

Private Women, Public Lives: Gender and the Missions of the Californias

Review Number: 941

Publish date: Thursday, 1 July, 2010

Author: Barbara Reyes

ISBN: 9780292718968

Date of Publication: 2009

Price: £40.00

Pages: 245pp.

Publisher: University of Texas Press

Place of Publication: Austin, TX

Reviewer: Linda Heidenreich

In moving the California missions into the public sphere, Reyes has provided us with a rich and multi-layered glimpse into the lives of California women. Those familiar with Reyes' early work will not be surprised that the focus of her work is gender; they may be surprised to see how very complicated that category becomes as it weaves in and out of the lives of men and women in 18th and 19th-century California. Reyes examines the lives of three women: Bárbara Gandiaga, an indigenous woman executed for conspiring to murder a priest; Eulalia Callis a Spanish woman, who caused scandal and was incarcerated for accusing her husband of adultery; and Eulalia Pérez, a *mestiza* whose faithfulness to the mission system was rewarded with steady employment, eventually as the *llavera* of Mission San Gabriel. In mapping women's lives, Reyes argues that gender must be understood in relation to race and class, and in the Californias, women's status must also be understood in relation to the mission system. To set the context, Reyes engages in a deep and detailed history of the mission system in both Californias (Baja and Alta) before turning her gaze to her three women protagonists.

The goal of Reyes text, in part, is to complicate the way we understand gender by exposing the ways that, in colonial society, the public and the private constantly overlapped. According to Reyes, in the process of colonization, 'there were no private places' (p. 9) as bedrooms were sites of resistance and subordination, and dormitories functioned to restructure and disrupt indigenous customs and lifeways. As colonizing institutions, the missions reorganized the space of California and the space and lives of indigenous peoples throughout the region. Thus it is within the mission context, Reyes argues, that historians must examine the lives of all California women: *mestiza*, indigenous, and Spanish. And so Reyes opens her text with a layered and detailed history of the three missionary orders that sought to Christianize the Californias, and of the indigenous peoples whom they encountered there.

California was colonized by three missionary groups: the Jesuits, the Dominicans, and the Franciscans. Each community differed in terms of culture, vows, and relationship to indigenous peoples. The peoples who preceded the friars to the region, however, were even more diverse in culture. And so Reyes takes the time to map some of the diversity of California's indigenous peoples, as well as the depth of that history. While some of the information will be familiar to California historians, Reyes' facility in utilizing the work of both United States and Mexican anthropologists to map this history adds a richness to the narrative that is often

lacking elsewhere. Thus, Reyes is able to point to 5,000 year old cave paintings and remnants of 3,000 year old textiles, and place the hunting and gathering cultures of the Californias in a very complicated context of continuity and change. Critical to her critique of the mission system is her attention to space, and the many ways movement and community shaped pre-colonial lifeways. Thus the reader is presented with a portrait of diverse indigenous cultures, which, due to common geographies and cultural exchanges, had much in common. They were hunting and gathering cultures where men hunted and women gathered, but where there was some cross-over in responsibilities. They were communities that claimed specific territories and that moved through territories with the seasons – who had specific religious beliefs, yet exchanged ideas and joined celebrations with neighboring tribes, thus encouraging cultural sharing throughout the Californias. Finally, family units and cross-generational relationships were crucial to the well-being of communities throughout the region, as peoples passed their knowledges from generation to generation through example, ritual and oral traditions. In Reyes's text, when Bárbara Gandiaga and her neighbors kill the local clergy, it is a clear response to the violence and destruction the clergy and their mission system had brought to the region.

Reyes attention to the colonizers – the missionaries, is both a strength and a weakness in her work. It is a strength because she paints the missionaries in all their complexity. They are clearly colonizers, disrupting indigenous spaces, taking land and inflicting violence upon men, women and children. Yet they are also very human; at times they struggle to do good, even within a flawed system. However, the depth with which Reyes addresses the three orders can be distracting, as this portion of the text is as detailed as her chapters on the women, and it is the women's stories in which many of us are most interested.

And so Reyes addresses the histories of the three orders. The Jesuits were the first to the region, often raising their own funds to fuel the mission system. When their ability to be self-sufficient garnered them too much political power, they were expelled. To prevent another order from ever gaining such power in the region the Spanish Crown replaced them with two religious orders: Dominicans and Franciscans. All the orders had regulations regarding the treatment of the indigenous peoples whom they sought to Christianize, yet they all failed to heed their own rules regarding harsh punishments and/or protecting the people they sought to convert. In the end, violence and threats of violence became key instruments in the Christianizing of the Californias. Many of the friars became ill and/or had to be sent home due to the physical and emotional challenges of working in colonial spaces – ironically, though, these were violent, colonial spaces of their own making.

It is only after mapping the histories of the three orders that Reyes allows us to meet Bárbara Gandiaga, an indigenous woman who was brought to Mission Santo Tomás while still in her teens. She was pulled from her family and forced to live in a *monjerío*, or women's dormitory, and later next to the quarters of the priest for whom she cooked. Gandiaga lived and labored at Santo Tomás until the age of 38, when she was sentenced to death for killing the local priest. It is here, in here mapping Gandiaga's life, trial and legacy, that Reyes is at her strongest. She places the trial of Gandiaga in the larger context of colonial processes. Arguing that the court records must be read for their silences, she maps both information from Gandiaga's trial and information omitted from those same records. Weaving together information from government correspondence and local legends, she is able to excavate a very layered history of one woman who resisted the violence of the mission system, and the men who sentenced her to death.

Reyes's critique of the system which brought about the execution of Gandiaga is threefold: it was a system of coercion where the person's charged with violence were often held against their will; it was a system that treated indigenous peoples as children and lacking in reason and; it was a system that utilized violence and threats of violence to reproduce and maintain itself. In these arguments, Reyes explicitly builds on the work of both Robert Jackson and of Antonia Castañeda. While some recent work has questioned the analogy of the mission system to the U.S. slave system, Reyes draws on the work of Jackson and on primary documents to remind us that indigenous peoples were often brought to the missions by force and also returned to the missions by force. During this very trial, Reyes points out, mission Indians, fearing for their lives, fled Santo Tomás. The trial was halted, soldiers were sent out to hunt down and return the runaways.

For Reyes, violence permeates both what is spoken and unspoken in the mission records. The trial does not mention sexual violence on the part of the missionaries or local soldiers. Yet, Reyes notes, local legends do – quite explicitly. Building on the work of Antonia Castañeda to contextualize local legends, she maps the sexual violence against which women struggled throughout the mission system, laying bare the very loud silences in the trial record. Finally, in looking at the official records of the trial and execution of Bárbara Gandiaga, Reyes notes the extreme violence with which her crime was punished. Gandiaga was not only executed, but her hands and head were ordered cut off and put on display for all to see. Incarcerated Indians from Santo Tomás and from neighboring missions were required to witness her execution and to view her body post-execution.

Reyes contrasts the story of Bárbara Gandiaga with that of Eulalia Callis, the wife of Governor Pedro Fages, the first lady of Alta California. While Gandiaga was abused, tried and executed under the Dominican system of colonization, Callis was shamed and incarcerated under the Franciscan system. Callis had walked in on her husband accosting an indigenous girl – a servant in their household. Callis accused him of infidelity and when the mission fathers asked her to drop her charges she refused. For this she was incarcerated at the mission for two to three months, until she recanted. Reyes uses the history of Callis to complicate our understandings of gender in the Californias, in comparing the spaces in which Gandiaga negotiated her life with those of the first lady, she convincingly argues that Spanish women, while complicit in the system, were also constrained by it. In Reyes' text, there is no black and white.

Both Gandiaga and Callis found their lives limited and contained within a system not of their choosing, yet Callis held a class and race privilege that was shared by very few women within the mission system. Perhaps, Reyes suggests, this is what got her in trouble. For Spanish women expected some protection under colonial law, including the right to separate from abusive and/or unfaithful husbands. The reality, Reyes argues, was that in order to maintain the patriarchal order of the Californias, a leading lady such as Callis had to model honour-virtue for the larger population. Building on the work of Ramón Gutierrez, Reyes argues that Callis' accusation against her husband constituted a rejection of female submissiveness. This lack reflected poorly on her husband, whose status as governor was tainted by his outspoken wife. Complicating this web of social relations, Reyes argues that the Franciscans' refusal to address the sexual violence of Fages, again made them complicit in the sexual violence of the colonizing process. Fages was accused of infidelity, not of rape, yet the person with whom he was found was a young girl, and a servant in his household. In a system constructed through honor, violence, patriarchy and missionizing, Reyes argues, the mission fathers chose to ignore such violence in order to maintain the colonial order.

The third woman whose life Reyes addresses will be familiar to some readers, in part, because of the earlier work of Reyes herself. For Eulalia Pérez was the *llavera* of the famous Mission San Gabriel, the most 'successful' mission of Alta California. In closing her work with the life of a *mestiza* who was able to garner some power for herself within the mission system, Reyes reinforces her argument that the missions were public spaces, and that gender, race and class, in relation to the mission system, were all factors structuring the lives of women in colonial California. Thus we meet Pérez, the wife and later widow of a soldier, who found work as a cook at the mission, and worked her way up to *llavera*. As such she was in charge of dormitory keys, but also indigenous work assignments, food rations, and education. Like Callis, Reyes points out, Pérez held a unique position. Few women had such privilege within the mission system – each mission required only one *llavera*. Through the labor and decisions of Pérez, we are able to see that her obedience to the mission fathers and their system was the key ingredient in her access to power. She reproduced the mission system in her education of mission Indian women and in her policing of mission space. She was submissive to the will of the mission fathers to the point of marrying against her will. Her access to power, like other women in the Californias, was limited and structured by her relationship to the mission system.

And so Reyes' work is a work about gender and space. Through the lives of Gandiaga, Callis and Pérez, she demonstrates that women of the Californias negotiated their life choices in relation to their race, class, and

gender *and* in relation to the missions and the mission fathers. Building directly on the work of Robert Jackson and Antonia Castañeda, she maps the violence that permeated the lives of indigenous women and the role of *mestiza* and Spanish women in participating in a violent colonial system. Reyes does not deny that women had agency or choice within this system, but, to borrow a phrase from Randall Milliken, she demonstrates how it was a 'Time of Little Choice.' Gandiaga was executed for her resistance. Callis was incarcerated. Pérez chose to work for the system and was so rewarded for her labor.

Private Women, Public Lives is a wonderfully layered yet accessible text. While the amount of detail devoted to the three missionary orders of the Californias proves a bit distracting, Reyes succeeds in building upon and complicating the important work of earlier historians such as Robert Jackson and Antonia Castañeda. As such, the text will prove invaluable to those of us who study the histories of the Californias. The tensions Reyes excavates between violence and resistance, gender and colonization, will continue to influence the work of many of us for years to come; yet the book is also accessible enough for upper-division history students to grasp its key points. Finally, and of interest to students and researchers alike, will be the appendices included at the close of the text, for here Reyes includes Gandiaga's interrogation records, Callis' complaint, and Pérez' *testimonios*. For some of these documents this is the only place, outside of their archives, to find them.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/941#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/4880>

[2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>