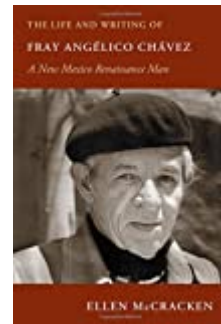




Ellen McCracken. *The Life and Writing of Fray Angelico Chavez: A New Mexico Renaissance Man.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009. xii + 460 pp. \$42.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-4760-2.



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Published on H-NewMexico (August, 2010)

Commissioned by Tomas Jaehn (Special Collections/Center for Southwest Research)

A Man Between Two Worlds: The Struggles and Scholarship of Fray Angélico Chávez

In *The Life and Writing of Fray Angélico Chávez*, Ellen McCracken, a literary scholar, analyzes the intellectual career and literary accomplishments of Fray Angélico Chávez in relation to the ebbs and flows of his personal and professional life. Bringing together literary analysis and biography, McCracken contends that the writings of Chávez are directly linked to his internal struggles. His devotion to his people and cultural identity sometimes clashed with the priorities and inclinations of church officials. Linking these internal conflicts to the vast body of essays, books, and poetry produced by Chávez, McCracken illuminates a direct link between Chávez's evolving identity and the important scholarship he produced.

McCracken focuses on both the context within which his writings were created and the circumstances that dictated Chávez's evolving interests. Chapter 1, "A Life's Trajectory," represents the heart of the biography and perhaps the book itself for those more interested in the man than his writings. Though it is a general sweeping history of Chávez and his experiences, McCracken's

recounting of his days from his childhood in northern New Mexico to the twilight of his life, frequenting the restaurants of Santa Fe, presents a portrait of man torn between his cultural heritage and his spirituality. McCracken portrays Chávez's numerous problems with his fellow clergy and during his military service. His struggles with his own identity led ultimately to his final stand in favor of his fellow Hispanos over the Franciscan order. Although those craving a biography might wish for more detail, the chapter remains eloquent in its presentation. Especially noteworthy is McCracken's summation of Chávez's years after he left the clergy, which portrays him as a man loved and respected by his friends and community, yet struggling to make a life for himself outside of the church.

Chapter 2 shifts the focus to Chávez's writing career, specifically highlighting the early creative works that McCracken argues were heavily influenced by his strong sense of ethnicity and swayed by his feelings of estrangement, which came from being the only Hispano in the Franciscan seminary in Cincinnati. Focusing on his

paintings, drawings, poems, short stories, and ultimately his first novel, McCracken successfully displays the importance of the Hispano ethnicity as the major theme in his early writings. Chávez's Hispano identity continues to be central in the next chapter, as McCracken examines the interplay between his creative works and his identity as well as his evolving spirituality during this period.

The book proceeds chronologically and moves into Chávez's years as an army chaplain in World War II, shifting briefly into a biographical mode again. McCracken recounts how Chávez's sense of being American was awakened by his experiences during the war, and how within the constraints of military regulations he continued to exercise autonomy in his behavior and writings. McCracken categorizes Chávez's art in this period as the embodiment of the Freudian opposition between Eros (the drive for life and living) and Thanatos (the drive for death and destruction); his art and writings were a representation of life in those times of death and darkness. McCracken concludes that during this period, Chávez discovered his interest in history, the art that would ultimately define his legacy for many scholars of the Southwest. The next few chapters recount Chávez's evolution as a historian, his massive archival projects, and his struggle to find research time amidst his busy schedule. McCracken documents how Chávez produced quality scholarship despite the fact that he was continually frustrated both by frequently overwhelming responsibilities and by lack of respect from his fellow clergy.

Chávez's most important historical contributions, his revisionist interpretations of the early New Mexican clergy, are the subject of the final chapter. McCracken links Chávez's revisionist spirit to his own personal rift with the Franciscans's lack of respect for his cultural heritage and scholarship. McCracken astutely asserts that Chávez was guided by his empathy for the long-

maligned New Mexican clergy and the New Mexican people at large who, much like himself, were considered to be inferior to the Anglo population. For Chávez, his own life and that of nineteenth-century Padres Antonio José Martínez, José Manuel Gallegos, and Ramón Ortiz were too eerily similar; all were victims of what Chávez labeled "ecclesiastical colonialism."

McCracken's book proves to be a valuable contribution for Latino studies scholars interested in literary studies as well as for historians interested in Hispano identity in New Mexico. She offers a window into the ecclesiastical colonialism that Chávez endured, and while her study focuses on just one individual's responses to oppression, her analysis can potentially help us understand how other individual Hispano New Mexicans have reacted to the political, economic, and cultural colonialism of the twentieth century. As a result, McCracken's work leads to a more nuanced understanding of more extreme and exclusive forms of Hispano identity in the present day.

In linking the events of Chávez's personal life to his shifting intellectual interests, McCracken presents us with a believable insight into Chávez and his scholarship. The extensive interviews she conducted with friends of Chávez accentuate his contributions to literary and cultural history of New Mexico. And these contributions are far from overstated. Indeed, Fray Angélico Chávez stands as one of the most important figures in both New Mexican and greater Latino American history and his life illuminates the Hispano spirit that imbues many of the people who have descended from the families he once studied. Perhaps the most important contribution of McCracken's book, then, is that it underscores the importance of producing a full-length biography of the man himself, whose life and experiences prove to be every bit as important as the writings he left behind.

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Citation: Michael J. Alarid. Review of McCracken, Ellen, *The Life and Writing of Fray Angelico Chavez: A New Mexico Renaissance Man*. H-NewMexico, H-Net Reviews. August, 2010.

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