

Fabiola Cabeza de Baca. *We Fed Them Cactus*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954, 1994. Pp. 186. Paper \$10.95.

Fabiola Cabeza de Baca wrote about the history of her community in eastern New Mexico at the end of the Mexican-American War, 1846-1848. Her book helps preserve folk culture and also fits within the subject United States borderland history. *We Fed them Cactus* provides a glimpse into the private lives of Nuevo Mexicanos during a period of transition and reveals how they navigated the Americanization process. Doña de Baca's sources come from both her memories and the oral histories of these settlers. This emphasis on oral histories illustrates the importance her community placed on the oral tradition. First published in 1954, the book was later reprinted with a new introduction by Tey Diana Rebolledo, a Professor of Spanish at the University of New Mexico who specializes in Chicana/o literature, Latin American poetry and women's literature.

Rebolledo classified this work as “resistance discourse” typical of a generation of women writers from “old landed upper-class New Mexican families” who wrote about a time when power was shifting from “Hispanic to Anglo control” (xxii). What Rebolledo does not suggest is how to tell this story without being pigeonholed. An introduction warning that “resistance discourse,” follows can discourage reading further. Cabeza de Baca simply stated that she wanted to tell “the story of the struggle of New Mexican Hispanos for existence on the Llano, Stacked Plains” (ix). In the first of sixteen chapters, she describes this flat and semiarid landscape as a particularly challenging place to establish a settlement. The seclusion of the Llano helped augment the significance of storytelling for forming personal and community identity. While these stories, replete with blood, sweat, and tears were intriguing, the abundance of Spanish topography, at times, distracted from the narrative.

Through El Cuate, the cook on her father's ranch, she introduced the stories of ciboleros or buffalo hunters, rodeos, fiestas and how Nuevo Mexicanos traded with Comanche warriors long before and after it became outlawed. The arid conditions of the Llano also influenced this community since water shortages were a constant anxiety and this is evident in the fact that the topic of rain ran through many of the stories. In particular, the last chapter discusses how the drought of 1918 reaped havoc on her family and neighbors. To avoid financial ruin, her father sold off the majority of his cattle at below market prices. To keep his remaining cattle alive long enough to steer them to greener pastures, her father and other ranchers fed them cactus. This experience not only inspired the title of de Baca's narrative, but also reflects the ingenuity of these settlers.

An influx of migration into the area, mostly European-Americans from eastern states, eventually sparked tension with the old Hispano population and homesteaders as power started to shift to the latter group. This is not, however, an example of Hispano resistance strategies used by a conquered people to eschew Americanization. On the contrary, one of her fondest memories is celebrating the Fourth of July and learning English. Cabeza de Baca points out that it was not the homesteaders Hispanos resented but the flagrant violations of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and their rights as citizens.

Rebolledo sees this work as nostalgic and “edenic” but appreciates that it combines the recollections of many to preserve their voices. For Cabeza de Baca, those attributes were important to include in this narrative because they are part of the struggle

for survival. Though the book lacks the structure of most published oral histories, this does not diminish its historical value. Aside from offering a history of her community and a record of traditions and rituals, de Baca offers insights into their everyday lives. As such, it is not just a valuable primary source, it is also entertaining.

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