HISTORY

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR

OUR AMERICA

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FELIPE FERNÁNDEZ-ARMESTO

OUR AMERICA

A HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

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INTRODUCTION

"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 keyboard—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 their bibles to hand when they asked me questions. They clearly wanted the world to be a lot simpler than it really is. Generally, however, I thought the academy was an exemplary place of education and that it 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 Hispanics' 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, a "demographic" becomes "the vote" whenever voters in a particular age group or ethnicity or phratry

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 Republicans' 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.[1] "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 intra-party fistfight about how we become electable again."[2] 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 of 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 their 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 a 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 to 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 Herbert Howe Bancroft, a Californian businessman who devoted his retirement and fortune to collecting documents, commissioning professional researchers, and publishing regional histories, bringing into a 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 aver-

sion 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."[3] 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 on 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 historical background as New England is Puritan, as New York is Dutch, or as New Orleans is French."[4] 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.[5] 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.[6]

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 1942 (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 Commu-

nist for questioning bans on interracial marriages and suggesting that Hispanic children should be allowed to swim in Pomona's public baths.[7] 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 a 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 era 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.[8] 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 speculator who manufactures

Spanish-sounding place names."[9] 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 hispanophone immigrants today intelligible by locating it in historical context. He shared Handlin's perception, which has become US orthodoxy.[10] But the Hispanic United States encompasses more than migrants. 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 nativist 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 customs, 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 laws, 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 this 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 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, or 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." *E 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 minds that imagine them. In America, especially, the stuff of which history is made are dreams.