "Spaniards." Here, Montgomery lines up behind previous critics who have regarded the Hispanos as

passively subordinate to Anglo whim, writing that, in New Mexico as in California, "Anglo disparagement of the 'Mexican' *prompted* a search for Spanish roots" (p. 64, italics added).

Montgomery's formidable wordsmithing generates this argument with impressive force. In a style that churns irony upon irony, the author thus becomes a critic of his historical subjects. His critical framework, however, fails to explore other aspects of the Spanish heritage's complex and multifaceted terrain. Because minority groups have their own historical trajectories, the Hispano complement in the Spanish revitalization can and should be considered on its own holistic terms.

The key issue here concerns the matter of Hispano "resistance." In a consistent rue, Montgomery claims that the redemptive function of the Spanish heritage blocked the Hispanos from challenging the structures of ethnic inequality enforced by the dominant Anglo class. For instance, he chastises the Hispanos for failing to develop the kind of critical social literature that African Americans who opposed Jim Crow managed to create, failing to note that Black writers had access to considerably better institutions of higher education, benefited from White academic mentors, and profited intellectually from living close to the bosom of American political and cultural power. In so doing Montgomery glosses over other research that has begun to identify an extensive volume of social protest that transpired under the banner of Spanish American identification. In these works, Hispanos brandishing their homeland heritage openly battled Anglo racial stereotyping, confronted public institutions, such as the public schools and the University of New Mexico, over their exclusionary practices, advocated providing adequate education to Hispano youth, and demanded bilingual education in the state legislature.[3]

To be sure, *The Spanish Redemption* gives a nod to the "native son" demands, made by such leaders as Octaviano Larrazolo and Antonio Lucero, that equality be provided to the Nuevomexicanos in the political system. Montgomery also clarifies much about the way race relations affected electoral politics, introducing the "race issue" debate into the literature and stressing the importance of the Hispano vote. However, the imperative to draw immediate conclusions from selected materials causes him to fall short of recognizing the significant extent and effectiveness of the native sons' call for political equality. For example, Montgomery construes the insertion of voting and educational rights for Spanish Americans into the state constitution as ploys of the conservative Republican "old guard" to further its control over the Hispano vote. And he writes that after statehood the racist Democratic Party

nominated Ezequiel C. de Baca for governor in 1916 as a trick to limit the number of Hispanos in political office, a charge that is affirmed but not demonstrated.

Of course, as a series of essays the book is unable to probe deeply into the politics of statehood. What is lost is an adequate picture of the Hispanic native-son influence that began in the 1890s and sustained itself to the 1930s. Further research is destined to show that both the Spanish American "bill of rights" in the New Mexico state constitution and C. de Baca's nomination and subsequent election as governor resulted more accurately from the norm of equality that came to affect party decision making in both major political parties precisely because of Hispano political action. Hispano journalists, lawyers, politicians, business people, and educators demanded that the political parties should, as a matter of social justice, practice so that Hispanos could share in high political office on a level commensurate with their percentage of the population. This grievance was registered with such vehemence, that, as primary investigation will bear out, it contributed mightily to the elections of B. C. Hernandez to the U.S. Congress in 1914, Octaviano Larrazolo as governor in 1918, Nestor Montoya to U.S. Congress in 1920, and Larrazolo and the Anglo leader of the Hispanos, Bronson Cutting, to the U.S. Senate in 1928.

Montgomery argues that in the political system the Spanish heritage failed to upset New Mexico's power structure—that it actually legitimized the fact that Hispanos did not have power equal to that of Anglos while "helping to create the appearance of substantial equality" (p. 87). That claim exaggerates the redemptive interpretation. It would be more accurate to say that the Hispanos emphasized the obligation of all public leaders to work for realizing the equality to which Hispanos were entitled not simply as a matter of constitutional right but because of their cultural birthright to the land of New Mexico itself. A powerful homeland identification justified native-son mobilizations in the various constitutional conventions that New Mexicans organized prior to statehood and at practically every election from 1911 to 1934. Without this fundamental ideological spur driving the native-son agenda, the admittedly low level of Hispano representation in office would surely have been worse. This form of "resistance" did not tear down a whole social system, as the Civil Rights Movement did later in the South, and, admittedly, it was insufficiently comprehensive (it failed to address the land grants issue), but this historical reality should not gainsay a key Hispano motivation: to have the Spanish identity serve as an instrument of insurgency at a time when the railroad was opening the way for Anglos to gain power by leaps and bounds.

The Spanish heritage may have thus permitted some Hispanos to fly on the wings of romantic redemption, but for many more it served as a grounded, practical tool for prying open the barriers to political resources. Looked at from the Hispano experience, the electoral political domain rises to greater importance than the other sites of Spanish identity examined by Montgomery. Montgomery cites in cursory fashion Hobsbawm's well-known essay on the widespread "invention of tradition" before World War I. Hobsbawm argues that the constructions of cultural tradition created by the state were central, and actually linked, to those created by voluntary associations, suggesting that political mobilization in the modern era actually anchored the greater project of harking back to idyllic times.[4] Echoing this view, political scientist Jack Holmes speculated that for Hispanos the political order was historically "primary."[5] To the contrary, politics actually permeated all the communities in the Hispano homeland during the era of statehood. Political communication in the Spanish language press blanketed the Hispano areas with a politicized Spanish American identity. The status of *nativo* not only inhabited the minds of the so-called "elites" but penetrated to levels of precinct activists, poll watchers, rank-and-file party members, and the voting public.

That the native-son trend enjoyed widespread Hispano support has been pointed out before but needs further reinforcement as a fundamental fact. In many ways Spanish American identity served as a precursor to later instances of minority-group identity that would become commonplace in the sociopolitical landscape of the United States in the twentieth century, a point appreciated by Holmes.[6] In regard to heritage content, the nature of public-identity movements, including those of nation-states, is to mold a given group's heritage and history to meet the contemporary partisans' contingencies and needs. The form of Spanish American identity was little different from other ethnic movements that arose in the United States after the industrial revolution. Emerging in the late 1960s, the Chicano Movement, a challenging phenomenon for sure, became another example of participants attempting but failing to universalize their own distinctive ethnic nomenclature, selecting the heritage icons, heroes, and stories that suited the needs of their own revitalization, and producing a certain unity among its members and partisanship against other members of its own ethnic group.

This argument does not question the validity of defining and naming a culture but recognizes the fact that the act of codifying heritage is governed by the need to make choices in a rational process of deliberation. The wonder, then, is not that the generation that called itself Hispano at the turn of

the century identified with a Spanish heritage but that, fully cognizant of being a social minority, those proponents asserted a politicized ethnic identity at all. Nuevomexicanos favored a Spanish ethnic identity because a Mexican heritage would have served little purpose in a context where native rights in New Mexico itself, as a state of the American union, were at stake. Indeed, Hispanos were not simply taking their cues from the Anglos who chose to idealize a Spanish past. For example, Tranquilino Luna's speech accepting the Republican Party's nomination for territorial delegate to Congress in 1880 came some twenty years before Montgomery claims that the Hispanos stepped into the tracks left by the Anglos. Luna declared, "I am native born to this soil; my father, grandfather, and in fact all my ancestry, as far as the memory of man runneth, were the same." Luna staked his claim to the office by reporting that his ancestors had "fertilized [New Mexico] with their blood" and that their "bones were scattered over its elevated mountains and beautiful plains—monument of their patriotism, loyalty, and bravery."[7] The key suggestion here is that the Hispanos were "prompted" to project their heritage most heavily by the very conditions of social subordination that Montgomery so effectively demonstrates and by their practical political interest in seeking to change them.

Other problems of historical precision arise in the book's exposition. Montgomery perpetuates some oversimplifications of New Mexico history. Similar to the way that the Santa Fe Ring is commonly treated, his understanding of the "Old Guard" in the Republican Party adopts the ideological rhetoric of the times, portraying a monolithic conspiratorial clique rather than what it truly was: a highly complex political alliance whose circles of power competed with one another at any given point and regularly turned over across time. He asserts that the dominance of the Republican Party served only the interests of the rico sheep ranchers, for example, in supporting the wool tariff (p. 79). The party, however, also served the interests of small Hispano ranchers and the Hispano ranch employees. The notion of "elite" is central in Montgomery's vision, but actual socioeconomic and political stratifications among both Anglos and Hispanos were more graded than what an elite-lower class conception implies. Moreover, as among the working people, everyday life among members of the middle class, including "old guarders" such as Holm Bursum and Secundino Romero, involved a constant struggle to keep one's head above the waters of financial ruin.

Despite these reservations, Charles Montgomery has written an important book. Not only does it open up vistas, but it serves to elevate the debate about the nature of regional culture, civic society, ethnicity, power, inequality, and

politics. The task now is to round out the picture, fitting the aspects of symbolic action that he has effectively marked out with other dimensions of cultural formation in a truly historic corner of the world.

Notes

1. See for example Richard L. Nostrand, *The Hispano Homeland* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992); Doris Meyer, *Speaking for Themselves: Neomexicano Cultural Identity and the Spanish-Language Press, 1880–1920* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); and John Nieto-Phillips, "Spanish American Ethnic Identity and New Mexico's Statehood Struggle," in *The Contested Homeland: A Chicano History of New Mexico*, ed. Erlinda Gonzales-Berry and David R. Maciel (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 97–142.
2. Carolyn Zeleny, "Relations Between the Spanish-Americans and Anglo-Americans in New Mexico: A Study of Conflict and Accommodation in a Dual-Ethnic Situation" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1944), 338–440.
3. See Phillip B. Gonzales, *Forced Sacrifice as Ethnic Protest: The Hispano Cause in New Mexico and the Racial Attitude Confrontation of 1933* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001); Phillip B. Gonzales, "El Jefe: Bronson Cutting and the Politics of Hispano Interests in New Mexico," *Aztlan* 25 (fall 2000): 67–108; Phillip B. Gonzales, "The Hispano Homeland Debate: More Lessons," *Perspectives on Mexican American Studies* 6 (spring 1997): 123–41; Phillip B. Gonzales, "The Political Construction of Latino Nomenclatures in Twentieth Century New Mexico," *Journal of the Southwest* 35:3 (1993): 158–72; Phillip B. Gonzales, "Spanish Heritage and Ethnic Protest in New Mexico: The Anti-Fraternity Bill of 1933," *New Mexico Historical Review* 61 (October 1986): 281–99; and John Nieto-Phillips, *The Language of Blood: The Making of Spanish American Identity in New Mexico, 1850s–1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, forthcoming).
4. Eric Hobsbawm, "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 263–307.
5. Jack E. Holmes, *Politics in New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1967), 17.
6. Ibid.
7. "Tranquilino Luna to Fellow Citizens and Gentlemen of the Convention," *Campaign Bulletin* (Las Vegas, N.Mex., 25 August 1880), 1.