



PROJECT MUSE®

House Built on Ashes: A Memoir by José Antonio Rodríguez
(review)

Cordelia Barrera

Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Volume 122, Number 2, October 2018,
pp. 241-242 (Review)

Published by Texas State Historical Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/swh.2018.0094>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/702945>

House Built on Ashes: A Memoir. By José Antonio Rodríguez. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017. Pp. 189.)

José Antonio Rodríguez's *House Built on Ashes*, dedicated to "the refugee, the unhomed, the exile," provides a rich portrait of the social and family dynamics that surround Mexican immigrant families who move fluidly across the Texas–Mexico border as a matter of necessity. Themes of identity, belonging, and the arduous work and living wage pressures that make up and mold the lives of immigrant families structure the lyrical, beautiful, and often haunting vignettes that form the book.

House Built on Ashes opens in 2009, when Rodríguez was a doctoral student in New York. When his plan to visit his family in McAllen, Texas, is derailed by a drug cartel that has occupied the border village of La Sierrita where he was born, he flashes back to his American citizenship interview in 1992. During the interview, Rodríguez is asked to surrender his allegiance to Mexico, and he does. The choice is easy, he thinks. Nothing but dirt, sweat, and outhouses to look back on. "Nothing at all" to miss, he imagines (15). But *House Built on Ashes* is a work of memory and journeys rooted in spaces and places that are more than landscape or flimsy dwellings that shelter from relentless heat or cold. The interview triggers Rodríguez's early memories of his impoverished life in South Texas that are full of conflicting, often painful moments both reflective and expansive. As he confronts issues of family uncertainty, school bullying, his budding queerness, and various forms of othering, readers journey alongside Rodríguez as his memories, far from being "nothing," coalesce to illustrate the harsh, poignant industry of immigrant life.

The vignettes in *House Built on Ashes* are short, two to three pages, but they are also circular, reaching back to generative moments in Rodríguez's childhood that evoke the raw beauty of the South Texas landscape. In this regard, lizards, bleating goats, old bedspring coils that serve as a makeshift grill, and half-raw potatoes that speak to a lack of kindling highlight a life of limits, but also of perseverance and enterprise. Some chapters include raw and painful moments, such as when even the family's chickens starve because the parched landscape yields no worms, or when, as a young boy of six, Rodríguez yearns for his mother's love—elusive as clouds. Why is her love not as relentless as the sun's heat, the young Rodríguez asks? Like the ashes of the book's title, ashes that spring from the burning of the neighbor's trash and that yield only remnants of old toys, all things in Rodríguez's world are transitory and splintered because life for immigrants and transient field workers comes relentlessly from every direction.

The book's structure reflects the adaptable nature of the best memoir writing, as each chapter serves as a kind of nonfiction prompt, an entry into a world most readers cannot imagine or have not been privy to. As the adult Rodríguez muses on actual physical changes wrought by neolib-

eral, globalizing forces that have devastated the U.S.–Mexico borderlands, images of flags, maps, customs, and nation-states coalesce so that both author and readers realize that “home” for immigrant families always lies ahead. For them, the future is as ephemeral as memory.

House Built on Ashes is more complex than the sum of its chapters. These are stories of hope, fear, and possibility. More significantly, Rodríguez’s ruminations cry out for empathy and change. On the surface, the vignettes are about a boy who yearns for his mother’s love or a store-bought toy. On a deeper level, they describe the hardships and horrors impoverished immigrant families in South Texas wrestle with daily. *House Made of Ashes* offers no answers and provides little interpretation. Instead, it paints astonishing, often harrowing pictures of the costs many immigrant families pay while reaching for the ever more elusive American Dream.

An evocative, lyrical work, *House Made of Ashes* will be useful to students and scholars of Mexican American and borderlands studies as well as laypersons interested in immigrant cultures and the American Southwest, notably South Texas.

Texas Tech University

CORDELIA BARRERA

Cowboy Christians. By Marie W. Dallam. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 248. Notes, bibliography, index.)

Marie W. Dallam’s *Cowboy Christians* is an engaging, interdisciplinary analysis of one of the lesser studied, but certainly more interesting subcultures within the broader scope of modern American evangelicalism. Relying heavily on a mix of personal communication, first-hand accounts, and secondary literature, Dallam illuminates the human dimensions of this subculture. The result is a study that is informative, compelling, and consumable.

The book begins with an extended introduction of “cowboy Christianity” detailing its various definitions, characteristics, and iterations, including a discussion of historiographical placement and methodology. An associate professor in religious studies, Dallam is not a professionally trained historian. But she is clearly comfortable with many of the historiographical parameters that will be of great interest to historians, and she effectively positions her study within these parameters. She is particularly effective when discussing her work as part of a larger conversation about western mythos, as opposed to western history, not so much in distinguishing fact from fiction, but in the enduring value of the fiction as summative reflection on muscular Christian tradition in the United States. Dallam describes the incorporation of heroic, romantic themes like rugged individualism, liberty, and courage into the organizing soul of cowboy Christi-