

• *Book Reviews* •

Chasing Dichos Through Chimayó. By Don J. Usner (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014. Vii + pp. 232, prologue, introduction, postscript, photographs).

Northern New Mexico's Chimayó region developed a distinctive culture over the previous four centuries. Linguistically, its residents still speak a Spanish more closely related to the Castilian dialect of European settlers and conquistadores than the informal tongue found in other parts of former Mexican territories. A dance called the Matachines, imported from European sources but augmented by local Nahuatl custom, has been a staple of regional identity for nearly as long as Spanish has been spoken in Chimayó. The poetic local-color proverbs known as *dichos* or *refranes* (sayings and refrains, respectively) also add character to the place, and in *Chasing Dichos Through Chimayó*, photo-memoirist and folklorist Don J. Usner follows the trail of *dichos* through his homeland as he captures the vibrant-but-fading character of the land and its people. The resulting text provides a catalogue of the folk sayings of the Chimayó region, but more importantly, situates those texts within the particular idiomatic contexts of the people who use them.

Usner introduces his journey as one rooted in language, although he quickly reveals a second language beneath the Spanish which peppers the book throughout—a language of genealogy spoken quite thoroughly by the *Chimayosos*. Untangling deep family connections dating back centuries appears second nature to many of the people Usner documents, particularly the *viejitos*, or elders of the community, who maintain a detailed understanding of kinship almost entirely by memory. The language of ancestry becomes a framing device for nearly every collecting episode which Usner presents. Connections going back generations inform familial relationships in the present day and often allow the author access into physical and mental spaces to which he might otherwise find himself barred. Each chapter of the book details a personal encounter between the author and a Chimayó resident or family as he attempts to capture the sights, sounds, and stories

of the area with as much of an insider's eye as possible. In some ways, these chapters—and the rich black-and-white photographs which accompany them—become less about individual personal accounts and instead form an episodic narrative for Usner the author and his work in the region. He certainly does manage to convey much about the residents, often visiting the same people multiple times to get a fuller account, as in the case of Esequiel Trujillo, whose final year is chronicled in the book. The personal touch Usner provides transforms the ethnographic elements of the book into an autoethnography, however. Usner relates his insider/outsider status—as a son of an outsider father and a Chimayoso mother, who only spent time in the region sporadically—yet maintains numerous intimate connections with the residents, particularly the many layers of *primos* (cousins) and other distant relatives.

Following each chapter, Usner includes a list of *dichos* in their original Spanish, as well as his translations into English. He has loosely grouped the *dichos* according to theme, with proverbs about “Friendship and Enmity,” “Fate and Hardship,” “Food,” “Faith,” and multiple sections of proverbs on the subject of “Character.” In some instances, his translations actually seem to do injustice to the Spanish originals, as in his interpretation of the *dicho*, “*Con hambre no hay mal pan*,” which he translates as “When you are hungry, there is no bad-tasting food,” rather than more literally—and poetically—rendering it “With hunger there is no bad bread” (9). Still, the vast majority of the *dichos* retain the character of their language and the people who speak them, and Usner's work provides a serviceable record of lore which would likely not have found a broader voice without him. Crucially, Usner uses the *dichos* as supports to his chapters rather than as central guiding mechanisms, and often one proverb will pop up among multiple sources, truly demonstrating the widespread use of *dichos* among the Chimayosos. The author's ability to intimately contextualize the actual phrases perhaps points to a new methodology for folkloric “collecting” practices which do not isolate language outside of its use. Instead, the book presents a fully integrated text-context dynamic

which subverts the notion of open-ended interpretation of the *dichos* themselves. When Usner presents a particular proverb, it means exactly what the speaker intends, because it is supported by a micronarrative construction which eventually led to its use, rather than existing in a vacuum.

Usner fills out the book with his excellent photographs and concludes the text with a postscript describing the intervening years between his collecting exercise and the completion of the text. The reader departs the book with a fuller knowledge of the region and its flavor—a point paralleled by the metaphor of the distinctive species of chili pepper grown in Chimayó. Scholars of Mexican American folk culture and genealogy will glean much from *Chasing Dichos through Chimayó*, as will those with an interest in memoir and local New Mexican history. While the author's hand is heavily felt in every page, it seldom proves detrimental to the work as a whole. Usner has explored his fatherland repeatedly in his other work and still finds much to say and reveal about Chimayó and its people here. He recognizes the magnetic draw of his home, even if he does not live there anymore: "It's like this with so many people in Chimayó who have moved away, including us with our family land and houses: having property gives us an excuse to visit it, and while we're at it, to reconnect with family roots, to remember the old days, and to retouch the earth—or the old machinery" (107). In forging that reconnection, Don J. Usner accomplishes a depth of ethnographic research and regional documentary which offers new frames of context for others who seek to preserve distinctive local cultures through their work.

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