The Other Side: Fifteen Mexicans and an American

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Abstract
Manifest Destiny provided the rationale for American violence, manipulation, and greed during the Mexican-American War. This paper argues that Albert C. Ramsey’s *The Other Side: or Notes for the History of the War Between Mexico and the U.S.,* a translation of a Mexican account of the war, *Apuntes para la Historia de la Guerra entre México y los Estados-Unidos,* attributed to Ramón Alcaraz, depicts the Mexican perspective on the war to counter the misrepresentations of Mexico by his American peers. Using the critical lens of postcolonial theory, my research method consists of a close reading and comparative analysis of the primary cartographic sources and portraits of historical figures in the English text and the equivalent illustrations from the Spanish text. It concludes that, through the translation of the historical narrative composed by fifteen contributing Mexican authors, the use of the same primary cartographic sources, and the exclusion of the American portraits, Ramsey’s version reveals a conscious effort to illustrate the Mexican perspective.

Keywords
Manifest Destiny — Texas — Mexico — Mexican-American War

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Introduction

The pursuit of Manifest Destiny during the Mexican-American War provided the rationalization for violence, manipulation, and greed that America utilized to gain Mexican territory. This paper argues that Albert C. Ramsey’s *The Other Side: or Notes for the History of the War Between Mexico and the U.S.,* a translation of a Mexican account of the war, *Apuntes para la Historia de la Guerra entre México y los Estados-Unidos,* attributed to Ramón Alcaraz, depicts the Mexican perspective on the war to counter the misrepresentations of Mexico by his American peers. Using the critical lens of postcolonial theory, my research method performs a close reading and comparative analysis of the primary cartographic sources and portraits of historical figures in the English text to the equivalent illustrations from the Spanish text. It concludes that, through the translation of a historical narrative composed by fifteen contributing Mexican authors, the use of the same primary cartographic sources, and the exclusion of the American portraits, Ramsey’s version reveals a conscious effort to show his interest in the preservation of the Mexican perspective.

In order to accomplish this goal, the paper examines the way this object, *The Other Side: or Notes for the History of the War Between Mexico and the U.S.* reflects the political and social context of the relationship between the United States and Mexico during the nineteenth century. It aims to answer how Albert C. Ramsey’s translation of a historical Spanish narrative of the Mexican-American War upholds and preserves the Mexican perspective as written by the original fifteen contributing Mexican authors. Finally, utilizing the images within both texts, it will examine how Ramsey preserved the integrity of Mexico while illustrating the uneven power relationship between the United States and Mexico.

The following paragraphs employ an art historical object-based research method to analyze the illustrations and text in Ramsey’s *The Other Side.* My analysis uses the theoretical framework of postcolonial theory as practiced by Edward Said [1]. Post-Colonial theory examines the controlling relationships between the colonizers, the imperialists, and their colonial Others. Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism analyzes the systematic approach through which the West defined the peoples of the East. Said investigated the discourse surrounding knowledge of the East, revealing the resulting unequal power relationship. He concludes that in defining the East in its own image, the West justifies itself and its dominance [2]. This approach is relevant for the study of *The Other Side,* as the Mexican narrative is revealed in the Spanish version and translated into English by Ramsey, exposing the impact that the United States had on Mexico from the Mexican perspective for the first time.
Albert C. Ramsey was colonel of the Eleventh United States Infantry during the war with Mexico. He translated *Apuntes para la Historia de la Guerra entre México y los Estados Unidos* in Mexico where, in 1850, it became, “the first Mexican historical production deemed worthy of a translation into the English language” [3]. Today, the Spanish version is attributed to Ramón Alcaraz, but is a compilation of articles written by 15 Mexican authors critical of their government. The articles were first released in installments in 1848 and 1849. The original 15 authors decided to take group responsibility for the pieces of literature because they were quite critical about General Santa Anna’s military strategies. The 15 Mexican authors of Apuntes are all editors of Ramsey’s *The Other Side*.

The Mexican illustrations were released at a rate of about two per article and because they were released in installments, the illustrations do not always match the text. In the English version, the images are located sometimes in entirely different sections and are also not necessarily connected to the text in a profound way. In fact, Ramsey has excluded multiple images from the narrative. The original Spanish version holds 28 lithographic illustrations in 34 essays. Ramsey’s English translation holds 23 of these images. The portraits in Ramsey’s edition portray ten Mexican officers. Though the original Spanish version contains four images of distinguished Americans of the 14 total portraits, Ramsey excludes only the American portraits. Both editions include cartographic illustrations, and tables of forces.

The Other Side reflects the events of the Mexican-American War. One of the most controversial wars in American history, it was deeply rooted in the ideology of Manifest Destiny, a term coined by newspaper editor John L. O’Sullivan in an 1845 article celebrating the recent annexation of Texas. Sullivan wrote, “Our Manifest Destiny is to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions” [4]. The term Manifest Destiny eventually became interchangeable with the notion of expansionism [5]. The effect of the expansionist ideology in the United States justified the move towards war. In April 1846, American troops were attacked by Mexican troops for occupying the Rio Grande. The United States claimed the Rio Grande as the boundary of their territory while Mexico claimed their northern territory continued to the Nueces River. In response, on May 11, 1846, President James K. Polk asserted to Congress that American blood had been shed on American land and asked for a declaration of war against Mexico [6]. The war ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848. The treaty settled that the Texas border was located at the Rio Grande and gave the U.S. the territories of Arizona, California, and New Mexico.

The social ramifications of war influenced American perspectives of Mexico. Democrats utilized racial and gendered rhetoric to justify war to their constituents as a necessary means to gain territory that they believed was their God given right [4]. In U.S. literature and culture, visions of Mexico were produced in response to the Mexican-American War. Formulated theories in the U.S. of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority proliferated in popular literature through travel narratives, which frequently depicted Mexico as a weak, worthless, and failed country that would benefit from U.S. intervention [7]. A hierarchy of bravery was based on anti-Mexican rhetoric that asserted Anglos were far more courageous and deserving of land than the Mexican people [8]. Those that supported the war with Mexico often associated Mexicans as an “inferior” race, which they related with female traits—the “inferior” gender—solidifying notions of Mexicans as vulnerable, emasculated, and feminine [7]. The culmination of these prejudices against the Mexican people created a social divide between the U.S. and Mexico throughout the nineteenth century.

Though no extensive research has been conducted on this text, historians have researched similar types of publications. Historical narrative is reviewed in *Lone Star Past: Memory and History in Texas*, a collection of essays edited by Gregg Cantrell and Elizabeth Hayes Turner. The contributing authors determined that the ‘collective memory’ develops from both the primary individual memories and the “memories” of those who study the event [9]. Cecil Robinson’s *The View from Chapultepec: Mexican Writers on the Mexican-American War*, on the other hand, reveals that the American memory of the Mexican-American War has receded further than the Mexican memory in what is still considered a “national trauma” [10]. In Shelley Streeby’s “Imaging Mexico in Love and War: Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature and Visual Culture,” the divisions between the United States and Mexico are argued to have been forged by comparisons and stereotypes in literature and culture, referencing *The Other Side* as a piece of literature that exposes the contradiction of U.S. expansionism [7]. The art historical literature in historical military narrative texts of this time period is limited. These works on historical narratives have helped me to analyze the ways memory can shape and alter the past.

The essays collected in *Mapping Latin America: A Cartographic Reader* as a whole, examine map production, circulation, and contribution to the reality of what maps seek to represent. Raymond B. Craib describes a study of historical maps as a space in which history unfolded in the essay, “Historical Geographies,” this has been crucial in helping me to perform the analysis of maps as spatial narratives of Mexico during the Mexican-American War [11]. Also by Craib, “The Life of a Map” is helpful in deriving meaning for maps that are sparse in information yet contain recognizable icons and symbols. Shelley Streeby’s “Imaging Mexico in Love and War: Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature and Visual Culture,” examines the origins and history of American literature, as well as the tropes in pictorial history [7]. The characteristics of stereotypes that Streeby addresses help me in my discussion of portraits. These texts form the foundation for my assessment of military maps and portraiture.

The 23 images and two statistical tables included in Ram-
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Figure 1. Ackerman’s Lith., “Plan of the City of Monterey: State of New Leon, September 1846, September 1846,” Lithograph. Image in the public domain.

sey’s The Other Side: or Notes for the History of the War Between Mexico and the U.S. are dispersed throughout a collection of 34 essays by 15 authors that illustrated Mexican concepts of war as well as their interpretations of war events. The two statistical tables discussing the Northern Army’s strength and organization in San Luis Potosí and a statement of artillery and trains of war of the Army have been disregarded, as they do not inform the argument of this paper.

The images for this paper have been categorized in two ways, the maps illustrating cities and maps of battles and plans of strategy, and portraits of political and military figures.

The first category explores the 13 maps in Ramsey’s The Other Side. My research reveals that this group of images visually preserves the perspective that Alcaraz initially instilled in this narrative. This group of images includes two subgroups. The first subgroup includes three maps that illustrate plans of cities such as Monterey, Tampico, and the land to the North East of Matamoros. The second subgroup includes the remaining 10 maps. Seven of these illustrations narrate plans of conflicts in battle maps. Three more maps are included that depict strategy or position of Armed Forces, including positions occupied by Mexican troops in Guerrero Resaca in 1846, the entrenchment of the Rock of Marqués, and the four landmarks identifying the main entrances by U.S. forces into Mexico City. The main examples of these maps of the Mexican-American War are the “Plan of the City of Monterey: State of New Leon, September 1846” and “Buena Vista: Outline of the Battle on the 22nd and 23rd of February, 1847, in the Angostura.”

The first example of this type of image, the “Plan of the City of Monterey: State of New Leon, September 1846” (Figure 1), is a street plan of Monterey which illustrates the major roads into and out of the city represented by dashed lines. Two roads lead to the city of Marín and are located on the right and travel north from Monterey; another road leads north to the woods. The map plots the columns of U.S. Generals Taylor, on September 21, 1846 along the road leading to the woods, and Worth, on September 22, 1846 along the road from Jahuri to Topo. Near the left road to Marín is the Perote Prison, which is labeled “I. Citadel” on the map. Prairies and high peaks are also recorded on this map, along with a possible river. The name of this river, however, is not listed, proving that Ramsey, though there are slight variations between this map and the Spanish version published in Apuntes (Figure 2), keeps the integrity of the Mexican authors by not listing a river name that they would already know.

This crafts the legacy of Mexico and the Mexicans by visually preserving their perspectives from the original text.
Along with this visual preservation, Ramsey maintains the textual content as well through translation. For example, in the following passage, in regards to the Mexicans meeting the enemy from the exterior, Ramsey keeps the third person, maintaining the original authors’ personal perspectives:

In this pronunciamento, as always happens, they were unmindful of the true interests of the nation. The effects of this were sensibly felt in Monterey. They appointed Ampudia governor-general-in-chief of the army of the North, and this appointment, for a thousand reasons impolitic, revived old misunderstandings, which displayed themselves in such manner that various officers wrote to Mexico, showing their discontent. The press denounced it as shameful, and vivid antipathies sprang up, which in the end were fatally strong (66).

Ramsey maintains the candor of the Mexican contributors by retaining their voice and internal concerns and debates about enemies in both text and image.

By comparison from the American perspective, Hubert Howe Bancroft, in *History of the North Mexican States and Texas* vol. 2, copies this plan of Monterey and Americanizes it (Figure 3), simply calling it “City of Monterey” [12]. In this image, Bancroft completely erases the key, therefore erasing the Mexican presence, heritage, and importance from the town depicted. The use of the Mexican map in this American context also denotes the way Bancroft, and other American
peers, felt the necessity to erase the Mexican perspective on maps. Even the locations of the American troops are in a much larger text in Bancroft’s depiction of Monterey than in Ramsey or Alcaraz’s texts.

In the second subgroup, ten maps from Ramsey’s *The Other Side* narrate seven battles, including Palo Alto, Angostura (or Buena Vista), Cerro Gordo, Churubusco, Contreras, Sacramento, and the siege of Veracruz. The remaining three maps depict the strategies or positions of both Mexican and American Armed Forces during the war. Standard bibliographies and sources of *The Other Side* call for thirteen maps total. In the English edition, the map called “Plan of Positions Which the Mexican Troops Occupied in the Action with the Americans on 9 May 1846 in the Resaca de Guerrero” is occasionally excluded in Alcaraz’s *Apuntes*. One map is included in the original 1848 Spanish edition of *Apuntes* but missing in Ramsey’s 1850 version of *The Other Side*. This map is titled “Plano de la ciudad de Matamoros 1846” (Figure 4), which is a plan of the city of Matamoros. All seven of the battle maps in Ramsey’s *The Other Side* are also depicted in Alcaraz’s *Apuntes*.

Wartime maps provide information about enemy locations that can be used to plan and conduct military operations [13]. The main example of these military maps is the “Buena Vista Outline of the Battle on the 22nd and 23rd of February 1847 in the Angostura” (Figure 5), which identifies Mexican and American troop locations during the Battle of Buena Vista, also known as the Battle of Angostura. An extensive key provides explanations for the characters that symbolize each side’s claims of political and military control of territory. Many of the forces are located within the hills of the city, shown by short, radiating lines to depict the difference in elevation. Roads and geographical features are delineated but not specifically named. “Croquis del combate de 22 y batalla del 23 de febrero de 1847 en la Angostura” (Figure 6), the equivalent map in *Apuntes*, was created for a Mexican audience, therefore, details of location specific names were unnecessary.

The spatial organization of this battle map reveals the movement of Mexican troops towards the American forces that held Monterey. Instead of elevating the American troops and erasing the Mexican presence as Bancroft did in *History of the North Mexican States and Texas* vol. 2, Ramsey conserves the key and characters of the map, only altering his version by translating it (Figures 7 and 8). The Americans are still at the bottom of the key and thus have less significance than the Mexican forces, which have an extensive explanation of their different troops and important military locations like the Head Quarters. This reading of Ramsey’s “Buena Vista Outline” is supported by analysis of the text. Within the textual narrative, the original authors are translated in their own voice with only the occasional supplementary note from Ramsey about the accuracy of the claims. Concerning the Battle of Buena Vista,
the Mexican authors describe part of the battle, which resulted in a small victory for the Mexicans:

The column which we had left upon the road, sheltered by the unevenness of the ground, came now to form the reserve of the line. Our troops advanced in good order; the battery of General Micheltorena alone which played upon our side, destroyed the enemy, and it came to the bayonet, with the soldiers fighting hand to hand. For the second time our brave men conquered. The Americans rallied on the next hill top, leaving for a trophy one piece of cannon and three flags (126).

The Mexican authors do not, however, only give praise to Mexican troops. Following this admiration of the forces, the authors proceed to say, “Taylor having tenaciously receded from hill to hill, and losing all, after an obstinate resistance, prepared to make his final stand before yielding the palm of victory...The truth is, our arms routed the Americans in all the encounters, and so far the issue of the battle was favorable to us. There had been three partial triumphs, but not a complete victory” [3]. Ramsey keeps the authors in the third person, does not change their story, but adds notes to it when he felt necessary, preserving both the visual and textual content from the Mexican perspective of the war.

The second category of images is made up of historical and political figures. Coinciding with what Ramsey preserved in the maps, the portraits that are included in The Other Side are only minimally altered and continue to maintain the integrity of the Mexican Officers. For example, in a comparison of Ramsey and Alcaraz’s portraits of Santa Anna (Figures 9 and 10), the integrity of the President of Mexico is kept through the similar portraits. The release of Apuntes in 1848 was a bold move by the Mexican authors because of their candor within the narrative of the war, particularly in criticizing Santa Anna’s military strategies. In 1854, when Santa Anna returned to power, he ordered Apuntes to be collected and burned and the fifteen contributors arrested and sent into exile [14]. Despite this, both The Other Side and Apuntes contain portraits of Santa Anna displaying him in an honorable light.

In both The Other Side and Apuntes, Santa Anna’s portraits depict him in full dress uniform. Both illustrations show
Figure 9. Ackerman’s Lith., “El Escmo Sr. Gal. de Division D. Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna,” 1950, Lithograph. Image in the public domain.

the President with medals and impressively ornate details in the dress. This is a stark contrast to the images of Santa Anna other American authors were releasing at the same time. Santa Anna was easily the favorite villain in Texas narratives, as well as a model for fictional scoundrels [8]. That this portrait of Santa Anna does not depict him as a scoundrel or a villain is indeed proof of Ramsey’s preservation of the Mexican military officer’s appearances through these details. Interestingly, Ramsey’s The Other Side does not include four of the original images from the Mexican text. All four of these figures are Americans. Ramsey does not include President James K. Polk, General Scott, General Taylor, or General Worth (Figures 11, 12, 13, and 14) [15]. Contemporary books of the time, like Bancroft’s texts, have images representing both Americans and Mexicans, but Ramsey completely disregards the four American figures in The Other Side, proving he is attempting to capture the Mexican perspective more than many other American authors.

2. Conclusion

Ultimately, through this research, I have examined how an American author such as Albert C. Ramsey supports the Mexican perspective in his translation of Apuntes and also allows for the interpretation of the United States as a neocolonial power exploiting postcolonial Mexico. Ramsey, utilizing basic translation of a Mexican narrative created, in English for the first time, the Mexican notions of the Mexican-American War. By examining the images in The Other Side to those in Apuntes, along with a close examination of the accompanying text, my research of Ramsey’s The Other Side: or Notes for the History of the War Between Mexico and the U.S. strongly supports the notion that he held a great interest in the truth and perspective of his Mexican peers who contributed to the original Spanish edition and edited the English edition to show his interest in the preservation of the Mexican perspective and history of the Mexican-American War.

Author Biography

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References


Figure 13. P. Blanco, “General Scot,” 1847, Lithograph. Image in the public domain.

Figure 14. P. Blanco, “General Worth,” 1847, Lithograph. Image in the public domain.