



# OUR AMERICA

A HISPANIC HISTORY  
OF THE UNITED STATES

FELIPE FERNÁNDEZ-ARMESTO

"A RICH AND MOVING CHRONICLE FOR OUR VERY PRESENT." —JULIO ORTEGA, *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*



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## *A Hispanic History of the United States*

FELIPE FERNÁNDEZ-ARMESTO



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Toda la piel de América es nuestra piel.

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[ALL AMERICA'S SKIN COVERS US.]

*~ Attributed to Pablo Neruda*



NOTE ON USAGE

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MY FOCUS IS ON THE MORE THAN FIFTY MILLION US CITIZENS and permanent residents who, like me, list themselves as “Hispanic” in official surveys, and their ancestors. I call them “Hispanics” or, in contexts where a Spanish name seems more appropriate, “hispanos.” The name corresponds to a form of identity well established in official statistics and widely accepted by people who apply it to themselves. I use the word “Latino” only when quoting or alluding to the modern academic literature in which it is the favored term for immigrants to the United States from Latin America or people who share some aspect of culture or tradition of supposedly Latin American origin. I should confess that one reason I avoid it is that it excludes me, as my paternal origins are in Spain; another is that it includes Brazilians, who are not part of my remit in this essay. The term “Hispanic” originated in official circles only at the end of the sixties, and initially designated Spanish-speakers. When I use it does not entail any language, pigmentation, or other cultural trait: it is simply a self-descriptor. But throughout the book, for reasons of practicality and common sense, I treat the use of Spanish as a sufficient, though not necessary, criterion of inclusion. I call Hispanics’ enemies, or those sometimes Hispanics perceived as enemies from time to time, “gringos” in an attempt to capture or invoke a particular point of view; of course I do not consciously use the term, or any other, with a pejorative intention, mindful of the warning of Esmeralda Santiago’s “Papi”:

“You should never call an *Americano* a *gringo*. It’s a very bad insult.”

“But why?”

“It just is . . .”<sup>1</sup>

The same goes a fortiori for names applied to Hispanics, such as “greasers” and “dagos.” Sometimes use “Chicanos” for Mexican Americans who designate themselves as such, and “indios” for Native Americans in areas formerly belonging to the Spanish monarchy.

As I had different editions of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo’s *Historia general y natural de las Indias* to hand at different times, I have cited the work by chapter numbers, and have done the same for Richard Henry Dana’s *Two Years before the Mast*, because my copy is of an obscure and undated edition. In both works, chapters are short and, as far as I am aware, consistently numbered in all editions.



BY AMADEO PETITBÓ JUAN  
DIRECTOR, FUNDACIÓN RAFAEL DEL PINO

THE IMAGE OF THE UNSETTING SUN HAS STOOD, LONG AND OFTEN, for the enormous size of the Spanish monarchy in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. When the great orb shone on Hispanic dominions in Asia, darkness covered the lands of the Crown of Castile in America. The sun's rays reached them after lighting European kingdoms and states that were subject to the Catholic monarch. Vast territories encompassed varied peoples, geographies, and cultures, some of which preceded and survived the imperialism, while others emerged and developed within or alongside the framework of the monarchy.

If we focus on Hispanic America, most of which later became a set of independent republics linked by a common language and in cultural fraternity with Spain, we find an apparently anomalous case: the great country, the United States of America. Even though it does not belong to the group of nations that has come to be known as Latin America, the United States shared a common history with most of them, partly because a large portion of its current territory formed part of the dominions of the Spanish crown. We need only recall the frontiers agreed to by Spain and the United States: first, in 1795, under the Treaty of San Lorenzo, also known as Pinckney's Treaty, and then in 1819, under the Transcontinental Treaty, also called the Adams-Onís Treaty after its negotiators. The long period of shared history is not sufficiently known or valued in American and Spanish historiography. Although particular authors have produced works of genuine merit, the scope for further research is enormous.

In the context of the aims of the Rafael del Pino Foundation, which include the preservation of Spain's historical and cultural heritage, the foundation takes an active part in cultural enterprises that highlight all that both nations share, and particularly the role played by Spain in the historical shaping of the United States. In addition, a total of almost three hundred foundation scholars have studied at American universities; currently there are thirteen in the United States. Three ongoing partnership agreements with Harvard University and one with Georgia State University in Atlanta are evidence of our interest in sharing our ideas and sentiments with the United States.

Our sponsorship of Professor Fernández-Armesto's book is therefore not an isolated initiative but part of a broad cultural policy. The book we present is a history of America from a Hispanic perspective. Or perhaps it could better be described as a book on the presence of Spain in the history of America. But it is much more than that, since it also focuses on Hispanic influence in the country's recent past, its present, and even its immediate future. *Our America: A Hispanic History of the United States* will leave no one indifferent. Born and educated in England, now teaching at the University of Notre Dame, and before that at the University of London, Professor Fernández-Armesto invites us to join him on a journey along many paths through the past, present, and future Hispanic dimension.

the United States. He starts by taking us back to the time of the discovery and the colonies, and then moves us on to travel through times and places that mark the difficult relationship between the two great powers: albeit one of them, Spain, then in decline with its dominant role forgotten, and the other, America, rising to the peak of its still-active role as a world-shaping and world-reshaping force. The book's closing pages contemplate the future while keeping an eye on the past: *why the United States is—and has to be—a Latin American country*. The author takes a positive approach “is—and has to be—,” avoiding the word “problem,” the use of which in any intellectual discourse, in the words of the great Hispano-American writer Jorge Luis Borges, “may be an insidious form of question-begging.” The book's invariably positive line of argument leads us to a present that is not without difficulty but, above all, to an encouraging future. A past worth remembering; the present embodied by our del Pinar Foundation scholars; and a future in which Hispanic influence and the richness of Hispanic culture contribute constructively to the United States: this is the setting for all that the Rafael del Pinar Foundation does in partnership with a country that is a fine friend and ally for Spain and the whole Hispanic world: the United States.



“It’s like the optical illusion of the tumbling cubes—you know, the pattern of cubes which looks concave to the eye; and then, by a readjustment of your mental focus, you suddenly see them as convex instead. What produces that change? Why, you catch sight of one particular angle in a new light, and from that you get your new mental picture of the whole pattern.”

~*Ronald Knox, The Three Taps (1927)*

I STARTED THIS BOOK—IN MY HEAD, WHICH IS WHERE I ALWAYS start writing, years before I hit a keyboar—in Colorado Springs. I had gone there to give some talks at the U.S. Air Force Academy. At the time, the academy had a reputation as an evangelical, conservative enclave. Some students had the bibles to hand when they asked me questions. They clearly wanted the world to be a lot simpler than really is. Generally, however, I thought the academy was an exemplary place of education and that was comforting to know that the officers of the armed forces of the world’s superpower are encouraged in critical intelligence, ethical reflection, and breadth of culture. The teachers I was lucky enough to meet, most of whom were air force officers, with a leavening of lay scholars, were liberal in the best sense of the word: unprejudiced, thoughtful, generous.

I had a long conversation about immigration with one of them. He had—with one limitation—what I would call a proper view of the subject. He realized that the United States needs immigrant labor and plenty of it. He wanted the country to be welcoming to immigrants and appreciated that the best way to turn them quickly into patriotic citizens or committed residents is to make them feel at home. He had no trace of hostility to any color or creed. He knew that the future of the United States was inescapably plural and that natives had to adapt to change, just as newcomers had to adjust to fit in.

His only scruple was that he thought that “people who come here must learn the native language.” I did not think he spoke or meant Ute or Comanche, so I said, “I quite agree. Everyone should learn Spanish.” He looked nonplussed for a moment; so I added, “What is the name of this state?” As we were in Colorado, he conceded my point. I could reciprocate by agreeing that everyone in the United States should know English, but not at the expense of forgoing their ancestors’ languages. I also insisted that bilingualism is at least twice as good for any community as self-incarceration in a single language.

The encounter made me realize that even well-educated, amiable, open-minded people in the United States do not realize that their country has a Hispanic past, as well as a Hispanic future—or, at least, that if people do realize this fact, they commonly assign it no contemporary relevance or cultural significance.

The 2012 presidential election, in which Hispanic voters in unexpected numbers and in surprising solidarity turned out to support Barack Obama, alerted even the most myopic politicians to Hispanic current and future strength in numbers. As I check over the text of this book for the last time

tweaking the prose, responding to the publisher's suggestions, thinking better of some assertions and boosting others, I am surrounded by newspaper columns and emanations from airwaves and blogosphere that are abuzz with the importance of the Hispanic vote. In the United States, "demographic" becomes "the vote" whenever voters in a particular age group or ethnicity or phrat or other psephologically defined tribe evince, in combination, strength of numbers and congruent voting habits. Politicians and power brokers then take notice and court them.

In the 2012 election the winner, according to pundits' consensus, had the backing of 71 percent of voters who class themselves as Hispanic. President Obama's margin of victory in most swing states was so big that he would have won even if Hispanic voters had divided much more nearly equally. But in Florida, Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico, which are likely to remain among the most fiercely contested states in future elections for many years, he needed the support of the majority of Hispanics to win. He got it. In one respect Hispanic voters decisively bucked a trend: Nevada and Colorado were the only western mountain-region states to support Mr. Obama. The importance of the phenomenon seems bound to grow, partly because Hispanic numbers are growing and partly because Republican appeal to Hispanics has declined year-on-year since 2004. Republican strategists are expected to respond by planning Hispanic-friendly policy turns and framing Hispanic-oriented messages.<sup>1</sup> "We have a Latino problem that just cost us a national election," was the response of GOP spokesman Mike Murphy on election night. "We're going to have to have a very adult conversation that might turn into an intraparty fistfight about how we become electable again."<sup>2</sup> Shortly after the election, the Republican scramble for Hispanics' favor began, when governor of Nevada Brian Sandoval announced a fast track to state identity documents for some allegedly illegal immigrants.

NEVERTHELESS, WHILE POLITICS HAVE affected perceptions of Hispanics' role in the present and future, the facts of electoral life seem to have made little difference, so far, to the way most people perceive Hispanics' place in US history.

I recall with pleasure an amusing moment in *The Andy Griffith Show*—perhaps the most-often aired serial ever broadcast in the United States. When I first stumbled on the show, flicking channels in an attempt to appease exhaustion during an insomniac night in an uncomfortable hotel, I thought the dialogue captured, with greater fidelity than almost any other document of popular culture I then knew, what ordinary people think about the country. In the episode I have in mind, Andy and his friends enroll for an adult education class in US history. They begin by asking when US history began. "As soon," one character suggests, "as the Pilgrim Fathers stepped off that ship." Andy demurs, pointing out that there were English colonists in Virginia before the landing in Massachusetts. His remark provokes someone to say that maybe the story began deep in the history of England. Someone else mentions Columbus, provoking a suggestion that maybe part of the story began in Spain, but the suggestion dwindles in the ether and the course follows the conventional narrative of the unfolding Anglo-America across the continent from east to west. In another episode, the schoolteacher who becomes Andy's sweetheart asks her class where the United States began. Andy's son pipes up with the instant answer, "Jamestown, ma'am. 1607."

Citizens of the United States have always learned the history of their country as if it unfolded exclusively from east to west. In consequence, most of them think their past has created a community essentially—even necessarily—anglophone, with a culture heavily indebted to the heritage of radical Protestantism and English laws and values. Immigrants with other identities have had to compromise and conform, sacrificing their languages and retaining only vestigially distinctive senses of the

peculiarities as “hyphenated” Americans. The heirs of slaves have had to subscribe to the same process. Natives who preceded the colonists have had to surrender and adapt.

Of course, the Andy Griffith version of US history is not wrong. The country, like the stripes in the flag, is woven, in part, of a horizontal weft, stretching across the continent. But no fabric exists without a strong warp crisscrossing at right angles from bottom to top. The Hispanic story of the United States constitutes the warp: a north-south axis along which the United States was made intersecting with the east-west axis highlighted in conventional perspective. Making the Hispanic contribution conspicuous is like tilting the map sideways and seeing the US from an unusual approach.

History is a muse you glimpse bathing between leaves. The more you shift your point of view, the more is revealed. I do not say this for some postmodern reason, in order to imply that historical reality is nonexistent or inaccessible. On the contrary, I think the truth is out there. But truth cannot be grasped easily or all at once. We build up a picture bit by bit, rather as, circling a sculpture or building, we compose an overall impression by contemplating each fragment, each aspect at a time. The advantage of a shift of perspective is that it adds to our stock of perceptions and gets us nearer the truth—the objectivity that lies at the sum total of all possible subjectivities. Fresh perspectives always enhance our vision by challenging our assumptions. Think of the Argentine or Australian maps of the world that put south at the top, or a still life by Paul Cézanne, who, resuming work every morning, would set up his easel in a different spot, in order to place each object he painted in a peculiar perspective of its own. In this book, I adopt only one, Hispanic perspective. So this is not a comprehensive history of the United States, only an essay designed to open a different vista. It does not disclose the whole truth of the subject, but draws attention to an important and still underemployed way of approaching it.

I do, however, try to include the whole country panoptically, and the whole period from 1505 to the present. The justification for trying to scan such a long, broad story in one sideways glance is that piecemeal histories have not so far succeeded in changing the way most people in the United States contemplate their country.

MATERIALS FOR STUDYING THE warp became available in the late nineteenth century, thanks to Hubert Howe Bancroft, a Californian businessman who devoted his retirement and fortune to collecting documents, commissioning professional researchers, and publishing regional histories, bringing into single conspectus the whole of Pacific-side America west of the Rockies and the Sierra Madre, with some excursions beyond, as far east as the Gulf of Mexico. Bancroft had strong moral sensibilities, conservative inclinations, and an aversion to everything that seemed to him coarse, vulgar, and irreverent. He hated the gold rush, which he thought might have corrupted California forever if honest farmers had not followed the gold diggers. He detested narrow nationalism and saw the mixture of migrants and natives in his state as exemplary—“this intermixture of the best from every nation whose “effect upon the good-will and advancement of mankind will be felt more and more as the centuries pass by.”<sup>3</sup> In fifty years of indefatigable work from 1868 onward, Bancroft’s output never included a history focused on the Hispanic contribution to the making of the United States, but he made it possible to see that such a history existed.

Bancroft’s successor in teasing the country’s Hispanic past out of the archives was Herbert Eugene Bolton. He graduated college in the 1890s—the decade in which the Indian Wars ended and the US Census Bureau declared the frontier closed—just as the United States came to fill the continent from sea to shining sea. Bolton moved west himself, from Pennsylvania, where he did graduate study of

free blacks in the antebellum period, back to his home state of Wisconsin to teach school, then across the country in the footsteps of pioneers to professorships in Texas and California. Along the way, he began to question the east-west story of the making of the United States, which he had learned from one of its greatest exponents—his own teacher in Madison, Frederick Jackson Turner. The depth of the evidence of Spanish colonial penetration Bolton saw in the Southwest convinced him that there was more than one story to be told of how the US was made.

In “the old borderlands north of the Río Grande, the imprint of Spain’s sway is still deep and clear,” Bolton found. “Nor,” he noticed, “is this Hispanic cult—or culture—losing its hold. On the contrary, it is growing stronger. In short, the Southwest is as Spanish in color and historic background as New England is Puritan, as New York is Dutch, or as New Orleans is French.”<sup>4</sup> He extended the range of the researches Bancroft had commissioned in Mexican and Spanish archives. He adopted a complex, plural vision of the nature of the United States as the confluence of a lot of different pasts—in the colonial era, French, Spanish, and Dutch as well as English—and multiple beginnings. In 1920 he tried to write a history of the colonial period of North America with multiple starting points in Spain, England, the Netherlands, and France.<sup>5</sup> He acknowledged that there were other possible openings or exordia in the Native American and black pasts, though his work never gave them equipollence with those in Europe. He also inaugurated a debate, which is still going on, about whether it makes sense to see the history of the United States as exceptional in its own hemisphere, or whether it is better understood in the context of the history of the Americas as a whole: he changed many scholars’ minds on this point, but in popular perceptions the notion seems ineradicable that the United States is marked out as special by the unique features of an unparalleled past.<sup>6</sup>

Bolton wrote with a wide readership in mind, but the reach of his influence outside the academic world was small. Carey McWilliams, on the other hand, was a first-rate popularizer, with a journalist’s vocation for communication and a scholar’s disposition and grasp. Before he became, in 1955, a long-serving editor of *The Nation*, which is still exemplary in proclaiming liberalism in the United States, he worked in California, dividing his time between his profession as a lawyer—specializing in the advocacy of the underprivileged—and writing reports and commentaries on the glaring social injustices that evidently and deeply touched his heart. He had experienced deprivation himself in his childhood, when his family ranch collapsed. The Depression radicalized him, as he saw workers in desperate straits abandoned or exploited.

From 1939 to 1942 McWilliams worked in the state government’s Department of Immigration and Housing, championing immigrant farmworkers and escapees from the Dust Bowl. He raised funds to defend the accused Hispanics victimized in a notoriously corrupt murder trial in Los Angeles in 1941 (see below, p. 269) and defended Japanese-American internees during World War II. He denounced anti-Semitism and McCarthyism. César Chávez, the hero of Chicano farmworkers in the 1960s, claimed to have learned about agribusiness from him. Witch-hunters accused McWilliams of being a Communist for questioning bans on interracial marriages and suggesting that Hispanic children should be allowed to swim in Pomona’s public baths.<sup>7</sup> He wrote many influential books. One the world largely ignored, published in 1949, was *North from Mexico*, in which he developed some of Bolton’s insights and outlined a case for an alternative history of the United States, constructed along the migration routes of Mexican workers.

McWilliams failed to change public awareness of the Hispanic contribution to the making of the United States. Bolton’s legacy, meanwhile, was immeasurably more influential in universities than outside them. He is commonly said to have had more PhD students than any other historian in the history of the world. Those students spread the message and established a tradition, known as the

Borderlands school, which has contributed innumerable histories of the regions of the United States that were once part of the Spanish monarchy or the Mexican republic, and which has highlighted the broader influence of the Hispanic past of the United States. The borderlanders have succeeded in supplementing, but not displacing, the traditional myth. Even in academic circles, as we shall see, most Americans still think that Jamestown is the best starting point from which to construct the narrative of the making of the present-day United States; many even think—clearly falsely—that the first permanent European settlement in what is now US territory was English.

There is, of course, an equally mythical Hispanic version of US history, in which the Spanish empire appears as a lost civilization truncated by Anglo barbarism, while historians' vision seems hypnotized by the twirl of the caballeros' spurs, enchanted by the dark eyes of sinuous señoritas, dazzled by the flash of swordplay, and disarmed by the piety of missionaries and martyrs. Carey McWilliams was wary of the myth, challenging the mawkish romanticism and fake memories that gilded the Southwest's Spanish past.<sup>8</sup> A representative and surprisingly influential piece in a regional periodical in 1955 denounced Hispanophile mythopoeia for exaggerating the role of Spanish culture in the Southwest "from Helen Hunt Jackson and the Ramona legend to the . . . latest real estate speculation who manufactures Spanish-sounding place names."<sup>9</sup> I suspect that the Hispanic myth originated as an antidote to the Anglo myth. So in this book I concentrate fire on the latter, and hope that the former will falter in response. Of course, myths should be treasured for the art they inspire, and studied and understood for the sake of their genuine impact on real events. But they can only be fully appreciated as myths if they are distinguished from history.

THIS BOOK IS NOT a study of immigration, because Anglos' understanding of their Hispanic neighbors in the United States has often suffered from representations of the Hispanic presence as a result of immigration into a country with a culture sprung fully formed from its eastern seaboard. Hispanics belong in the entire story of the country—as part of its origins and part of every important episode in its unfolding. Of course, immigration is a big theme in what follows, because it has reshaped the Hispanic presence in the United States—as it has made all communities in the country what they are regardless of how long they have been around. "Immigrants," as Oscar Handlin, one of the greatest US historians of immigration, pointed out, "were American history." John Higham, a slightly younger and almost equally heroic historian who flourished in the 1950s, studied the equivocations of US responses to immigrants in a classic book that helps make Anglo unease about hispanophobia and immigrants today intelligible by locating it in historical context. He shared Handlin's perception, which has become US orthodoxy.<sup>10</sup> But the Hispanic United States encompasses more than migrant Hispanics preceded the United States in what is now national territory. Their presence has been a longer part of the history of the land than that of any other intruders from across the Atlantic, including Anglo-Americans.

Fears grow out of the misperception that immigration is the sole source of Hispanic influence in the United States. Fears and falsehoods gorge one another like serpents sucking their own tails. Two kinds of fear count in the current situation. First, fear of "illegals," which is mainly economic, follows the rhythms of job opportunities: there are moments, sometimes dangerously sustained, of native resentment whenever times are tough, but the fears subside as soon as people realize that immigrants shun shrinking job markets. When economies recover, illegals are welcomed again to do the jobs no one else wants. Cultural fears, secondly, are more insidious than economic ones. Anxieties about the mutability of culture play an understandable part. US unease over the erosion of familiar custom

language, manners, and ways of life is part of a global phenomenon. Even communities with a long investment in multiculturalism, in the Netherlands, for instance, and the United Kingdom, have turned against it in recent years, and politicians have won votes by promising tougher immigration law and stronger demands for immigrants to “integrate” and “assimilate,” and higher standards of cultural adjustment in citizenship tests. Revulsion from multiculturalism—which, admittedly, does not work well but which should surely be praised for working at all—has profoundly affected the United States where it was never strong and where immigrants have always been expected to plunge their distinctiveness into the “melting pot.” In 2005, with courage bordering on recklessness, Samuel Huntington—the Harvard political scientist whose animadversions on Hispanics, to which I shall return at the end of this book, aroused indignation in Europe and Latin America—voiced fears of the dilution or transmogrification of US identity by a wave of Hispanic immigrants. Whether focused on economics or culture, the fears, I want to argue, are irrational. In the chapters that follow, I argue that people in the United States can be unafraid in the face of the changes currently under way.

There are plenty of encouraging historical precedents. Just about every feature of culture that US patriots formerly overvalued or sacralized as essential has turned out to be compatible with other, new or complementary cultures that immigrants have introduced or Anglos’ predecessors bequeathed. No particular ethnic model has retained a privileged place in US identity. You can be black and be president. There is music that “sounds American,” as Glenn Miller put it, but a lot of it sounds Irish or Latino or Jewish as well. I do not think, for instance, that the pace or direction of immigration will ever attenuate the English tenor and traditions of most US law, but it is easy to imagine a future in which the United States will get its law mainly from the English strand in its history and other aspects of culture from a mixture of contributions from other communities, originating in different parts of the world.

Protestantism has long ceased to be a definingly “American” tradition. Strictly speaking, the founding fathers themselves excluded it by refusing to make an “establishment of religion,” though reactionaries fight a rearguard action on its behalf as a supposed source of such secular features of culture as individualism, capitalism, and even democracy (though as we shall see [below, p. 336] Protestantism really has little or nothing to do with any of these). Catholics have long outnumbered any Protestant church in the population. They were already the largest single denomination by the middle of the nineteenth century, growing to about 20 percent of the population by the time of World War II. About a quarter of US citizens today are Catholics. In the last four decades the Catholic population has grown by nearly 75 percent. Now there are four times as many Catholics, according to declarations made in the census, as adherents of the next biggest communion—that of the Southern Baptists. It is no longer (if it ever was) un-American to be Catholic.

The English language still has a powerful hold on minds searching for unifying principles. In the land of immigrants, most non-Spanish speakers still tell pollsters that the country must have a single language to remain united (though historical precedents suggest the opposite: most successful states, including many of the most powerful and longest enduring, for most of history, have combined political unity with bilingualism or linguistic plurality). The status of English could and probably will change. The English of the United States has already borrowed many peculiarities of its grammar and lexicon from other languages, especially Spanish and Yiddish. Spanish is already de facto the second language of the United States and de jure the second language of parts of it (although for reasons we shall encounter, I doubt whether Spanish will ever be as privileged in the United States as, say, French is in Canada). The idiom of the fictional dialogues by the acclaimed US writer of Dominican birth Junot Díaz, captures modern American hybridity. Most of the Spanish words in his macaronic lexicon

are about sex. In “Ysrael,” his first short story, published in 1995, *tigres scrawl chocha and toto on the walls and chingan the chicas*. It is as if Samuel Pepys, who chose Spanish, along with French and Latin, to conceal his diary’s dirty thoughts from his wife and servants, were reincarnated as a street urchin, and Díaz’s profanities, like Gibbon’s footnotes, were clad in the decent “obscurity of a learned language.” Yet the impression should be resisted. Spanish is not arcane or esoteric in the United States. As my Air Force Academy host came to acknowledge, it is a native language of the country with a longer history as such than English. A genuinely US identity can survive in a bilingual and multicultural future.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS book, in short, is to show that there are other US histories than the standard Anglo-American narrative: in particular, a Spanish history, rolling from south to north and intersecting with the story of the Anglo frontier, provides me with a narrative yarn, and I thread other histories across and through it. I rotate the usual picture, so that instead of looking at the making of the United States from the east, we see what it looks like from the south, with Anglo-America injected or intruded into a Hispanic accented account. The effect, I hope, is that, instead of the history of blacks, Native Americans, and later migrants becoming add-ons to an anglocentric story, they become equipollent strands in a complex fabric.

Today’s plural America looks, in these perspectives, like a product of the whole of America’s past, not a threat to traditional US identity. There was, we learn, no single frontier, no single language, no tradition, or identity, no manifest destiny, no culture that deserves to be hegemonic or that predominates or ought to predominate by virtue of US historic experience.

The very diversity of Americans’ origins helps to explain why Americans typically are so invested in symbols of unity—the language, the law, the flag, the historical myths, the “American Dream.” *pluribus unum*: the founding fathers meant the slogan to apply to a multiplicity of states, but now the multiplicity is of ethnicities and identities and tongues and colors, and the process of constructing unity continues in a cultural rather than a political sense. Ironically, the United States is now so rainbow-hued that pluralism is the most effective common value. Americans can hold together only by being at ease with their own diversity. In these circumstances, US people are bound to reconsider their history and see it as originating in numerous places. Plymouth Rock may never be submerged by the rising tide of pluralism, but it will be less prominent.

Because I frankly adopt a single perspective, I offer what follows only as an essay on the history of the United States, not a comprehensive study, with the aim of stimulating thought rather than accumulating knowledge. Part One covers the colonial era. Chapters One and Two tell the story of the first European colonies in what is now US territory east of the Rockies: Spanish establishments in Puerto Rico, Florida, and parts of what we now think of as the Southwest. In Chapter Three I turn to the English or (as they became) British establishments and their early intersections with those of Spain. Chapter Four is about early colonization in California and the ensuing showdown with Anglo-America, culminating in the Mexican War. The next two chapters make up Part Two, which deals with the decisive episodes of the nineteenth century that made the Hispanic story of the United States seem—for a while—trivial, marginal, or over: the subordination of the Hispanic population and the expansion of Anglo-America into the West. In Part Three I turn to what I call Hispanic countercolonization since the late nineteenth century and its transformative—and, I argue, salutary—effects. Each chapter is named for a myth, because myths impel history. Material conditions and exigencies shape it—bodies, biota, elements, economies—but the events they shape start in the mind.

that imagine them. In *America*, especially, the stuff of which history is made are dreams.

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PART ONE

ORIGINAL SINS



*The First Hispanic Colonization of What Is Now  
US Territory, c. 1505~1846*

## THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

*The First Colonies in What Was to Be the United States, c. 1505~1763*

America is a young country with an old mentality. It has enjoyed the advantages of a child carefully brought up and thoroughly indoctrinated; it has been a wise child. But a wise child, an old head on young shoulders, always has a comic and an unpromising side.

~George Santayana, *Winds of Doctrine* (1913)

THE FIRST EUROPEANS TO SETTLE IN WHAT IS NOW THE TERRITORY of the United States of America were three pigs and some goats.<sup>1</sup> The year was 1505. The place was Puerto Rico.

When I was teaching at Tufts University, in Massachusetts, not far from the legendary Plymouth Rock where, according to a long-standing misconception, US history is commonly supposed to have “begun,” a vacancy occurred for a professor of history in the colonial period of what is now the United States. The best postdoctoral specialists in the period applied. We had the cream of the country to choose from. I asked all the candidates the same question. It was rather a sneaky question, but not unfair in the circumstances: “Where, in what is now US territory, was the first enduring European colony, still occupied today, established?” Surely it was reasonable for a prospective or actual professor of the colonial period of the United States to know the answer. None of the young people who passed hopefully before our panel committed the folly of pointing in the direction of Plymouth Rock. “Jamestown, Virginia,” was the unthinking answer of most candidates, reflecting the assumption that English colonists forged what became the United States, and built it from east to west. Others, more aware of the possibility of a trap, said, “It must be somewhere in Florida, or maybe the Southwest,” and nominated San Agustín, Florida, or Santa Fe, New Mexico. These answers, though not strictly correct, were sensible. Europeans have been in continuous occupation at San Agustín since Spaniards fought Frenchmen for it in 1567. Santa Fe and El Paso were in Spanish hands from 1598—decade before the colonization of Jamestown began—though Santa Fe was briefly evacuated during seventeenth-century Indian revolt. The correct answer to the question about the location of the first permanent European colony in what is now US territory is, however, Puerto Rico, founded over a hundred years before Jamestown.

Yet nobody thinks of Puerto Rico as the place where US history began, partly because the island did not become US territory until 1902, when the republic had been in existence for fully a century and a quarter, if one counts from the Declaration of Independence, and the country already had a character and constitution to which Puerto Ricans had made no contribution. Obviously these are valid scruples. They account for why, in one of Stephen Sondheim’s versions of his lyrics for *West Side Story*, he wrote that “nobody” in the United States knows that Puerto Rico is “in America.”<sup>2</sup>

But in part, Americans—including Puerto Ricans, sometimes—ignore or deliberately exclude Puerto Rico because of prejudice: prejudice that the United States is a country made by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, constructed by anglophone colonists, where concepts of liberty and law are defined by traditions that originated in England; where the English language is the basis of whatever cultural unity can be contrived among all the ethnicities that make up the population; and where you become “American”—or, more accurately, where you qualify to be a citizen of the United States—by subscribing to a canonical version of the history of the country that begins among English colonists on the east coast of the continent.

None of those prejudices is unquestionable. All are founded on shaky historical assumptions. No country has an unchanging essence. No community has an unchanging identity. What it means to be English or Chinese or Spanish or Indonesian or American changes all the time. There was never a time when most Americans, or most people in what is now the United States, were white English Protestants. The making of the country has been a collective effort—sometimes collaborative, sometimes conflictive—of all the ethnic and religious minorities who inhabit it. Native American “Indians” have been contributing for longer than Anglos. By the end of the colonial period, in much of the rural south, blacks counted for more in terms of numbers and perhaps effort than white English people. Over 40 percent of the population of Georgia and the Carolinas were black when the Declaration of Independence was signed. Without the input of other communities of European origin, the United States today would be unrecognizable. Without the migrants who have joined from Asia, especially in recent times, the future character and dynamic of the history of the United States would be very different and, probably, less successful in conventional terms—in terms, that is, of wealth and power—than it would otherwise be. I can imagine a US history textbook of the not-too-far-distant future beginning not with the arrival of Puritans in Massachusetts, or with English adventurers at Jamestown, or even with French and Spanish contenders in Florida, or conquistadores at El Paso or New Mexico, but with three pigs and some goats in Puerto Rico. What might such a rewriting of the country’s past look like?

COLUMBUS CALLED THE ISLAND San Juan Bautista, in honor of the patron saint of the heir to the Spanish throne at the time. “Boriquen” was the nearest he could get to the way the natives said the name of the place where he landed in November 1493. The assonance with the Spanish word for rich, *rico*, turned out to be fortuitous: the island had gold.<sup>3</sup> So San Juan de Puerto Rico was a suitable designation and eventually, after the relocation of the main city on Puerto Rico Bay in 1521, Puerto Rico became the island’s enduring name.

Columbus was searching for what he could recognize as civilization—somewhere he could engage in sophisticated, potentially profitable trade and, if possible, find evidence of the supposed proximity of the rich, advanced lands of east Asia, such as China or India—some proof that he had delivered on his promise to his backers to open a new route to the Indies. It was disappointing to him to find that the buildings were all of straw and wood, but comforting to be able to assert that they were cunningly and solidly constructed. They were also empty, even the tall beach house that Columbus supposed belonged to the local ruler as a sort of pleasure resort, although it was presumably, at least in part, a watchtower. The fleet’s physician guessed why the natives fled at the Spaniards’ approach. They lived in fear of cannibal raiders from neighboring communities or nearby islands. The encounter between native and newcomer began in misunderstanding and suspicion. Each suspected the other of cannibalism. As far as the prospects for colonization in Puerto Rico were concerned, the native

behavior seemed auspicious. Their timidity was a short-term source of annoyance, as it meant that first the Spaniards could not get at them. In the long term, however, it suggested that they would be easily cowed, bloodlessly conquered, handily domesticated, and profitably exploited.

Other Spaniards did not share the discoverer's distress at the apparent inaccessibility of China. On the contrary, the failure of Columbus to deliver on the terms of his contracts with his financial backers and with the monarchs who legitimized his enterprise meant the lapse of his rights to the exclusive exploitation of his discoveries. From 1498 the routes he had pioneered were flung open to interlopers. Puerto Rico, an easily conquerable island with plenty of native gold, was ideally equipped to excite cupidity in Spain. The environment, though tropical and unfamiliar to Spaniards, had congenial aspects, demonstrated by the profusion of fruit trees—"like those of Valencia," Columbus said in a transparently promotional choice of language. One of the opportunists who sailed in Columbus's wake was his former partner, Vicente Yáñez Pinzón, who obtained a patent from the king and queen as governor-designate of the island, with the right to conquer it. His ambitions bedeviled and delayed settlement, because Columbus's heirs disputed his claims. On August 8, 1505, however, he took the first step toward founding a colony. He released those pioneering pigs and goats.<sup>4</sup> It was the usual procedure for preparing new islands for settlement. The plan was that the animals' progeny would multiply and provide food for the colonists who would arrive in a year or two. But the lawsuits began, and the colonists did not come.

After nearly three years of haggling, with the rivals' claims still unresolved, a way forward emerged. Juan Ponce de León, a Castilian gentleman of obscure origins, had made a favorable impression as governor of the town and province of Higüey in Hispaniola, the first island Spaniards subjugated and settled in the New World. The governor of Hispaniola chose him to make a preliminary incursion into San Juan, with temporary authority to gather gold and find a site for a colony. The expedition sailed on July 21, 1508, with forty-two men, including a ship's crew only eight strong: not enough manpower to hold a whole island in subjection or establish a settlement, though the ship's carpenter would be able, if the opportunity arose, to supervise the building of a stockade on land. Juan Ponce's search for a habitable site was unsuccessful, but he did gather significant samples of gold—according to his accounts, more than 800 pesos (in modern terms, of a little over 450 grams or about a pound each). Flushed with gold and optimism, he went to Hispaniola in 1509 to bid for a contract with the crown to rule the island himself.

Three circumstances delayed the resumption of his efforts. First, the Columbus family still had an outstanding claim, though that of Vicente Yáñez de Pinzón had lapsed. Second, the pigs and goats had failed to deliver their potential: there were insufficient food sources—at least, insufficient for Spaniards' tastes and appetites—on the island. Finally, during Juan Ponce's spell in charge of the island, the crown would not authorize the exploitation of indigenous labor. The last problem was a frequent source of grief to conquistadores and investors in many parts of early America. Without pliable labor, no colony could succeed. But the Spanish monarchs regarded the natives of the New World as their subjects, whom it was their duty to protect, and potential converts, whom they had to encourage to Christianity and treat with charity. Colonial entrepreneurs had to find a way around the monarchs' scruples—ignoring them in some cases or, in others, supplementing or supplanting native labor with imported slaves.

Apart from importing labor, two strategies were available. First, indios could be classed as subjects to enslavement, either as captives in morally justifiable warfare—waged, for instance, in defense against aggression or to recover usurped property—or as infringers of natural law by virtue of cannibalism, human sacrifice, supposed sexual perversions, or rebellion "against their natural lords

Alternatively, by means of a legal device known as *encomienda*, which the crown authorized in Hispaniola in 1503, the more or less informal arrangements by which natives contracted to serve Spaniards could, in effect, be imposed by gubernatorial decree.<sup>5</sup> Most governors did not wait for royal authorization to divide native labor services among their followers. In Juan Ponce's case, however, compliance with royal policy was essential: he needed royal patronage to secure his rights against competitors.<sup>6</sup> Juan Ponce returned to his island without formal rights as governor, but with the governor's effective authority for the time being to distribute land and exploit mining rights. His freedom to exploit the natives remained highly circumscribed. He could buy provisions from them, for a fair recompense, only if they had a ready surplus and "not against their will."<sup>7</sup> He doubted whether he would be able to honor his obligation to protect the natives from depredations: there were Spaniards on Hispaniola keen to enslave them, and natives on other islands anxious to eat them. To protect his followers, Juan Ponce tried to have canoes on neighboring islands destroyed, but the governor of Hispaniola refused to cooperate in so radical a measure. The terms on which Juan Ponce was authorized for mining, moreover, were hardly generous. After the deduction of the usual royal tax of one-fifth of all proceeds, he had to split the remaining profit fifty-fifty with the crown. This left insufficient funds, he claimed, to cover the costs of employing men and dogs, providing their rations of salted pork and fish, wheaten bread, oil, and vinegar, almost all of which had to be imported.

Still, to a remarkable extent, Juan Ponce's colony overcame the disadvantages that afflicted it. He found, at first, that the natives, or some of them at least, were remarkably cooperative. This is one of the unremarked paradoxes of Spanish conquest in the New World. In many places, it was not really conquest at all, but a negotiated process in which native communities, for reasons of their own, admitted Spaniards to privileged and sometimes ruling positions. To understand why and how such a surprising turn of events was possible, we have to make a brief excursion into what one might call the anthropology of conquest.

TWO ASSUMPTIONS HAVE WARPED previous accounts of the establishment of Spanish rule in the Americas: first, that conquests are necessarily violent and conflictive episodes. "War," as Thomas Hardy said, "makes rattling good history, but peace is poor reading." Therefore, our history books have concentrated on the blood and guts of the subject—the massacres, the atrocities, the pitched battles, the protracted sieges. And of course all these things happened frequently and ferociously in the New World when Europeans intruded. But for every serious passage of arms there were scores, perhaps hundreds, of cases in which natives came to an accommodation with the newcomers after little or no bloodshed. In Mexico, for instance, our traditional accounts are full of the sanguinary horrors of the fall of Cholula, where Hernán Cortés, by his own account, authorized the massacre of thousands of townspeople, or of Tenochtitlan, which he razed to the ground, or of the conquest of Michoacán, where the conquistador Nuño de Guzmán committed so many cruelties, according to the chief chronicler of the events, "that he was the principle cause of the aversion of the natives to the yoke of the gospel."<sup>8</sup> But the conquistadores did not have to fight for the allegiance or alliance of literally hundreds of cities or towns, formerly tributaries of the Aztecs.

The conquistadores themselves, or the priests who wrote their own explanations of what happened, tended to attribute successes to a miracle of Providence, or to Spanish prowess, or to technical or moral superiority. Some ascribed their success to the folly, superstition, or fatalism of the natives, who, undermined by prophecies of their own doom, supposedly resigned themselves to the rule of beings they mistook for gods. In reality, however, none of these explanations had much merit. The

workings of Providence lie beyond a historian's brief and beyond the reach of evidence. In battle, the technical advantages Europeans enjoyed in the Americas did not last long. Their adversaries readily acquired and adapted to horses, which were not, in any case, suited to most of the terrains Spaniards conquered. The available guns were slow, inaccurate matchlocks reliant on supplies of volatile powder and scarce shot, of little or no use except for purposes of display in most of the environments in which conquistadores labored. Moreover, Spanish armor was generally an encumbrance in the New World, quickly discarded. Steel swords and bolts were deadlier than most natives' weapons, but insufficient for victory against the sort of odds conquistadores commonly faced. Spaniards enjoyed a huge advantage in nautical technology, but, after getting them to the New World in the first place, it played little part in warfare, except in relatively rare instances of lake and river wars. Nor, of the celebrated trinity of guns, germs, and steel, did germs make a decisive difference in most conquests, since almost everywhere Spaniards relied absolutely on native allies to do most of the fighting. The ravages of the new diseases from Europe, to which natives of the Americas were unimmunized, affected the allies as much as or, since they were in close contact with the sources of infection, more than the enemy.<sup>9</sup>

Natives did not usually mistake the newcomers for gods and, if they did, were quickly disabused by the all-too-human behavior the intruders evinced. Conquistadores were not, on the whole, superior to any other class of persons, including natives, except perhaps in their own estimation. Stories of their exceptional heroism and valor derive mainly from their own accounts, which they wrote, typically, in an attempt to secure rewards from the crown for their services in the conquest and which, therefore, project an exaggerated and often incredible image of their authors' merits. In Puerto Rico, a tradition that began with Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, the chief chronicler of Spaniards' observations on ethnography and natural history in the early years of the conquest, asserted that the natives regarded the Spaniards as "children of the sun," immortal and invulnerable, until they tried an experiment. They offered to carry a Spaniard over a river, pitching him in and holding him under until he died. Mortality was beyond doubt. In case of divine trickery, they repeatedly checked up on the corpses "until he smelled bad."<sup>10</sup> Such tales of awestruck natives and divinized Spaniards come from the accounts of conquistadores, who were themselves trying to understand the strangely favorable way in which many indigenous people responded to them. Conquistador literary output, moreover, was under the influence of delusive literary models: the lives of saints and the fiction of romantic chivalry, both of which realism played little part. The deeds of the conquistadores in their own works, and in the historical tradition that derives from them, resemble those of modern comic-strip heroes endowed with special powers.

The conquests of what became Spanish territory in what is now the United States engendered many such stories. In Puerto Rico, the most egregious tale was of the conquistador Diego de Salazar, whose most famous escapade might have been written by Hollywood screenwriters, though its real source prior to its appearance in the chronicle of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, was almost certainly Salazar's own *probanza de méritos*—his account of his services for presentation to the king in solicitation of rewards. If the document were believable, we should have to acknowledge that he crept unseen into the heart of a hostile village to rescue a woefully disheartened captive conquistador. While the natives were feasting in preparation for the ritual sacrifice of their prey, whom in obedience to their custom they proposed to torture to death in agony prolonged for the pleasure of gods and spirits, Salazar released his comrade. Single-handed, he led him out of the midst of the foe, fighting off three hundred enemy warriors, fatally wounding their chief, and escaping, bloodied but unbowed. As if this feat were insufficient, he returned to the enemy camp in answer to a summons from the moribund chief. His companion begged him on bended knees to refuse the request, but Diego

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