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Changing National Identities at the Frontier: Texas and New Mexico, 1800-1850

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‘Poor New Mexico! So far from heaven, so close to Texas!’ It is just as well that this famous lament of Manuel Armijo, the last Mexican governor of the territory of Nuevo México, is not quoted in *Changing National Identities at the Frontier*, for the author, Andrés Reséndez, shows that there are enormous benefits to be derived from bringing New Mexico and Texas close together in this sustained comparative scrutiny – one that should interest scholars across a variety of fields and disciplines.

Texas and New Mexico were two starkly different lands that nevertheless shared a common fate in the first half of the nineteenth century. Once jealously guarded northern outposts of the Spanish empire in the Americas, both had fallen into the hands of the United States within a quarter century of Mexico’s independence from Spain. Yet Reséndez warns that this should not be interpreted as a ‘simple-minded’ story of ‘American expansionism’ and ‘Manifest Destiny’ (pp. 5-6). He insists instead that there is much to be learned by examining the complex and lengthy processes of ‘changing identities’ that took place as Mexico’s Far North became the American Southwest.

This book is as much about boundaries as about identities, but Reséndez is not interested merely in the lines of demarcation fixed by international treaties. By closely examining the words and deeds of the denizens of

Texas and New Mexico, the author traces the development of other kinds of boundaries that were formed as people, ideas, and articles of trade slipped past the official borders to create new, varied, and quite incongruent boundaries: of cultural and linguistic ascendancy, of commercial relations and economic influence, of literary discourse and national imagination, of religious persuasion and church authority, and of course, the raw power of physical control.

It is because these multiple boundaries were almost *never* congruent on the American-Mexican frontier that the identities shaped by them were, in the words of the author, both "multiple" and "fluid." He admits that early on in his research he had to abandon the assumption that

. . . deep within us, somewhere in the reptilian portions of our brains, we all belong to one group or another, however reluctant to take a public stance we may be (p. 3).

Reséndez found instead that

. . . identity choices almost always follow a situational logic. A person was not a mission Indian or a Mexican, a black slave in Mexico or an American, a foreign-born colonist or a Texan, but could be either depending on who was asking (p. 3).

Moreover, because "the state" and "the market" – the two most powerful forces creating the shifting boundaries of the frontier – were usually "out of sync" (p. 8) with each other and pulling in opposite directions, the "identity choices" (p. 5) faced by the people of both Texas and New Mexico could be agonising. The tension so pointedly felt by the *tejanos* of San Antonio "between their origins, traditions, and culture on the one hand, and the preservation of their interests on the other" (p. 170) following the separation of Texas from Mexico (by means of a revolution which they had largely supported) was only an extreme case of the stresses experienced and the dilemmas faced across the whole extent of Mexico's Far North between 1800 and 1850.

A fundamental point emphasised by Reséndez is that the citizens of Mexico's northern frontier more often found themselves at odds with their own national government than with foreigners – and in this part of the world, the term "foreigner" usually referred to people from the United States. These foreigners came in many guises: fur trappers, colonists, merchants, doctors, land speculators, slave owners, lawyers, unruly filibusterers, and only in the last extremity, uniformed soldiers. And in *all* of these cases – even the last – the newcomers were welcomed by Mexican frontiersmen with far more enthusiasm than they were received by the representatives of Mexico's central government.

The foreigners and their influence brought both wealth and risk, and their arrival inevitably found Mexicans of the Far North both divided amongst themselves and conflicted as individuals as to how they should respond. But to most of the *norteños*, the promises of greater prosperity and the added capacity to repel dangerous Indian enemies were far more tangible than any potential threat to the integrity of the Mexican nation.

Mexico became independent from Spain in 1821, after a bloody and debilitating eleven-year struggle, followed by internal upheavals which left the economy in shreds. Indeed, the economies of Mexico and the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century, notes Reséndez, "were as different as night and day" (p. 93). The disparity is stunning. While the United States saw an expansion in population from 5 million to 32 million between 1800 and 1860 and more than a twelve-fold rise in national income, Mexico's income actually declined by 10.5 percent while its population "hovered around 6 million" (p. 93).

When independent Mexico dropped imperial Spain's rigid barriers to foreign trade and immigration, however, both the populations and the economies of Texas and New Mexico began to rise dramatically. "In

the span of a few years," writes Reséndez, "the frontier made the transition from economic backwater to dynamic crossroad of exchange" (pp. 475). Yet it was a Faustian bargain. Texas had seceded from Mexico by 1836, and by the time that war broke out between Mexico and the United States a decade later, New Mexico was far more integrated into the economy of the United States than it was with the rest of Mexico. 70 percent of government revenues in New Mexico in 1846 came from import duties on goods brought in along the Santa Fe Trail from Missouri. There was a corresponding reluctance among influential *nuevomexicanos* to resist forcibly the military invasion from the United States when it finally came. In the words of the author, "the Americanization of New Mexico had been a long time in the making" (p. 248).

The Mexican government had seen the trouble brewing, but could do little to stop it. An official Boundary Commission sent to the north-eastern frontier of Texas under General Manuel de Mier y Terán in 1828 found the international border being blissfully ignored by people on both sides of a line that was quite literally imaginary. Settlers from the United States, whether or not they had conformed to the laws governing immigration to Mexico, were welcomed by state and local officials in Texas (which was a part of the joint Mexican state of Coahuila y Tejas), even as the newcomers retained ties to the commercial centers (and sometimes even used the courts) of American Louisiana. Mier y Terán, one of the most competent and respected officers in the Mexican army, became so despondent over his country's prospects of holding on to Texas despite his best efforts to rectify the situation that he committed suicide in 1832. The loss of New Mexico seemed neither as imminent nor as inevitable, but there, too, Reséndez finds that the inhabitants were "quite oblivious to national boundaries" (p. 29) in the 1820s and early 30s as they welcomed the arrival of merchants from the United States and eagerly formed both business and familial alliances with Americans.

It was the Native Americans of the Far North who were easily the most oblivious to the boundary lines drawn in Washington or Mexico City. Reséndez describes an "expanding Indian world" (p. 45) in the borderlands, where Comanches, Kiowas, and other Indian groups benefitted from both trading and raiding to become the most formidable military presence on the frontier. With horsemanship superior to the Americans and weapons superior to the Mexicans, it was only the Plains Indians who could travel freely from San Antonio to Santa Fe, and only they who could successfully enforce their claimed territorial boundaries!

Given the weaknesses of the fledgling Mexican nation-state in the face of these challenges from the *indios* and the *norteamericanos*, how could stronger links between the Far North and the rest of the country be forged? In his second chapter, Reséndez skillfully compares the contrasting networks of patronage and power that emerged in Texas and New Mexico. In Texas, which became something of an "experiment in liberalism" (p. 73) for Mexico, alliances between American investors and Mexican national officials (who often mingled in the new Masonic lodges being founded in Mexico) created "vast networks of landed interests" (p. 71) from the *baldíos* (vacant lands) of Texas. In New Mexico, however, the strongest network binding nation to frontier was the "priestly web" (p. 74) of the Catholic hierarchy, which served to represent Mexican national interests virtually in lieu of the state. Needless to say, this was a network far less open to or favourable toward the foreigners coming from the United States.

The Mexican government itself, chronically short of resources, had to rely for the most part on ritual and display "patriotic pageants, proclamations, and processions" to impress a new national identity on its citizens in the Far North, but Reséndez is careful not to leave the impression that he agrees with scholars who have portrayed Mexican national power as being in a hopeless state of decline in the years following independence. On the contrary, he argues, the Mexican state was beginning to flex its muscles by the 1830s, attempting to put limits on American immigration and to rein in what had become almost shameless land giveaways by self-interested regional politicians.

However, the very process of centralisation created opposition in both Texas and New Mexico, as residents in both areas resisted reforms which threatened their "entrenched business interests" (p. 123). Profits flowing in from the United States, says Reséndez, overwhelmed the nationalising efforts coming from below the Río Grande. His third chapter, "The Spirit of Mercantile Enterprise," shows (with impressive archival documentation) the extent to which Texas and New Mexico were pulled into the American economic orbit. The author follows, for instance, the cultural choices made by frontiersmen as they became dependent on the

United States for both medicines and alcoholic beverages that were in short supply in Mexico.

There was also an inescapable economic dimension to the mixed marriages that became common across the borderlands between American husbands in search of citizenship, land acquisitions, and business alliances (in addition to female companionship) and the Mexican wives whose families coveted commercial and legal connections with the United States. However, as Reséndez demonstrates in his fourth chapter, these marriages became increasingly less common in New Mexico in the late 1830s, where fear of national loss of territory made the Catholic prelates who served as the gatekeepers to the Roman ritual more reluctant to sanction such marriages. This was in stark contrast to Texas, where the only priest assigned to serve the growing Anglo majority was an easygoing Irishman named Michael Muldoon, and where all church officials were far more accommodating to those who chose partners across the ethnic divide. In chapter four, as with the contrasting networks of patronage described in his second chapter, Reséndez shows how the pervasive tug-of-war between the countervailing powers of market and state played out in different ways in the two distinct frontier societies of New Mexico and Texas.

A similar theme is developed through the fifth and sixth chapters of *Changing Identities at the Frontier*. Here Reséndez compares revolts against the Mexican national government that occurred in Texas and New Mexico in the 1830s. The outcomes were vastly different, despite the fact that both began as responses to centralising moves from Mexico City. It is fascinating to review the all-too-familiar story of the Texas Revolution from the sophisticated and revelatory perspective that the author brings to this event. Ironies abound in the description of an 1834 inspection tour carried out by Colonels Juan Almonte and José Noriega in Texas and Coahuila respectively. While Almonte found the supposedly restive Anglo-American colonists in Texas "thriving . . . and content" (p. 151), Noriega found Coahuila (where, unlike Texas, there was an overwhelming Hispanic majority) already in the throes of a revolution led by Mexican "Federalist" politicians who were striving to rouse the quiescent Anglos of Texas to help protect lucrative "states' rights" (such as control over land, trade, and immigration) from interference by "Centralist" rulers from Mexico City.

The problem was that the Anglo colonists, who by 1835 accounted for nine-tenths of the population of Texas, had almost as much as disdain for the Federalists (whom they suspected of corruption) as for the Centralists (whom they viewed as tyrannical). When in 1835 the Federalist Governor Agustín Viesca fled to Texas from Coahuila to escape capture by the forces of Centralist President Antonio López de Santa Anna, the Texans refused to recognise Viesca's authority over them, though they were ready to fight against Centralist troops sent by Santa Anna. Reséndez argues that three groups then vied to fill the power vacuum in Texas: the Anglo colonists, exiled Mexican Federalists of national stature, and the *tejanos*.

It is at this point in his analysis that Reséndez fails to see the power of the market transforming itself into the power of the state. He underestimates the importance of American commercial interests in New Orleans in sending men, weapons, and supplies to the incipient "Federalist" revolt in Texas, as well as the importance of American influence in turning the Texans' participation in a Mexican civil war into a fight for full political independence. Reséndez did not have the opportunity to incorporate into his narrative the important new work by Edward L. Miller, *New Orleans and the Texas Revolution*.⁽¹⁾

Reséndez also fails to take into account the degree to which the revolutionary Texan leader Sam Houston was a conscious agent of the United States, working (as he had promised President Jackson shortly after leaving the United States for Mexican Texas in 1832) to see that Jackson's goal of annexing Texas would come to fruition. Reséndez is correct, however, in noting that the "multi-ethnic" coalition which fought the successful revolution in Texas largely survived the turn to independence, with several *tejanos* (and even the prominent former Federalist from Yucatán, Lorenzo de Zavala) participating in the government of the new Republic of Texas.

It was a very different coalition which rose up against the national government in New Mexico in 1837, although the rebels, like those of Coahuila y Tejas, sought to avoid the burdens and restrictions of living under a Centralist regime. The Chimayó Rebellion, as it became known, began like the revolt in Texas as a

defense of the old Federalist Mexican Constitution of 1824. The rebels were angry over the loss of local autonomy and the imposition of direct national taxation imposed by the Centralists. Significantly, they also objected to the new religious centralisation and discipline brought about by an invigorated Mexican Catholic hierarchy, and to the imposition of an onerous (and frequently deadly) duty of compulsory military service against the Mexican government's many Indian adversaries.

The irony here, and a signal difference between the Chimayó Rebellion and the Texas Revolution, is that a large number of the rebels were 'Indians' themselves – the Pueblos and other sedentary Native American groups in New Mexico who were the main targets of new requirements for both religious orthodoxy and military duty. The presence of these 'domestic' Indians in the Chimayó Rebellion helps to explain the powerful counter-revolution in New Mexico led by Manuel Armijo, who was rewarded for his successful crushing of the revolt by his ascent to the office of Territorial Governor, which he held until the American soldiers arrived at his door in 1846. Reséndez makes the obvious point that fears of a racial 'caste war' among Hispanic *nuevomexicanos* led to the successful smothering of the revolt, but I believe that the author, as in his missed opportunities in the fifth chapter, fails to acknowledge that critically important material aid from the United States helped the Texan rebels to succeed, while the Chimayó insurrectionists, without such outside support, failed.

The last two chapters of *Changing Identities at the Frontier* (not unlike the first six) are models of brilliantly conceived, assiduously researched, and gracefully written scholarship. The seventh chapter explores a familiar and obvious topic, the military-commercial expedition launched toward New Mexico by the Republic of Texas in 1841. Reséndez explodes traditional approaches to this subject by exploring the reaction to the Texan Santa Fe Expedition by the starkly disparate literary cultures of the Americans and Anglo-Texans (who are virtually indistinguishable by this point), the Mexicans (whose newspapers were essentially politicians' mouthpieces), and the Indians (through the medium of the remarkable Kiowa 'Winter Calendars' – pictographic records of events painted on animal hides).

The last chapter compares the relatively peaceful American military conquest of New Mexico in 1846 (Governor Armijo met with the Americans, protested their arrival, but retreated without a fight) with the anti-American revolts which broke out in New Mexico in 1847. Showing (as one might expect by now) that this was not a simple turn from a pro-American stance by *nuevomexicanos* to the opposite position, Reséndez demonstrates how *both* events revealed the fissures and fractures in New Mexican society, revealing the enduring relevance of the old Federalist/Centralist divisions as well as the lasting power of the institutions of the army and the church – institutions which had so often acted on Mexico's behalf in lieu of a fully functional national state on the northern frontier, and which still showed life even when their connection to the Mexican nation-state had been severed by the American conquest.

Andrés Reséndez, equally at home himself on both sides of the border, has accomplished a remarkable feat, taking us further than any historical writer yet into the minds of the diverse characters who inhabited Mexico's turbulent northern borderlands in the early nineteenth century. The 'risky eclecticism' (p. 10) which he has employed in this task has paid off richly – but then there's nothing like hard work and clear thinking to reduce the risks inevitably incurred in path-breaking scholarship.

Notes

1. Edward L. Miller, *New Orleans and the Texas Revolution* (College Station, Texas, 2004).[Back to \(1\)](#)

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