

Strangers on Familiar Soil

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Book Review

The Histories and Destinies of Chile and California

Strangers on Familiar Soil by Edward Dallam Melillo. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT. ISBN 978-0-300-20662-3. 325 Pp. \$40 hardcover.

In *Strangers on Familiar Soil*, Edward Dallam Melillo shows how Californians and Chileans each have one foot on their land and the other connecting them through the Pacific Ocean. Melillo reframes our understanding of US history in the west and links the histories and destinies of Chile and California from 1786 to the current day. Contrary to popular belief, Melillo asserts that California was built by more than westward migration during expansionism in the US. It was also built by influences from Chileans or *Chilenos* whose country was the last stop after coming around the horn of South America before sailing north to California. At least 56% of all ships from Europe or the eastern US stopped at a Chilean port. Such data suggest that zones of historical migration and arenas of intercultural contact are not always borderlands. They are... "where land and water converge."

Melillo's premise echoes a sentiment expressed by Pablo Neruda, Nobel Prize winner from Chile: "With one foot on land, and one in the sea" referring to a division he feels from the deep connection to both places. Melillo tells a compelling story about Pacific world history shaped by the overlooked, yet persistent link between the country of Chile and the state of California by reviving their shared past.

It becomes obvious through Melillo's description that exchanges of people, goods, species, and ideas dramatically influenced the cultural, social, and ecological terrain of each place. Both Chile and California are shaped by resourceful indigenous people, the Pacific Ocean to the East, the American Cordillera (which includes the Sierra Nevada in California and the Andes in Chile), their Mediterranean ecosystems, similar regional wars (the US-Mexican War and War of the Pacific), and waves of immigrants between and to both

places. Before the 19th Century, both were part of Spanish colonial rule, which had headquarters in Lima and Mexico City—a history that differs from much of the rest of the US, which was under British rule. With the Gold Rush in California the Chile-California destinies were united by contact via the Pacific Ocean, which allowed for the exchange of people, goods, species, and ideas. From Chile, California received potatoes, Chile club wheat for bread, alfalfa for nitrogen, wood from ships and raw lumber to repurpose into buildings, fertilizers from Chilean mines, technologies that advanced gold mining practices, masonry skills that transformed California's landscape, and thousands of Chilean laborers wearing "short ponchos and turned up straw hats." From California, Chile received Monterey pine trees that began highly productive monoculture plantations for export, the building of the railroad, entrepreneurs who helped to create the fruit export industry, expansion of agricultural products mostly for export (fields of poppies, fruits, trees, wheat), and early ideas of racial exceptionalism, liberation, and capitalism. Melillo forgot to mention that California also provided the stocks for many of the Pacific salmon and trout used in aquaculture and for sport fishing in Chile.

Although redundant at times, Melillo creates a balanced portrayal of the intertwined histories of Chile and California. He recounts ugly parts of their history including bigotry in California against early Chilean immigrants and the 1973 *golpe del estado* or coup d'état in Chile, which was supported by US. He respectfully describes the complexity around race, culture, slavery, sex, and gender and uses multiple literary sources to support the ideas. The wide-ranging quotes are mostly from men, but also women, from all walks of life from high-ranking officials to poets to laborers. Indeed, traces of Chile are still found in California with Chilean-inspired names that remain today, including Chileno Valley (Marin County), Chileno Creek (Merced County), Chileno Canyon (Los Angeles County), a hotel built with Chilean mahogany in Verona (Sutter County),

Valparaíso Avenue along highway 101 south of San Francisco, and a sign marking the historical neighborhood “Little Chile” on Columbus Avenue in San Francisco.

Ultimately, this compelling book is described by Melillo as a book “of origins” linking the histories and destinies of the country of Chile and California. The people of each place will always have one foot on their land and the other literally connecting them through the Pacific Ocean. Throughout the book, Melillo uncovers details about the origins of both places and leaves me curious about the hidden legacies of other places. *Strangers on Familiar Soil* is quietly direct, with sharply drawn stories adorned with meticulous details. It reads like an extended story from The Atlantic; intellectual and approachable. Anyone from these places or who has an interest in Chile or California may want to read this book to gain

new insights into their origins. This book would also be an excellent choice for graduate and undergraduate students or history buffs looking for a quick read.

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Dr. Penaluna’s research focuses on understanding the effects of climate change, contemporary forest harvest and disturbances on fish and both riparian and aquatic habitats, and more generally on the ecological linkages among water, land, and people. Her goals are to use multiple lines of inquiry from various approaches to understand the complexities of fish and the aquatic and riparian world with implications for management and policy planning.