

SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

Remapping the Territory

'Our America,' by Felipe Fernández-Armesto

By JULIO ORTEGA JAN. 17, 2014

In "Our America," Felipe Fernández-Armesto, a British historian of Spanish heritage at the University of Notre Dame, recasts the pilgrimage of Hispanics in the United States as a rich and moving chronicle for our very present. His book navigates five centuries of painful documents, atrocious statements and dubious literature to argue that the United States was, from its beginning, as much a Spanish colonial southern enterprise as an unending march westward. After long periods of migration, deportation and accommodation, the next United States could well be a pluricultural bilingual power, updating the American dream. "Our America" is perhaps the first history to make the case for this nation's becoming a bright Latin American country.

From the brave conquistadors who dreamed of the legendary North American city of Cibola, the Fountain of Youth and the mythical kingdom of Queen Calafia, to the Texas secessionists who revolted against Mexico's emancipation of its slaves ("the protection of slavery was among the most urgent economic reasons for rebellion," Fernández-Armesto writes), to the Native Americans who saw the bison disappear from their prairies before being almost eliminated themselves, this story is one of random

violence, intentionally inflicted pain and wanton killing (not to mention smallpox). The narrative moves easily from panoramic views and exemplary cases to interpretation and reflection.

Fernández-Armesto's first conclusion advances his main claim: "The U.S. empire, in short, was like the Spanish empire and the Mexican empire and Mexican imperial republic that succeeded Spain in North America, mixing mercies and malignity." Spain, Mexico and the United States all turned to "subjugating, exploiting, victimizing and sometimes massacring."

Borges took the United States side in calling the Alamo "that other Thermopylae." Octavio Paz protested. But the earliest representations of Nova Britannia were not too different from those of Nueva España: "most excellent fruits . . . much warmer than England, and very agreeable to our natures." José Martí, the spokesman for the Cuban independence movement, advanced the notion of "Our America" in 1891 to distinguish it from Anglo-America, afraid of the idea of a Pan-America, a United States without borders. The 19th-century California novelist and playwright Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton, the first Mexican-American female author to be published in English, rewrote "Don Quixote" and denounced "how we would be despoiled, we, the conquered people." From a different perspective, a woman interviewed by The New York Times in 1856 spoke for many when she declared that "white folks and Mexicans were never meant to live together anyhow and the Mexicans had no business here."

This book is especially adept at following the construction of the United States territory as it defined its borders beginning in the early 1800s. Time and again, those borders were traced through rebellion, looting and murder. Spanish forces, Mexican armies and United States troops competed ferociously, with opportunists and landowners ready to join the shooting. In 1819, Spain renounced claims to Florida while the United States renounced Texas. But Mexico's independence from Spain resulted in its losing Texas to immigrants from the United States, the "illegal aliens" of their day. John Quincy Adams said, "In this war, the flag of liberty will be that of Mexico, and ours, I blush to say, the flag of slavery."

Stephen Austin, on the other hand, saw the war between the Texans and Mexicans as one “of barbarism and of despotic principles, waged by the mongrel Spanish-Indian and Negro race against civilization and the Anglo-American race.”

The frontiers multiplied along with the cast of characters. The United States Land Commission of 1852-56 remade the map of California, redistributing estates at will. In Texas one wealthy Hispanic family defended its property in the courts for 50 years and lost. Other Hispanic landowners were shot or lynched. Things worsened with the California gold rush as nationality became an issue. Recent American citizens were excluded from the gold fields after California joined the Union, and they often turned to social banditry as a means of resistance. Probably the first Hispanic hero working as a bandit showed up in the 1890s in “El Hijo de la Tempestad,” by Eusebio Chacón, which may have been the blueprint for Zorro. Joaquín Murrieta is another popular hero of these early cultural wars. People doubted his existence but not his death at the hands of the Rangers. (Let’s hope Quentin Tarantino isn’t paying attention.)

Though not cited by Fernández-Armesto, Carlos Fuentes is the Latin American author whose engagement with the many Mexican-United States borders became a poetic exploration. The frontier, he wrote, is a scar because the Rio Grande border is a historical body still alive. Its melancholic genealogy is a matrix of human sacrifice, recycling racism, marginalization and subjection. It is a brutal irony that President Obama, elected in Spanish (¡Sí, se puede!) and with a majority of Hispanic votes, has a record of more than 1.4 million deportations, many of which have expelled students and separated families.

Fernández-Armesto dutifully deals with this changing landscape, writing with detail and gusto. He accounts for the incorporation of territories (in 1853, Tucson and nearly 30,000 square miles were transferred from Mexico to the United States); takes care of the adventurers (William Walker failed to incite rebellion in Baja California and Sonora, then invaded Nicaragua in 1856 only to be ousted); and

pays attention even to “socialists” like the ones who rode into Mexico to exploit the Mexican Revolution. Puerto Rico was frozen in a zombie citizenship as a “free associated state,” a colonial euphemism. Cuba, of course, was a colonial dream. After American troops left the country in 1902, the United States maintained a puppet government for over 50 years. And there remains the hell of Guantánamo, designed by lawyers as an extralegal military base for prisoners of undeclared wars.

One of the darkest hours registered in this book is the abduction of orphans by an Anglo mob in 1904, after the Sisters of Charity, in New York, sent abandoned children to Arizona for adoption by Mexican families. In a climax of racism and anti-Catholicism, the white locals seized the children. The district court ruled against “half-breed Mexican Indians,” who were “impecunious, illiterate,” saying that some good “Americans . . . assisted in the rescue of these little children from the evil into which they had fallen.” “Fraternization was unthinkable,” Fernández-Armesto says.

In his 1925 book of essays “In the American Grain,” William Carlos Williams, born of a Puerto Rican mother and a British father, advanced the extraordinary notion that the United States’ Spanish beginnings were mythical, poetic, heroic but, first, modern — that is, made up by mixture. “Our America” documents Williams’s statement and opens space to follow new developments and drives. After all, America’s cultural history includes more than chewing gum (from Mexico) and Coca-Cola (from Peru).

Latin American history has been not only a memory of things past but also a series of brave new projects of the future. The United States, for good and ill, has always made up an intrinsic part of its horizon. Because of the presence of Hispanics and the imperative of the Spanish language, Latin America is an inextricable part of the United States’ future. This book is also the history of that better mañana.

OUR AMERICA

A Hispanic History of the United States

By Felipe Fernández-Armesto

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