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Review/Reseña

Shawn William Miller, *An Environmental History of Latin America*
Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Nature's Place in (Writing) Latin American History

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Amarás a la naturaleza de la que formas parte.

Eduardo Galeano, "El derecho a soñar."¹

J. Donald Hughes states that "[w]hile Latin Americans and their friends in Europe and North America lament the late start of environmental history in the Spanish-and-Portuguese-speaking realms of

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y15JyHP1jbk>

the New World, and its lack of institutional support, anyone observing the youth, vigor, and productivity of environmental historians there today would certainly sense that the situation is rapidly changing” (73).² Miller has joined successfully those regional, young, vigorous, and productive historians from the American Academy with a solid and well-researched book. More to the point, Miller’s book helps to overcome the limited “recentism” that informs the scholarly production on Latin American Environmental History. According to Andrew Sluyter, despite the healthy number and diversity of articles, “those same contributions do exhibit one notable bias: recentism. They disproportionately focus on the twentieth century, followed closely by an affinity for the nineteenth century.”³ Certainly this is not the case when we read the book reviewed here. Miller’s work has achieved the not minor task of extending and deepening our understanding of pre-Columbian America and early modern (colonial) times in the Americas, and thus contributing to a more comprehensive history of Latin America, which definitely restores its rightful place to nature.

However, if we are to attend to Hughes’s claim that “[world environmental history] is also one of the earliest kinds of environmental history to appear” (78), it is necessary to understand that all local, regional, and national EHs belong as particular pieces of inquiry of a global historiographical (and multidisciplinary) approach to world history, one which records and studies the interplay between humanity and the environment throughout history, since the latter “has had a formative role in every period of history, from ancient times onward” (3). The essential question in the field is the one formulated by Cline Ponting: “How has the environment of the world shaped human history and how have people

² *What is Environmental History?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006.) Hughes provides a detailed list of bibliographical references of environmental histories in Spanish. The reader can also find useful information about Latin American environmental theorists/thinkers, particularly in the field of ethics, in *Encountering Nature. Toward an Environmental Culture* by Thomas Heyd (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2007).

³ Andrew Sluyter, “Recentism in Environmental History on Latin America,” *Environmental History*, 10, 1, January 2005.

shaped and altered the world in which they live?" (7)⁴ The development of an ecological outlook on history is a field that has been part of academia for the last three decades, and it was "born out of a moral purpose, with strong political commitments behind it," although it has become "a scholarly enterprise that had neither any simple, nor any single, moral or political agenda to promote" (290), states Donald Worster, who is established in the field as a pioneer and one of the most influential practitioners of the discipline. In his seminal essay, "History as Natural History: An Essay on Theory and Method" (1984),⁵ Worster formulated a definition of and mission for the "new history" that attempts to "combine once again natural science and history, not into another isolated specialty, but into a major intellectual enterprise that will alter considerably our understanding of historical processes" (2), and, as a consequence, it challenges our egocentric postulations about humanity's independent condition from nature. It is true that humans remain central to green historians, but as Miller says: "History without nature is not only self-serving: it is inaccurate, shortsighted, and potentially perilous to the human story line. For the drama to be complete, we must cast both nature and culture in the role of protagonist, for each have dealt the other health and sickness, aid and harm, and life and death." (2) Likewise, Miller is compelled to put forth a warning that accounts as a sort of justification for doing 'natural history': even though "humans will remain at the center stage in our drama," the inanimate objects, the nonhuman creatures and phenomena, such as soils, metals, parasites, diseases, natural catastrophes, guano, and plant maladies, will also become characters in his plot. (5) This type of approach has become a revolutionary form of writing (about) history—or, at the very

⁴ *A New Green History of the World. The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2007). A similar definition is expressed by Donald Worster in his appendix, "Doing Environmental History", to his edited volume *The Ends of the Earth. Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 289-307): "Its principal goal became one of deepening our understanding of how humans have been affected by their natural environment through time and, conversely, how they have affected that environment and with what results" (290-291).

⁵ Originally published in *The Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Feb., 1984): 1-19. See also chapter 3 ("History as Natural History") in his *The Wealth of Nature* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993), 30-44. Surprisingly enough Worster is not mentioned by Miller.

least, it functions as a counter-history, for it basically (and ideally) reverses the roles of the players in the drama of history on Earth giving a central role to nature. Although Miller clarifies that “[a]ll of our histories need not be environmental, but in some of our histories nature and culture deserve equal billing” (2), his work certainly belongs to this much larger and already global endeavor, often referred to as the “greening” of history. Hughes points out the reason behind this globalized awareness: “Environmental issues in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have increasingly assumed worldwide proportions,” simply because “environmental factors operated beyond single cultures and regions even in early times” (77). That is why Miller makes references and connections to the green history of other geographical locations, such as Europe, North America, Africa, Asia, and at the same time proposes a balanced understanding of what a postcolonial reflection has to contribute to an environmental history of Latin America, since colonialism and postcolonial conditions have had a major impact in this region as well as on world history.⁶

Miller is a professor of history who specializes in the colonial period and the environmental history of Brazil and Latin America. Currently, he serves as Department Chair of the History Department at the same university.⁷ His book, *Fruitless Trees: Portuguese Conservation and Brazil's Colonial Timber* (2000), offers an ecological perspective on the history of Brazil, analyzing an aspect of the colonial economy that previously has not been studied thoroughly, which is the timber industry and its importance within the colony and on the transatlantic scene. The focus on colonial Brazil and the tropical landscape is also apparent in the articles written by Miller. Although Brazil is often the focal point of his latest book, *An Environmental History of Latin America* (2007), it intends to offer a coherent and systematic formulation of Latin America's

⁶ Of use to complement and further this regional and world (post)colonial approach is Andrew Sluyter's *Colonialism and Landscape. Postcolonial Theory and Applications* (Oxford, England: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002).

⁷ The reader may want to consult Professor Miller's institutional webpage: <http://history.byu.edu/fac/miller/index.htm>

environmental history,⁸ a relatively new discipline that is gradually defining itself: "As the field is new, consistently bear in mind that we have only just begun to seek answers to questions about the historical experience in tropical nature, and we have certainly not yet asked the most important questions" (xi). By examining Miller's scholarly production, it is readily apparent that this study stems from his previous research and is an unmistakable part of an ongoing, larger, individual and collective project.

Miller's work positions itself in this field by taking 'history as natural history' of Latin America and producing a synthesis of a historical perspective for the region. Its aim is as follows: "This is a history of humans and nature in the Neotropics, the bioregion of tropical and subtropical America that ranges from Mexico and the Caribbean well down into South America's southern cone. [...] My primary focus, however, will be on humans striving to make themselves a tropical home." (2-3) The book, which covers six centuries, expands the boundaries of environmental studies, covering a broad area of subjects such as technology, politics, economy, religion, and ethics, and incorporating various disciplines, for example geography, anthropology, literature, and natural sciences. *An Environmental History of Latin America* is a solid and exemplary interdisciplinary study that seeks to comprehend the processes that are both environmental and social, and boldly defies our paradigm based on anthropocentric values and the utopia of unlimited development. It also proposes a new ethics for our civilization by studying one of the major events in history: the conquest and colonization of America, "a seminal event, one of the hinges on which swings the modern world" (49).⁹

⁸ See resources on the subject online: a) <http://www.stanford.edu/group/LAEH/index.html>, b) <http://www.csulb.edu/projects/laeh>. Mark Carey, under the title of "The Nature of Place. Recent Research on Environment and Society in Latin America," has reviewed six scholarly books focusing on the study of "human-environment interactions," which in these cases "have moved beyond traditional investigations of natural resources, export crops, or conservation." Their themes range from banana cultures in Honduras and the United States, landscape, power and identity in the Sonora desert and the Amazonia, in Louisiana and Guatemala, public spaces and city building, mapping and Empire, to science and creative imagination. *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 42, N° 3 (October 2007): 251-264.

⁹ The inclusion of an environmental-history concern is what one misses when reading excellent books, particularly if they are intended to be revisionist endeavors, such as *Revisiting the Colonial Question in Latin America*

As we have indicated, Miller narrates Latin America's environmental past spanning six centuries, from ancient Amerindian civilizations to today's asphyxiated urban habitats, covering a broad range of subjects, from the specialized topic of Tupi agriculture to contemporary popular environmentalism. However, the overall focus of his book lays on "humans striving to make themselves a tropical home" (3), which takes the reader directly to the notion of sustainability. The main concern of the environmental history practiced by Miller is, then, the question of sustainability, which, in contrast to sustainable development, puts more emphasis on duration and survival of a civilization than on its material progress per se. Marius de Geus has recently presented a 'brief history' of this concept, showing how controversial and malleable it can be after more than a century since its inception in Western culture, and pointing out that it "has become one of the most 'polluted' concepts of the last two decades." (24)¹⁰ He concludes that: "At this point of time, it seems vital to restrict the meaning and give concrete form to the concept again, to make it viable once more as a starting point for action and to ascertain that it can be used as a useful guide to policy making." (24) The problem of sustainability—as well as the definition of environmental history in this line of thoughts, and the presentation of supporting statistical material—is a recurring motive in Miller's book. The introductory pages, entitled "Props and Scenery," provide proofs of the author's efforts to restrict the concept and restore its viability. In the context of sustainability, the author focuses on four major themes: "population, technology, attitudes toward nature, and attitudes toward consumption" (4). Miller analyzes the contradictory relationship in recent years between our unprecedented environmental awareness and devastating actions, reminding us of Wallace Stegner's somehow sad but revealing statement: "nature appreciation and natural destruction are

(Madrid/Frankfurt: Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 2008), edited by Mabel Moraña and Carlos A. Jáuregui.

¹⁰ *The End of Over-consumption. Toward a Lifestyle of Moderation and Self-restraint* (Utrecht, Netherlands, 2003). The author introduces this evaluation by observing that "'sustainability' becomes a prime example of an open political concept, an abstract formula with which every imaginable party can agree, because the term sounds well and appeals to the ear. Nowadays, sustainability expresses a politically correct intention: it constitutes an adequate cloak under which the most varied political compromises can be achieved, but no longer induces radical and stringent environmental measures." (24)

utterly compatible" (5). The paradoxical meaning of Stegner's observation explains another of Miller's stances. He is fully aware that "sustainability is largely a human-centered aspiration. It promises nothing to the rest of nature's health and survival, just to that of humans." In analyzing sustainability as our foremost cultural goal, the author expresses a necessity to "grant nonhuman life, even inanimate landscapes, fuller consideration as regards their own rights to sustainable existence" (6). Sustainability, then, leads to the question of nature's rights. In Miller's book that impels us to give nature its just and legitimate place on history's stage, as well as privileges to which it should have a lawful claim, an issue that already has appeared in many environmental discourses.¹¹ The goal of history is to "expand human memory beyond a single generation" and "recover, in a sense, what has been lost, and to make it dear to our historical consciousness" (5). In order to achieve this goal, according to Miller, it is necessary to include nature in the reflections on our past. Also, it is important to include it in our vision of the future, because, in our mortal battle with nature, "true victory cannot envisage *Homo sapiens* as the last one standing." All of these aspects are part of the "Introduction", which ends in a combined tragic, apocalyptic, utopian, and even futuristic tone, urging us to a revolutionary change that would question material progress and success, as well as reestablish the relationship between human beings and the universe. His vision of the future implies a hypothesis that human-caused destruction of the environment is imminent and the action to prevent it must be instantly applied. Such projection of the future entails a radical adjustment of our attitudes toward nature, the necessity of reexamining our values, reorienting our cultural goals, and stimulating environmental awareness, "[e]ven if our civilizations will hereafter not require the biodiversity that much of the rest of nature provides, the next evolution in environmental thought must be the realization that we desperately want it anyway" (7).

¹¹ Teresa Vicente Giménez, in her book *Justicia ecológica y protección del medio ambiente* (Madrid: Trotta, 2002), offers a theory of environmental justice in the context of ethics, politics and law, as well as a new paradigm of ecological justice for our civilization.

Miller's *Environmental History of Latin America* is at once chronologically and topically organized, but distinctive time sequences serve to design chapters and the course of analysis. In addition to the Introduction, the book's structure encompasses seven chapters, an "Epilogue", "Suggested Further Readings", and a good number of maps and illustrations that provide a necessary visual supplement.

In the first chapter, "An Old World Before It Was 'New'", Miller challenges certain myths and misconceptions that have shaped our historical perspective since, in Miller's words, the "so-called 'New World,' once removed from the perspective of Columbus' astonishing landfall, is seen more accurately as just another old world" (8-9). The purpose here is to offer an alternative, critical view on commonly accepted historical interpretations, to examine the attitudes of Amerindians as well as Europeans toward nature and consumption, and to recover the history of environmental sustainability among indigenous populations, such as Tupis, Aztecs, and Andeans, particularly in contrast with practices brought by Europeans. The first myth is that of a pristine pre-Columbian America, an image of a virgin land that justified its conquest. Referring to recent scholarship that has deconstructed many of our racial assumptions about the superiority of European culture, the author persuasively points out that pre-contact America had been more abundantly populated than estimated by the scholars in the 1930s, and that pre-Columbian civilizations had been more advanced than previously believed. Another important myth that Miller questions is that of "the Indian as proto-ecologist" (26), claiming that the native inhabitants of the American continent, like all humans, used—and sometimes abused—nature to meet their material needs. By disarming the myths, the author investigates nature's contribution to various civilizations' successes, as well as their downfalls.

In the second chapter, "Nature's Conquest", which spans the centuries from the pre-encounter to colonial times, Miller discusses how the New World was created, focusing on the nature's role in shaping Latin American civilizations. Without denying the importance of the Iberians' ambition and military successes in the conquest of America, the author emphasizes nature's significant role on history's stage in refashioning the

New World—for instance, the depopulation caused by epidemic diseases and biodiversity's gains resulting from the import of new animals and plants to the continent and the decrease in population: "With fewer people, the land's evolution was driven by natural processes instead of human aspirations" (56). Additionally, Miller examines European attitudes toward nature and their lack of familiarity with the American land in order to explain the disastrous consequences of the Iberian practice of draining lakes. While for the Indians, the lakes of the Valley of Mexico were the foundation of their civilization, providing them with food and a transportation network, for the Spaniards they were "an ongoing annoyance and frequently a disaster" (71). Perceived as a repository for sewage, a breeding ground for disease, and a source of constant flooding, the lakes began to be drained, "an obsession for which the conquistadors and their descendants struggled for 400 years" (71). In the course of the analysis, the author makes a solid case, showing beyond a doubt that it was "nature, not culture, [which] managed most of the New World transformations" (76).

The third chapter, "The Colonial Balance Sheet", is an examination of the factors that contributed to the New World commercial revolution and the consequences of agricultural expansion for the region's nature and culture. An element that played a crucial role in the process of globalization was the transcontinental sailing ship—the link to the rest of the world that made "the commercial connection between the earth's continents permanent" (80). Miller also observes that, paradoxically, despite the destruction caused by sugar and silver processing, overall the era was a period of nature's regeneration: "It was both colonial America's tiny population and colonialism's multifarious commercial restrictions that permitted many of America's ancient wounds to heal" (79). Investigating the transition from colonial restrictions on the use of resources to liberal economic ideas brought about by Latin American independence, the author persuasively argues that the sustainability of Latin America's natural resources was profoundly affected, by putting more emphasis on the countries' material progress rather than on their long-term ability to provide for themselves and future generations.

The fourth chapter, "Tropical Determinism," investigates the post-colonial transition toward industrial capitalism that leads to ecological unsustainability, and examines the role nature played in this process. Miller begins by analyzing racist dogmas and environmental determinism, both of which form a unified theory that certain races were created by certain climates. According to the author, it was social injustice that constituted the primary obstacle to Latin America's economic success. Another set of factors that are analyzed, in the context of the region's material progress, are environmental disasters and tropical diseases. As the tropical fungi in Panama caused a tremendous damage to banana groves, "banana republics" were created in order to sustain the export of the fruit to the United States. Consequently, the process greatly contributed to the nations' rapidly growing industrialization and economic expansion(ism). According to Miller, "economic imperialism in Central America was to be expected even without tropical fungi" (135), however, "the story would have been much different if nature had stayed out of the narrative" (135).

The fifth chapter, "Human Determination", focuses on the unrecoverable changes to ecological balance in the twentieth century and the emergence of consumer society. Miller explores the power shift in human relations with nature, a transition "to the human camp, which makes the twentieth century a rather different story from that we have addressed thus so far" (137), and the consequences of cultural progress in Latin America. In the process of analyzing the transition toward modernization and culture's empowerment, the author mentions the most significant differences between the period discussed and the previous centuries, for instance, the impact of fossil fuels. Miller's principal focus in this chapter is to illustrate how the damage to nature turns out to be harmful to culture itself, and to do so he discusses three main events: the construction of Mexico City's Gran Canal, the discovery of guano, and the construction of dams. To conclude his reflection on the environmental abuses, modernization and material progress, he poses a question regarding our dependence on and addiction to fossil fuels, and the lack of effort to reduce the need for them while enhancing standards of living.

The focus of the sixth chapter, “Asphyxiated Habitats: The Urban Environment”, is the city—“the overwhelmingly preferred habitat for Latin Americans” (169). Miller describes its development from colonial times to contemporary age, and also speculates about the future—whether “civilization’s success will stand or fall on the sustainability of its cities” (168). Apart from examining the impact of the modern motorized city on our health and environment, particular emphasis is put on the cultural loss for the Latin American community, where the street, instead of continuing to be an interesting and desirable place to meet, has become noisy, polluted, and dangerous. To offer an example of a city that manifests human creativity and desire for permanence, the author describes the Brazilian city of Curitiba as proof that it is possible to enhance standards of living while reducing our dependence on cars. As a result of his speculation on the future ecological problems of Latin America, Miller proposes a solution, which is the “dense city”—well-planned, built, and administered.¹² Since the region is among the most heavily urbanized in the world, “The city is Latin America’s biggest environmental problem and its only solution” (192). According to Miller’s eco-biological conception of the city as “multicelled organism” (162), “the city becomes part of the environment” (162), and thus an environmental challenge.

The seventh chapter, “Developing Environmentalism”, focuses on the meaning and several central aspects of environmentalism, offering a theoretical base for the analysis of this concept. Apart from defining the term, Miller investigates its origins, development, and the role it plays in society as a political movement. The place of Latin America in global environmentalism is also analyzed since the region’s ecological problems

¹² Miller’s view represents an unconventional approach that is becoming more ecologically sounding nowadays, and it has been coined as “Live urban.” See the collective article “Attention Environmentalists [...] Inconvenient Truths In the Age of Climate Change...” in the June 2008 issue of *Wired*. Matt Power’s entry “Live in cities,” states that “[t]he fact is, urban living is kinder to the planet,” and he goes on to explain why Manhattan, for instance, “is perhaps the greenest place in the US.” (158) Another interesting new approach to the historical understanding of current environmental problems, particularly those concerning the role of agriculture in shaping our modern way of life as specie, is *Culture Quake. The End of Modern Culture and the Birth of a New World* (Victoria, BC, Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2008) by Chuck Burr
<http://www.culturequake.org/Culturequake/Home/Home.html>

have caused significant concern among other nations. According to the author, the reason for that is “the geographic proximity and cultural linkages that the most environmentally progressive nations have to Latin America: the region forms North America’s backyard and remains the most European of Europe’s former empires” (194). Another important aspect examined in this context is the role of environmental history, which is the awakening of historical awareness of nature: “Latin America has yet to exhume her environmental prophets, individuals who were ignored by their contemporaries and buried without eulogy or epitaph” (203).¹³ Miller also investigates the reasons why the promotion of green actions and the sincere commitment to the cause in Latin America are rather superficial. Some of the obstacles to environmentalism are non-democratic political systems, poverty, and hypocrisy, as well as the imposition of governmental environmental policies instead of bottom up initiatives by the people. Finally, after reflecting upon the disastrous consequences of tourism in the Yucatan, Miller makes a prophetic statement that takes us back to the introduction of the book, reminding us again that, unless we fundamentally change our values and adjust our lifestyles, the beginning of the end is in sight.

The epilogue of Miller’s book, “Cuba’s Latest Revolution”, offers a reflection on our dependence on petroleum and synthetic fertilizers, which is a threatening prospects for the future. The waning of cheap oil that allows for the import and long-distance transportation of food and the threat of environmental disasters that will prevent sustainable fertility are real, indeed, and so, our mission should be to find long-term solutions to the crisis we are facing. The principal objective of this chapter is to demonstrate that an ecological revolution is possible and to provide an example of such a possibility. In this context, Miller analyzes the situation of Cuba after the country “lost its petrochemical lifeline” (230) in 1989,

¹³ While criticizing the lack of spiritual appreciation of nature in the region, Miller does not mention for instance *Dignitas terrae: ecologia, grito da terra, grito dos pobres* (São Paulo, SP: Editora Atica, 1995) and other works by Leonardo Boff, a prominent advocate of the environmental cause, whose long-established scholarly production has helped to formulate a new ecological and spiritual paradigm for our civilization. Considering that Miller’s research area is Brazil and Boff is Brazilian, this is a noteworthy omission.

demonstrating how “the largest experiment in organic agriculture” (231) was achieved. One of the greatest challenges to farmers was the lack of fertilizers, which gradually was solved thank to the use of animal manure, vermiculture, and crop rotation. Another important factor that contributed to the success of the revolution was the shift of farming from the countryside to the city. Even though Cuba’s agriculture is still not completely sustainable and it is not certain whether this transition will continue, the country’s response to the national food crisis “has become a potential model for the future of agriculture” (235). According to Miller, Cubans have discovered “the most basic of human knowledge: the origin of our food, how it is produced, or at what environmental cost” (234), a discovery that is currently in conflict with the modern world’s priorities: “The power of oil has separated us from the elemental roots of our biological existence and in doing so blinds us to its accumulating damages and obscures its threatened future” (234).

In sum, out of the many merits of *An Environmental History of Latin America* we want to emphasize its global scope. While the main focus of Miller’s environmental study is Latin America, its impact is much wider, provoking the reader to a serious reflection on the current ecological world crisis. According to Guillermo Castro Herrera, the “weakness of the Latin American institutional organization for a historical approach to the environmental problems of the region” is apparent, and therefore, a “first task for the creation of an environmental history in Latin America must be that of developing itself not in isolation, but in a simultaneous dialogue with both its counterparts in other places of the world and its own societies in the region.”¹⁴ Miller’s book addresses this local, regional perspective in the context of the global ecological crisis past and present, and as such it makes an indispensable contribution to the polemic on the concept of sustainability, one of the most relevant and urgent problems of our time, thus giving Latin America a central and strategic place in the discussion. Miller’s intervention is thought-provoking, wide-ranging, thoroughly

¹⁴ See his article “Environmental History (Made) in Latin America”, <http://www.h-net.org/~environ/historiography/latinam.htm>

researched, and filled with fascinating historical details. Due to its interdisciplinary approach, it expands the boundaries of environmental studies, and seeks to comprehend a process that is both environmental and social, but where nature is not despoiled of its central role in shaping human experience on Earth. While creating an excellent panorama of the environmental history of Latin America and its global implications, beginning with an invaluable survey of pre-Colombian, discovery and colonial considerations, and concluding with a discussion of current practices and future developments, Miller offers an alternative, critical and groundbreaking account of commonly accepted historical interpretations, challenging the arguments of previous scholarship, and decisively posing the need of an ethical approach toward our earthly home. All of these factors make Miller's book an invaluable contribution to the field of world and Latin American green history, a book that will serve both as a *relación* (a type of 21st Century chronicle, if we are to suggest a fruitful comparison to the best pages of those colonial historical accounts of the region), and as a guide for past events, present circumstances, and a project to be carried on by historians, politicians and students interested in environmental studies.