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Javier Uriarte
The Desertmakers: Travel, War, and the State in Latin America
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A dense but, at the same time, illuminating read, Javier Uriarte's *The Desertmakers* takes its title, and narrative thrust, from *The Agricola* (AD 98), the first known work of Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus. Tacitus himself attributes an assertion he makes to the chieftan Calgacus, who fronted resistance to the Roman invasion of Scotland led by Tacitus's father-in-law (whom Uriarte inadvertently identifies as Tacitus's son-in-law) Gnaeus Julius Agricola. 'To ravage, to slaughter, to usurp under false titles – that they call empire', Tacitus wrote. 'And when they make a desert, they call it peace.' Agricola's assault on northern Britain in the end came to naught, the barbarian Scots unable to be quelled, coralled, and brought to heel by the confinement not of one wall but two. Farther south, those who became English proved better fodder for civilization. By way of Tacitus, however, the words of Calgacus still ring true, conjuring the desert: 'as a *result*, as a *product* . . . not a monotonous, motionless landscape containing only sand, extreme heat, and absolute aridity, mere geography' (p. 1). In Uriarte's creative hands, the metaphor is deployed to assiduous effect.

His endeavour is straightforward: he devotes a chapter each to four books or writings by four different authors, all set in distinct South American locales in the second half of the 19th century, specifically the years between 1864 and 1902. Uriarte draws on Ericka Beckman's *Capital Fictions* (2012) to define that period as when 'Latin American nations were brought swiftly – if unevenly – into the fold of global market relations, mainly as exporters of "raw" or "primary" commodities, and as importers of European and North American manufactures' (p. 9). Taking on Richard Burton's *Letters from the Battle Fields of Paraguay* (1870) comes first, an account by the British consul of the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870) during which Paraguay was 'utterly destroyed' (p. 4) confronting three of its neighbours – Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. The conflict 'was a key event in the South American modernization process, a foundational moment in the consolidation of the state apparatus that would, in Argentina and Brazil, come to a close with the Conquest of the Desert and the Canudos War' (p. 45), both episodes the focus of Uriarte's attention in subsequent chapters. The devastation of Paraguay, reported by Burton at the time of his travels there, is confirmed by recent demographic analysis. 'Before the war, Paraguay probably had between 420,000 and 450,000 inhabitants' (p. 43), Uriarte relays, a population that by war's end had been reduced to 'between 141,351 and 166,351'. Though epidemic outbreaks took the heaviest toll, an estimated 90 percent of Paraguay's males lost their lives in the fighting.

Chapter 2 sees Uriarte engage *The Purple Land* (1885), a novel by Anglo-Argentine William Henry Hudson in which his alter-ego, Richard Lamb, traverses Uruguayan territory and becomes involved in an insurrection. Hudson has his hero view the uprising 'as a form of resistance to the British imperial presence in South America' (p. 14), the continent's lands and peoples forming a significant part of Great Britain's 'informal

empire' (p. 87), defined as 'a manner of controlling particular regions or nations through economic means, regardless of whether [or not] there has been a political appropriation'. As in Argentina and Brazil, Paraguay less so, British interests in Uruguay were significant. Uriarte is as much at ease grappling with the fictions of reality as with the realities of fiction. 'At one interesting mega-narrative moment', he divulges, 'the protagonist tells another character that he will write the novel we are reading, and explains the title, linking it to violence' (p. 87). Hudson has Lamb declare: 'I intend writing a story of my wanderings . . . and I will call my book *The Purple Land*; for what more suitable name can one find for a country so stained with the blood of her children.' Since Hudson put pen to paper, alas, the colour purple has only stained farther and deeper, from Latin America's southern cone to its northern border, in truth more a scar, with the United States.

In 'Making Museums, Making Deserts', at almost 80 pages the longest of his four chapters, Uriarte's scrutiny shifts to Patagonia – a windswept, southernmost extremity to which Francisco Pascasio Moreno travelled 'a number of times before, during, and after the Conquest of the Desert' (p. 4). Perhaps no scenario better fits Uriarte's schema, literally as well as metaphorically, than discussion of the campaign mounted by General Julio Argentino Roca: (1) to rid lands beyond the Pampas of their Indigenous inhabitants; (2) to establish authority centred in Buenos Aires over them; and (3) to impose Argentine sovereignty in a domain to which Chile also laid claim and exercised pretensions – even as that nation, on the other side of the Andes, waged war in Araucania over its native peoples and their ancestral territories. Moreno, Uriarte informs us, 'wrote as a collector and scientist whose descriptions of the territory and its peoples were molded in a narrative of evolution' (p. 14). He viewed autochthonous communities 'as remnants of the past', convinced that 'the museum was the only space that the modern nation state could offer them.' Moreno's, at best, assimilationist mindset 'was also shaped by the fact that he represented his government in the tense negotiations with neighboring Chile over the necessity of establishing the international border in Patagonian regions'.

Uriarte saves the best to the last, an incisive reflection on Euclides da Cuhna's *Os sertões* (1902), a work he considers 'perhaps the most canonical and complex of these texts' (p. 15). At one level *Os sertões* 'recounts a massacre of a rebellious rural community' in the Bahia backlands of Brazil 'at the hands of the state' (p. 4). On another level, da Cuhna's 'unclassifiable text is also – among many other things – a meditation on nationhood itself and on the place within it occupied by the inhabitants of that region' (p. 15). In 1896–1897, swayed by the preachings of mystic-strongman Antônio Conselheiro, the 'marginalized and starving masses' of Canudos rebelled against the dictates of the newly formed republican government, successfully resisting three attempts to subdue them before succumbing (pp. 206–208) to 'an enormous contingent of troops (more than 10,000 strong) that carried out a huge massacre before burning down the entire settlement to wipe out all trace of it'. The desertification of Canudos ended with 'the final fall of the resistant settlement on 5 October 1897' (p. 214).

By way of hopeful conclusion, despite invoking Paul Klee's distraught *Angelus Novus* and Walter Benjamin's tormented 'angel of history', Uriarte signs off by quoting French philosopher Henri Lefebvre: 'No space vanishes utterly, leaving no trace' (p. 267). Uriarte then exhorts: 'I think of remains in relation to this research: there are new deserts

to visit, new journeys to embark on.' Anyone so inclined will find *The Desertmakers* a good place to start, and no doubt return to it time and again for inspiration, guidance, and orientation. Its Spanish-language predecessor, *Fazedores de desertos: viajes, guerra y Estado en América Latina, 1864–1902* (2012), Uriarte's doctoral dissertation, earned him a national prize for literature in Uruguay. Other such laurels surely await *The Desertmakers*.

Reference

Beckman E (2012) *Capital Fiction: The Literature of Latin America's Export Age*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.