

Book Review: Our America: A Hispanic History of the United States by Felipe Fernández-Armesto

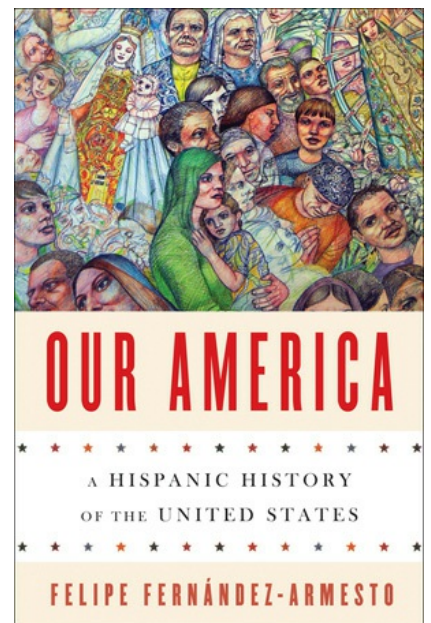
*The United States is still often thought of as an offshoot of England, with its history unfolding east to west beginning with the first English settlers in Jamestown. But what about the significance of America's Hispanic past? **Our America: A Hispanic History of the United States** is Felipe Fernández-Armesto's book on the Hispanic past and future of the U.S., taking in the explorers and conquistadores who planted Spain's first colonies in Puerto Rico, through to the the Hispanic heartlands in major cities such as Chicago, Miami, New York, and Boston. A wonderful and indispensable read for students of American history and culture, writes **Zalfa Feghali**.*



Our America: A Hispanic History of the United States. Felipe Fernández-Armesto. W.W. Norton & Company. February 2014.

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My lasting impression of [Felipe Fernández-Armesto's](#) *Our America: A Hispanic History of the United States* is its unflinching optimism. Alongside its optimism, this book is realistic, interesting, and scholarly, while still being utterly readable. Fernández-Armesto's Hispanic narrative of the US is more than a revisionist project; it is not "just" a recalibration of United States history premised on the foregrounding of a "minority" group. Instead, this project zooms out, as it were, to view the history and future of the United States using a wider, hemispheric frame, based on the premise 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" (xvii).



If the author's aim in *Our America* – a title evocative of, among the many other works that inform the book, José Martí's famous essay "[Nuestra America](#)" (1891) – is to remind us that "Hispanics belong in the entire story of the country – as part of its origins and part of every important episode in its unfolding", then he certainly succeeds. While his shouldn't be a radical assertion – because Fernández-Armesto is right – it is. Since, as he puts it, "citizens of the United States have always learned the history of their country as if it unfolded exclusively from east to west", the history of the US is all too often understood as "essentially – even necessarily – Anglophone, with a culture heavily indebted to the heritage of radical Protestantism and English laws and values" (xx). This tendency is not exclusive to the US; the same history is most often taught similarly in the UK and elsewhere.



That said, Fernández-Armesto does not claim to offer an exhaustive history of the US from a Hispanic perspective, but "an essay on the history of the United States...with the aim of stimulating thought rather than accumulating knowledge" (xxix). The book is divided into three parts, with nine chapters covering the colonial era, the nineteenth century, and what Fernández-Armesto calls "Hispanic countercolonization" since the 19th century.

The first chapter sets the tone of the study by asking a simple question: "Where is US history commonly supposed to have begun?" The answer, which Fernández-Armesto provides before the question, is of course, Puerto Rico (though a [Google search](#) provides hilariously vague and misleading results to this question). The fact that this question is so "difficult" to answer makes its own point; that even when faced with "facts", history has opted to overlook the fact that the first Europeans that settled in what is now the United States settled in Puerto Rico. There are various "justifications" for this, notes the author, but none account for the fact that Americans "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” (and so on), and where in order to qualify as an American citizen you must subscribe “to a canonical version of the history of the country that begins among English colonists on the east coast of the continent” (p.5).



Mi Orgullo or My Pride: images captured during the 2010 and 2013 Puerto Rican/Hispanic Day Parade in Bayshore, New York. Credit: [SonnyVisions Photography](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

Of course all of these are now commonly held positions in the study of US history (though perhaps it is not worth going so far as to say they are universally accepted). This gentle but incredibly effective beginning sets up the rest of Fernández-Armesto’s book, as he considers histories that run in parallel to and silently (from the perspective of mainstream historical perspectives) but significantly inform the Anglo-American narrative of the United States: the rise and fall of Spanish Florida, the Spanish colonization of what we now know as the South- and Mid-west, and Spain’s role in the Revolutionary War. Each of these narratives, he argues, are informed by myths, including those of the Fountain of Youth, Queen Calafia, King Arthur, and later, Aztlan, the mythical homeland of the Chicanos. As the author notes: “myths inspired people to explore and settle what has become the United States” (p.355).

The final chapter considers “the most pervasive myth of all – the American Dream of prosperity and independence in a land of opportunity unrestricted by barriers of class and creed (albeit not entirely by those of race)” (p.355). It is this final comment that may well be just a touch too optimistic – surely the US has not overcome issues of class and creed? And certainly the issue of race in the US deserves far more than a sidelined parenthetical comment. But despite this, the author’s points still stand: if the people of the US recognize the US as “a country with a Hispanic past as well as a Hispanic future” (p.352), there is little to lose. As Fernández-Armesto puts it: “The United States does not need to be an Anglo redoubt in order to remain itself” (p.353).

This book’s great strength is its optimism grounded in robust, rigorous scholarly enquiry and lyrical, poetic, and engaging prose. It will be (and has already been) well received by the wide range of audiences it effectively caters to. In last few years there has been burgeoning interest in North American Latinidad in the UK, and more recently, the emergence of groups such as [The Salsa Collective](#) and the [Radical Americas](#) research network, among many others, attests to this. Given my own interests in hemispheric American studies, I find this book to be indispensable.

Zalfa Feghali is Lecturer in Modern American Literature at Canterbury Christ Church University. Her previous research focused on the relationship between contemporary American and Canadian poetry, citizenship, and civic

acts of reading and her current project traces a literary history of North American citizenship. She is an avid ukulele player and can be followed on twitter [@zalface](#). [Read more reviews by Zalfa](#).

Five minutes with Felipe Fernandez-Armesto: “Hispanic America is resuming its history after what has been an interval of white, Anglo-Saxon supremacy”



Many have credited President Obama’s election 2012 election victory with his capturing of the vast majority of the Hispanic vote. But do America’s changing demographics mark an entirely new trend, or simply the return of its own Spanish history? Chris Gilson, editor of our sister blog on American politics, talks to Felipe Fernandez-Armesto about his new book, *Our America: A Hispanic history of the United States*, which argues that after two centuries of relative Anglo-Saxon dominance, the U.S. is beginning a return towards being a more typical Hispanic-American country. He says by acknowledging its Hispanic parts and history, Americans will be better able to adjust to having a more equal relationship with their Latin American neighbors. [Read the full interview on the LSE USApp blog](#).

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