

THE NATURE OF PLACE  
Recent Research on Environment and Society  
in Latin America\*

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*BANANA CULTURES: AGRICULTURE, CONSUMPTION, AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE IN HONDURAS AND THE UNITED STATES.* By John Soluri. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006. Pp. 337. \$60.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)

*LANDSCAPES OF POWER AND IDENTITY: COMPARATIVE HISTORIES IN THE SONORAN DESERT AND THE FORESTS OF AMAZONIA FROM COLONY TO REPUBLIC.* By Cynthia Radding. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. Pp. 456. \$89.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.)

*MAPPING AND EMPIRE: SOLDIER-ENGINEERS ON THE SOUTHWESTERN FRONTIER.* Edited by Dennis Reinhartz and Gerald D. Saxon. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005. Pp. 232. \$34.95 cloth.)

*NATURE, CULTURE, AND BIG OLD TREES: LIVE OAKS AND CEIBAS IN THE LANDSCAPES OF LOUISIANA AND GUATEMALA.* By Kit Anderson. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. Pp. 199. \$45.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

*RETURN TO THE CENTER: CULTURE, PUBLIC SPACE, AND CITY-BUILDING IN A GLOBAL ERA.* By Lawrence A. Herzog. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006. Pp. 299. \$55.00 Cloth, \$24.95 Paper.)

*SCIENCE AND THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION IN LATIN AMERICA.* Edited by Evelyn Fishburn and Eduardo L. Ortiz. (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2005. Pp. 210. \$22.50 Paper.)

With a shift in social science scholarship from clearly defined or fixed categories to syncretic and hybrid classifications, many researchers studying human-environment interactions have moved beyond traditional investigations of natural resources, export crops, or conservation. The latest studies depict diverse environments, present comparative research,

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analyze many aspects of human-environment relationships, and probe how people have historically constructed nature, landscapes, and places in their minds.<sup>1</sup> In short, scholars now understand that environments emerge historically from a mix of both nature's agency and cultural constructions.<sup>2</sup> Researchers of Latin America and elsewhere have, in turn, increasingly focused on cultural analyses to examine science, discourse, and narratives as diverse representations of environments.<sup>3</sup>

The six books reviewed here follow these trends and represent the diversity of recent scholarship on human-environment interactions in Latin America. Written by scholars of geography, history, literary studies, and urban studies, the books explore how people have related to and interacted with three types of environments: the physical, the imagined, and the built environment. Physical environments include distinct geographical places, agricultural crops, pathogens, and natural resources. Imagined environments involve mental constructions of environments, which emerge through discourse, maps, science, and stories. And the built environment consists of urban spaces such as plazas, buildings, and boulevards. Though these authors generally emphasize one of these environments over the others, they all recognize interplay among them. Most of the books explicitly examine culture by exploring social constructions of city plazas, trees, landscapes, borderlands, and bananas. Additionally, many of the books trace transnational connections or provide comparative histories, linking regions like Guatemala and Louisiana, Honduras and the United States, Bolivia and Mexico, and Latin America and Europe. Authors generally build on ideas from human geography, environmental history, and cultural anthropology.<sup>4</sup> They offer theoretical, methodological, and thematic innovations for the study of place, environment, and society in Latin America.

#### PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS

Representing some of the best new environmental history of Latin America, John Soluri's *Banana Cultures* is a well-written, clearly argued,

1. For other recent studies, see Kenneth R. Young, "Nature's Role in Latin American Governance and History," *Latin American Research Review* 40, no. 3 (2005): 457–468.

2. These trends are explained in Daniel W. Gade, *Nature and Culture in the Andes* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999); Ted Steinberg, "Down to Earth: Nature, Agency, and Power in History," *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 798–820.

3. For a synthesis of this cultural emphasis, see Richard White, "From Wilderness to Hybrid Landscapes: The Cultural Turn in Environmental History," *The Historian* 66, no. 3 (2004): 557–564.

4. For example, Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 1991); William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996); Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 6–23.

and engaging history of Honduran bananas. Tracing banana production from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century, Soluri asks—and answers—a key question about this valuable fruit: What has it meant historically to eat bananas? His question provides a rich point of departure to go beyond previous banana scholarship that tends to focus on political economy, labor, and other socio-economic issues. Soluri scrutinizes all levels of the banana business—from the soil in which bananas grow to plantations, packaging plants, shipping containers, marketing patterns, consumption trends, political decisions, and laboratories where corporate scientists developed plant pesticides. Although banana production and consumption occur worldwide, Soluri focuses his study on transnational connections between Honduras, the quintessential “banana republic,” and the United States, where the largest banana companies and a massive consumer market shaped the history of bananas. Linking environmental change with social relations, culture, labor strikes, scientific advances, and the power of the global food industry, this book represents cutting-edge environmental history that explores a complex dialectic between nature and society—and is a welcome contribution to Latin American environmental history.<sup>5</sup>

*Banana Cultures* stands out from other banana studies in two significant ways. First, Soluri recognizes nature as an active historical force. Specifically, he shows how plant pathogens triggered two distinct responses from banana companies. On the one hand, when Panama Disease decimated bananas in the first decades of the twentieth century, the pathogen lingered in the soil, rendering it inhospitable to future banana plants. In response, banana growers moved their plantations to new areas, which impacted land and forests as well as workers, transportation networks, and regional politics. After the 1930s, on the other hand, when the Sigatoka Disease destroyed Honduran bananas, companies did not relocate. Instead, they developed and sprayed pesticides on banana plants. Soluri not only examines how this decision to spray affected working conditions, local residents, and regional environments, he also traces the historical evolution of certain pesticides to illustrate how science, economy, and nature intersected through time.

Second, Soluri argues that banana history did not evolve simply because of forces in Honduras. Consumer preferences and marketing patterns in the United States also influenced banana production. Other scholars have recognized the importance of markets within the United States as drivers of export agriculture in the global South, but few have given such

5. Recent critiques of environmental history also suggest that Soluri's work invigorates the field. See Peter Coates, “Emerging from the Wilderness (or, from Redwoods to Bananas): Recent Environmental History in the United States and the Rest of the Americas,” *Environment and History* 10 (Nov. 2004): 407–438; Matthew W. Klinge, “Spaces of Consumption in Environmental History,” *History and Theory* 42 (2003): 94–110.

extensive attention to the history and culture of consumption as Soluri does in *Banana Cultures*. From the first recorded banana bunch to arrive in New York in 1804, to the rise of banana imports during the 1870s, to widespread banana eating through the twentieth century, banana exports from Honduras have always hinged on consumer preference. And consumers wanted the Gros Michel type of banana (and not plantains either), with its thick, bruise-resistant, bright-yellow skin. These were more than just consumer preferences, however. Companies marketed specific bananas to maximize profit. The epitome of these advertising campaigns was United Fruit Company's invention of Miss Chiquita in 1944, an alluring and persistent national icon for Chiquita brand bananas. Delving into recipe books, radio programs, films, cartoons, songs, stories, and a host of other advertising efforts, Soluri shows how and why banana companies sold certain bananas. By *not* taking banana consumption as a static force driving banana company activities, Soluri adds a new, overlooked transnational dimension to the study of export agriculture.

Soluri's ability to weave multi-leveled analyses and sophisticated ideas into clear, concise prose accessible to undergraduates makes for an excellent book. The book is provocative enough, however, that one sometimes wishes for more explanation. The title, for instance, suggests a prominent analysis of culture. Yet the text most often attributes historical shifts in U.S. banana consumption to banana company activities (advertising campaigns, changes in production, standardization of shipping) rather than to culture. Soluri recognizes consumer culture, but his evidence and explanation focus more on company initiatives than consumer responses. Further, without in-depth analysis of the consumers themselves, their preference for banana "quality" remains an unexplored aspect of consumer culture. Why did quality almost always refer to fruit *appearance* rather than to flavor or nutritional value? What does this consumer preference for aesthetics say about U.S. food culture more broadly? Or about export agriculture in Honduras and elsewhere in Latin America? Despite these questions about consumer culture and historical trends outside Honduras, *Banana Cultures* contributes significantly to environmental history: it recognizes the agency of nature, links history of science with environmental history, and explains what it has meant globally to consume certain foods.<sup>6</sup> Finally, Soluri's delineation of complex transnational connections avoids all-too-frequent depictions of U.S.-Latin American relations as simply the Colossus of the North versus Banana Republics.<sup>7</sup>

6. Soluri's focus on bananas in Honduras allows him to go into much greater detail than the excellent analysis of agricultural exports from several world regions in Richard P. Tucker, *Insatiable Appetite: The United States and the Ecological Degradation of the Tropical World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

7. Over the last decade, traditional depictions of the U.S. role in Latin America have been shifting to more nuanced views, as represented in Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. LeGrand,

Cynthia Radding's *Landscapes of Power and Identity* compares historical human-environment interactions in Mexico's Sonoran desert and Bolivia's Chiquitano rainforest. Spanning the period from initial sixteenth-century Spanish contact with indigenous inhabitants to the establishment of nation-states in the nineteenth century, this book analyzes how distinct groups in different regions and landscapes experienced Spanish colonialism. As Radding explains, her goal is to understand comparative "histories of imperialism and the historical ethnographies of the colonized" (xviii) on the frontiers of colonial Latin America. She also argues that physical environments—topography, hydrology, vegetation, and climate—restrained human history and led to the emergence of specific economies, cosmologies, and social relations. Not a history of environmental determinism, the book shows how indigenous people manipulated landscapes through subsistence patterns and trading natural resources, and how Spaniards brought European crops, livestock, and diseases, as well as new cultural forms of governance, systems of environmental management, and modes of economic exchange.

The principal strength of this book is its unearthing of histories of understudied regions in Latin America. It examines many familiar topics: the histories of *encomiendas*, *reducciones*, and missions; the political economy of Spanish colonialism; and indigenous struggles to maintain corporate community rights in response to increased privatization of landholdings. The author contends that, despite being "peripheral" regions, the indigenous residents nonetheless engaged a host of Spanish—and later Mexican and Bolivian—institutions, rulers, traders, and settlers. Rather than undergoing displacement or eradication, the indigenous inhabitants adapted by forging new identities and creating new landscapes. In one of her most innovative chapters, Radding contrasts indigenous views of nature and natural resources with Spanish perceptions. Interweaving examinations of nature, spirituality, language, cultural practices, and power, she shows how D'odham and Rarámuri cosmologies collided and coalesced with Spanish beliefs, in the end producing syncretic religious practices.

Despite its marketing and framing as an environmental history, *Landscapes of Power and Identity* is primarily a socio-cultural history. Except for a pledge to link cultural and environmental history, references to a few classic U.S. environmental history books, a chapter describing regional flora and fauna, and the above-mentioned chapter on cosmology, the book examines cultural, social, and economic history instead of environmental history. The definition of "landscape" does not, unfortunately, appear until the conclusion (321). Though this definition fits with other

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and Ricardo D. Salvatore, eds., *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998).

scholars' depictions of culturally constructed landscapes that exist in geographical space, through much of the book the physical and cognitive environments—the foci of environmental history—remain absent. More than any other book under review here, however, *Landscapes of Power and Identity* analyzes social history at the ground level to expose ethnic, racial, gender, political, economic, and even cultural fault lines that divided numerous groups in these two regions. The author's meticulous attention to social dynamics offers an excellent starting point to understand how power discrepancies historically shaped both landscape changes over time and people's interactions with their environments. The book, though sometimes difficult to read and penetrate, makes an important effort to merge social with environmental history.<sup>8</sup>

#### IMAGINED ENVIRONMENTS

Whereas some authors fix on physical spaces and natural resources, others focus on mental constructions of the environments they inhabit. Kit Anderson, for example, analyzes human-environment interactions by focusing on people's conceptualization of trees in Guatemala and Louisiana. Blurring the boundaries between nature and culture, Anderson, like other scholars, views the environment as an archive—a repository of human cultures, ideas, and activities. "Trees tell stories," Anderson argues (3). *Nature, Culture, and Big Old Trees* delves into these stories about Guatemala's national tree, the ceiba, and Louisiana's most famous tree, the live oak. By probing the cultural dimensions of human-environment relations in the Americas, Anderson moves beyond the vast majority of scholarship on trees and forests that focuses somewhat narrowly on deforestation, natural resource extraction, conservation, or environmental degradation. Instead, *Nature, Culture, and Big Old Trees* fits with a growing body of literature on Latin America—mostly by anthropologists, though Anderson is a cultural geographer—that investigates environmental narratives and discourses.<sup>9</sup>

*Nature, Culture, and Big Old Trees* is an ethnography of trees: it uncovers how and why people planted, utilized, imagined, remembered, sat under, sang about, harvested, sold, pruned, or otherwise interacted with

8. A number of recent articles have called for greater integration of social and environmental history, including Stephen Mosley, "Common Ground: Integrating Social and Environmental History," *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 3 (2006): 915–933; Alan Taylor, "Unnatural Inequalities: Social and Environmental Histories," *Environmental History* 1 (1996): 6–19.

9. See, for example, Gastón R. Gordillo, *Landscapes of Devils: Tensions of Place and Memory in the Argentinean Chaco* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004); Hugh Raffles, *In Amazonia: A Natural History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002); Candace Slater, *Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

trees in Guatemala and Louisiana. To convey these stories, the author identifies significant individual trees and important places where these trees grow. For example, she discusses the massive ceiba tree in Palín, Guatemala, with an entire marketplace beneath its sprawling branches, and Louisiana's Evangeline Oak, which gained recognition through an 1847 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem and continues today to receive more than fifty thousand visitors annually. Anderson interviewed hundreds of residents to understand what made specific trees important. She spoke with school children in Antigua, a naturalist at Tikal, a city worker in Jocotenango who cares for a ceiba he planted twelve years earlier, and many others who shared their arboreal stories. She also delves into history to explain that pre-colonial Maya considered the ceiba the "tree of life" and that Southern plantation owners planted parallel rows of live oaks (called *allées*) along walks and drives. More recently, government road crews, builders, and planners have removed or pruned ceibas and live oaks at their own discretion, sometimes earning the title of "murderer" for cutting trees that locals revered.

Rich in anecdotes, written in accessible prose, and illustrated with dozens of photographs, *Nature, Culture, and Big Old Trees* will appeal to diverse audiences, from undergraduates to professional academics within and beyond Geography. Yet, because the author focuses almost entirely on stories and individuals representing positive tree experiences, it can be difficult to gauge the relative importance or broader meanings of trees to society. Brief references—such as indigenous women lacking sacred feelings for ceibas or vandals defacing prominent trees—suggest that not all local residents venerated trees to the extent that the author conveys. Anderson writes about the majesty and allure of *allées* in Louisiana without recognizing that, to African Americans, *allées* on former slave plantations might conjure negative feelings, or at least something more complex than admiration. Delving more into the diversity of tree meanings and tree relationships beyond Anderson's positive stories could uncover important social divisions and power discrepancies. For instance, state sanctioning of tree removal and pruning for road building points at interesting issues related to how societies prioritize environmental projects or who had (and who lacked) the authority to manipulate nature. Raising these questions only proves that the book presents stimulating research. No reader will look at trees the same again.

*Mapping and Empire* examines maps as a way of representing and controlling environments, in this case the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Not just focusing on maps themselves, the essays examine historical cartographic expeditions that generated maps. The contributors focus innovatively on the role of soldier-engineers—experts associated with Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. militaries—who explored coastlines, watersheds, mountains, and deserts and who created the maps used by each empire as it expanded into

this region. This focus contributes to the history of science by targeting a relatively under-studied group of experts who generated environmental and geographical knowledge. More importantly, by contending that “maps are essential tools of empire” (xviii), the book fits into an ever-expanding literature that interrogates maps—and map-making processes—as tools of conquest, as weapons for states, and as cultural ways of knowing and representing nature.<sup>10</sup> Although many other studies are much more critical of the power embedded in maps, *Mapping and Empire* nonetheless contributes to broader arguments about the historical construction of expertise, empires, and geographical knowledge.

For an edited book, this one holds together better than most. From the first sixteenth-century Spanish naval explorations of the Gulf of Mexico and California coast to the joint 1850s U.S.-Mexican Boundary Commission, the chapters progress chronologically and thematically. Each essay builds on previous ones as they cover a variety of topics: early Spanish explorations and subsequent maps made during the sixteenth century; the rise of engineers as a class of military experts in New Spain; post-1763 activities of the Royal Corps of Engineers that worked with Spanish presidios in northern New Spain and that combined science and art in its map production; the U.S. Corps of Topographical Engineers nineteenth-century mapping of the Great Plains and Southwest, which helped solidify government control over distant lands and advanced cartographic techniques; and the role of U.S. soldier-engineer, Henry Washington Benham, in both aiding troop movements in the U.S.-Mexican War and producing detailed regional maps. All chapters depict historical intersections of science, technology, art, military, and empire. Paula Rebert’s essay on the U.S.-Mexico Boundary Commission (1849–1855) underscores the book’s overarching theme that mapping was as much political as technical. Seeking to show that Mexican engineers were active—not passive—participants in this commission, the author demonstrates that Mexicans contributed to mapping, verified data collected by U.S. engineers, and approved all Boundary Commission maps. Rebert also explains that Mexican engineers were scientifically and technically skilled, but did not participate fully in the Boundary Commission because they never received adequate instruments or support from Mexico City.

An important objective of this book was to showcase the roughly 6,000 maps in Special Collections at the University of Texas at Arlington. Most of the contributors rely heavily on maps in this collection, and dozens of them, including twelve color plates, illustrate the book beautifully.

10. Good examples of this literature on Latin America include D. Graham Burnett, *Masters of All They Surveyed: Exploration, Geography, and a British El Dorado* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Raymond B. Craib, *Cartographic Mexico: A History of State Fixations and Fugitive Landscapes* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004).

Nevertheless, the absence of any theoretical positioning or dialogue with existing literature isolates the essays from scholarly debates. Also, for a book title that links mapping with empire, the authors say surprisingly little about how maps specifically became tools for colonization, settlement, resource extraction, political control, Indian wars, or other aspects of empire expansion. Tantalizing references to hybrid knowledge, local participation in the historical development of maps, and soldier-engineers as intermediaries between states and local people—important topics for history of science and mapping research—indicate buried themes that receive little attention.<sup>11</sup> For example, in a discussion of U.S. military mapping, the author mentions how cartographers called a council of Kiowa Indians in 1845 to help locate topographical features; however, the author does not explain the Kiowa role in mapping, nor the consequences of using Spanish or Mexican maps instead of indigenous “maps.”<sup>12</sup> Even without explicit engagement with ongoing scholarly debates, the accessibly written chapters indicate how maps mediate between humans and their environments, how science and expertise evolve historically, and how borderland maps change over time.

Beyond maps, written texts and images also reveal how people imagine their environments. *Science and the Creative Imagination in Latin America* examines these environmental representations and addresses how Latin Americans have historically produced and reproduced knowledge through science and the humanities. Contributors investigate links between scientific discourses and fictional narratives (novels, poems, artwork, etc.). They reveal how forms of perception and expression emerged in Latin America and, in many cases, reinforced processes of nation state formation. Several chapters are also relevant for the study of historical human-environment relationships in Latin America because they analyze the emergence of knowledge and discourse about specific places. In these essays, authors explore the interplay among landscape, race, nationalism, expertise, and science.

Three chapters offer particularly relevant environmental analyses. First, Dame Gillian Beer investigates how Charles Darwin’s encounters with South America’s distinct landscapes, animals, plants, and people—specifically with the Fuegian savage, the tropical rainforest, and the devastating effects of an earthquake—allowed Darwin to dislodge long-held beliefs about society and environments. Beer’s essay shows how the environment can be an active historical agent and demonstrates how place and experience can influence the historical evolution of science. Second,

11. Craib’s *Cartographic Mexico*, for example, shows how nineteenth-century Mexican surveyors played vital roles as intermediaries between local residents and the state.

12. To imagine how an indigenous “map” of the U.S. Southwest might differ from Spanish, U.S., or Mexican maps, see Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

Benigno Trigo dissects early-nineteenth-century European discourses about American landscapes and inhabitants. Analyzing important writings and illustrations by Alexander von Humboldt, Gaspard Théodore Mollien, Agustín Codazzi's Chorography Commission, and others, Trigo unpacks the relationship between the European Self and the American Other to understand European perceptions of landscape, race, nation, and time. Third, Sylvia Molloy's essay examines historical links between place, science, and nationalism in late-nineteenth-century Argentina. The essay focuses on Francisco P. Moreno, known as "*Perito Moreno*" (Expert Moreno), whose Patagonia expeditions, writings, and collections contributed to national perceptions of Argentina. Molloy contends that Perito Moreno facilitated state control over the Patagonia and its native residents by bringing the people and places to Buenos Aires as specimens, exhibits, names on maps, and natural resources. Her essay dialogs with other scholarship on science and medicine, though other studies generally examine international scales to critique science as forms of European or North American imperialism.<sup>13</sup> Molloy, however, successfully shifts the scale of this research by bringing the issues to a national level and adding rich cultural interpretations.<sup>14</sup>

#### THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

In addition to nonhuman and imagined environments, scholars also recognize the importance of people's interactions with cities and the built environment. In *Return to the Center*, Lawrence Herzog examines this built environment—the urban public spaces in Spain, Mexico, and the United States. Herzog argues that public spaces play vital roles in societies by offering accessible areas for pedestrian-scale, spontaneous intermingling. Without these spaces, the author maintains, quality of life deteriorates significantly, as he suggests it has in U.S. suburbs and sprawling cities. In fact, *Return to the Center* is an emphatic protest against what Herzog calls "placeless suburbs," where residents have lost "community, sense of place, and pedestrian life" (xii). Although the majority of the book presents urban histories in Spain and Mexico, Herzog implicitly directs his arguments about improving urban life toward the United States: the Hispanic model, the author contends, could rescue the country's hollow

13. For example, Nancy Leys Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001); Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); James E. McClellan III, *Colonialism and Science: Saint Domingue in the Old Regime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

14. Stuart McCook, *States of Nature: Science, Agriculture, and Environment in the Spanish Caribbean, 1760–1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002). McCook develops the concept of "creole science" in his work on nation building in Latin America.

societies and lost citizens from the myriad problems that urban sprawl and suburbs generate.

Herzog organizes the book around several case studies. Individual chapters focus on Madrid, Barcelona, Mexico City, and cities along the U.S.-Mexico border, with two additional chapters on the history of urban Spain and on the merging of indigenous Mesoamerican and Spanish urbanization trends in colonial Mexico. According to Herzog, Spain has experienced a crisis of public space and a decline in public life. Cities responded to these crises differently: Madrid failed to produce productive public spaces, whereas Barcelona successfully revitalized its urban areas prior to the 1992 Olympics. Mexico also has both favorable public spaces—such as Querétaro’s “authentic” colonial zone and Mexico City’s Plaza Mayor—and failed spaces, including many plazas and parks in Mexico City’s sprawl. The final substantive chapter critiques public spaces in various cities along the U.S.-Mexico border. Overall, *Return to the Center* has two objectives. On the one hand, it points out the virtues of Barcelona and Querétaro, where vibrant public spaces foster pedestrian interaction. On the other hand, it exposes what Herzog deems the unsuccessful urban spaces of Madrid, parts of Mexico City, and the United States, where poor planning led to few public spaces, unused plazas, and ineffective downtowns.

This book’s diversity of case studies from three countries contributes to comparative urban studies. However, the lack of any concrete characteristics distinguishing successful from unsuccessful urban spaces detracts significantly from its objective. Herzog notes that successful spaces instill a sense of place and promote spontaneous, pedestrian-scale interactions; unsuccessful downtowns, in contrast, lead to urban decay, housing problems, and declining quality of life. But without defining sense of place, community, urban decay, or other concepts, they lose meaning, making it difficult to decipher to whom the terms apply. Surely, quality of life encompasses endless definitions depending on the individual’s vantage point or social position. In short, these vague, highly subjective characteristics offer neither tangible criteria for the evaluation of specific urban spaces nor recommendations to assist policymakers and planners in the future. This ambiguity generates contradictions: while he praises Querétaro and Mexico City’s World Heritage sites for preserving Mesoamerican and colonial culture, he criticizes Santa Fe, New Mexico, for “becoming too culturally defined” (206); while he condemns suburban shopping malls because the privatized space excludes people who do not consume or dress appropriately, he romanticizes Hispanic plazas, even though the state excludes vagrants and street vendors (people who neither dress appropriately nor consume).<sup>15</sup> Herzog’s focus on planning, building, and

<sup>15</sup> Romanticizing city plazas of the past does not hold either because Spain and Mexico controlled public spaces in Mexico City since the eighteenth century. See Pamela Voekel,

design rather than local views or community aspirations conjures a sort of "if you build it they will come" conceptualization of public spaces. This top-down analysis suggests that politicians and architects have sole control over the making (or un-making) of public space. Without such local perspectives, an analysis of social relations, or well-defined criteria to evaluate public spaces, the book's arguments fall short, though it does offer a series of interesting histories on public spaces in Spain, Mexico, and the United States.

#### COMMON TRENDS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

By focusing on hybrid categories of the environment, nature's agency, transnational comparisons, culture, and power relations, the books reviewed here highlight fruitful directions for research on human-environment relations in Latin America, though these themes could be refined and probed more deeply. For one, these books uncover dynamic interactions between people and their environments. Guatemala's ceiba trees may only grow in certain climates and at specific elevations, the Sigatoka Disease destroyed the banana plants it infected, and an earthquake in South America profoundly affected Charles Darwin's view of geology. But ultimately it was humans who conditioned these "natural" forces by deciding where to plant trees or what type of pesticide to spray on bananas or how to interpret seismic activity before the theory of plate tectonics became broadly accepted. As Soluri explains this dialectic between people and environment, "I am less interested in arguing for the primacy of cultural or biological processes than in demonstrating their historical entanglement" (5). By recognizing the agency of nature, identifying interconnected spaces, and exploring cultural, discursive, and mental constructions of the environment, these books advance previous scholarship on the environment in Latin America, which focused more exclusively on natural resources and physical aspects of nature.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to forging increasingly complex conceptualizations of Latin American environments, these books also offer methodological variety and complexity by approaching their topics from global, transnational, and cross-regional perspectives. Some demonstrate how

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"Peeing on the Palace: Bodily Resistance to Bourbon Reforms," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 5, no. 2 (1992): 183–210; Silvia Marina Arrom, *Containing the Poor: The Mexico City Poor House, 1774–1871* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000).

16. This is particularly notable for environmental historians, who generally recognized blurred nature-culture boundaries quite late. See Kristin Asdal, "The Problematic Nature of Nature: The Post-Constructivist Challenge to Environmental History," *History and Theory* 42 (2003): 60–74; Christian Brannstrom, ed., *Territories, Commodities and Knowledges: Latin American Environmental Histories in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2004).

similar processes, agendas, or events played out in different places under distinct historical circumstances, such as Radding's work on Bolivia and Mexico, Anderson's on Guatemala and Louisiana, or Herzog's on Spain, Mexico, and the United States. Others trace how historical processes initiated in one place—for instance, eating bananas in New York or sending engineers from Mexico City and Washington to map the U.S.-Mexico border—triggered repercussions for people and environments elsewhere. However, whether comparing regions or tracing transnational linkages, comparative studies should strive to achieve their mission: to draw substantive conclusions that might not have emerged had the author studied only one region. Too often, however, some of these books neglect the actual comparisons. Organized more predominantly around geographical regions than analytical themes, Anderson's and Radding's books sometimes read like two parallel cases placed in the same monograph. What does the study of trees in Guatemala and Louisiana—two unlikely places to compare—reveal about human-nature relations, environmental management, the culture of trees, or societies in general? Chapters in Anderson's and others' books would be stronger if the authors stepped back to suggest conclusions about larger, comparable processes rather than regions. On the other hand, scholars must take care to avoid comparisons too broadly drawn or unrealistic. Herzog's proposal that Hispanic urban spaces offer a model for U.S. cities neglects significant socio-cultural differences, such as the U.S. dependency on automobiles. In sum, comparative analysis can offer useful, incisive insights, but scholars must be specific (and careful) about what they are comparing and why.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond the trend toward comparative studies, these books also analyze culture to illuminate multiple ways of representing and interacting with environments. By employing cultural analysis, these scholars transcend simplistic tales of environmental degradation and avoid environmental determinism. Further, the unearthing of diverse, sometimes contested environmental knowledge—done especially well in the Fishburn and Ortiz collection—provides a foundation for understanding the ways in which power discrepancies, identity, social relations, and the evolution of expertise influence human-environment relations.<sup>18</sup>

Yet the mere identification of multiple meanings or differing discourses through cultural analysis does not ultimately explain how and why one view of the environment (and not others) wins out in the application of

17. George M. Fredrickson, "From Exceptionalism to Variability: Recent Developments in Cross-National Comparative History," *Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (1995): 587–604.

18. For a good recent study that successfully examines intersections of power, social relations, and environment in Ecuador, see Erik Swyngedouw, *Social Power and the Urbanization of Water: Flows of Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

policies, laws, and management decisions. To untangle these myriad webs of power that affect people's relationship with their environments, a variety of sub-disciplines offer useful analytical tools and methodologies that could be integrated more systematically into Latin American environmental scholarship. These include social history to delineate how race, class, and gender affect human-environment relations; science and technology studies to understand how historical contexts shape the evolution of science, knowledge, and expertise; ethnography to expose diverse cultural meanings among distinct groups; and political ecology to recognize how power and social relations affect interactions with and control over environments.<sup>19</sup> Greater attention to nuances of power relations will yield even more sophisticated studies than these books have already provided. It will also allow research on human-environment relations to illuminate broader social, political, economic, and cultural trends in Latin America.

19. Ted Steinberg, "Fertilizing the Tree of Knowledge: Environmental History Comes of Age," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 2 (2004): 265–277; Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, and Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Karl S. Zimmerer and Thomas J. Bassett, eds., *Political Ecology: An Integrative Approach to Geography and Environment-Development Studies* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2003).