



Vol. 4, No. 1, Fall 2006, 146-151

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Review/Reseña

Cynthia Radding. *Landscapes of Power and Identity: Comparative Histories in the Sonoran Desert and the Forests of Amazonia from Colony to Republic*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005)

Unexpected Comparabilities: Environment and Society, Colony and Republic in Two Corners of the Spanish Empire

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Landscapes in Power and Identity is a deeply original work of historical scholarship that opens multiple pathways of analysis into indigenous societies, colonialism, and the environment in Latin America. The book departs from a disarmingly simple reflection: both the province of Sonora in what is now northern Mexico, and of Chiquitos, in eastern Bolivia were politically and economically marginal regions of Spain's New World empire initially colonized by

Jesuit missionaries, and they remained largely—though in the case of Sonora, less fully—indigenous and only “partially colonized” throughout the colonial period (19). Despite these similarities, they had quite different ecosystems, which helps to explain their differing historical trajectories during the period between the consolidation of the Bourbon reforms around 1750 and the moment when the national states began to consolidate a century later. Radding shows that native peoples in both places underwent a complex and incomplete process of ethnogenesis brought about by mission life and, later, independence and nationhood. Yet geography and environmental and other factors led Sonorans to engage with European political and economic forms to a far greater extent than their Chiquitano counterparts. Among other differences, this produced the disintegration of the mission life in Sonora and the continued viability of the corporate mission economy in Chiquitos, leading to different forms of cultural blending in each case.

Radding’s work unfolds chronologically, beginning with a geographical and historical overview of the two regions around the moment of European contact. In a neat historical twist, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca—the most famous survivor of the ill-fated 1527 Pánfilo de Narváez expedition to Florida—not only trekked through Sonora in 1536 en route to the sanctuary of Mexico City, but later became the royal overseer (*Adelantado*) of the province of Río de la Plata that included Chiquitos. By the time Cabeza de Vaca passed through Sonora, the great *Casas Grandes* culture had long been in decline, and perhaps a dozen ethnic groups lived within one of three varied landscapes ranging from highlands to desert lowlands. Yet the arid and semi-arid landscape forced native peoples to migrate as part of their basic subsistence strategy (a topic Radding more fully addressed in her first English language book, *Wandering Peoples: Colonialism, Ethnic Spaces, and Ecological Frontiers in Northwestern Mexico, 1780-1850*. Durham, NC: Duke University

Press, 1997). Cross-cultural contact, collaboration, and friction were all but inevitable in such circumstances, though by the colonial period the Jesuits and their successors arrived and began trying to concentrate populations within Spain's signature mission "reductions" (*reducciones*) beginning in 1591.

When Cabeza de Caca ventured into Chiquitos, scouting the social and physical landscapes in search of an overland route from the silver mines of the highlands, Radding shows that he found a seemingly diametric case to the multiple ethnicities and hardscrabble life of northern New Spain. Located on the great savanna east of the Andean foothills and south of the Amazon basin, Chiquitos is humid, flat, and far more lush than Northern New Spain. It was settled by an indigenous people known as Chiquitanos whose common language led Spanish colonialists to define them as a single ethnic group. This more hospitable climate allowed Chiquitanos to adopt less peripatetic subsistence strategies than indigenous Sonorans but its strategic location on the frontier with the Portuguese colony of Brazil to the east and the great highlands silver mines to the west, along with the favorable conditions for agriculture, led the Jesuits to establish missions there beginning in the 1690s.

Indigenous society in both regions therefore revolved around missions even though the Jesuit enterprise began a century later in Chiquitos than in Sonora. The Jesuits shaped ethnic spaces through their forced settlement policies (though to a lesser extent in Sonora than Chiquitos), though Radding shows as well that indigenous people had their own reasons for submitting to mission life in order to escape both intertribal warfare and the labor demands of Spanish colonists. Jesuit Missionaries also functioned as the primary emissaries of colonial authority until their expulsion in 1767, though truncated structures of indigenous authority continued to function among these communities until well into the nineteenth century. The missions likewise introduced new agricultural techniques in both

places. Radding demonstrates, however, that these were conditioned by the environmental conditions and pre-Hispanic agricultural systems of each region. This is not to say that missions were the only colonial intrusions on indigenous communities. In both places as well, many communities had to render forced service: on *encomiendas* (feudal-like land grants that gave owners the rights to periodic labor drafts of indigenous peoples) in the case of Chiquitos; and in the mines as part of labor *repartimiento* in the case of the Pima and Opata people of Sonora. At a greater remove, indigenous peoples also found that the mining complexes in their respective regions created some demand for agricultural goods hence, their labor on mission lands.

By the late colonial period, which is the primary focus of the book and accounts for roughly five of its eight chapters, colonialism had wrought major changes to the cultural and physical landscapes of Sonora and Chiquitos. A series of thematic chapters shows that, while colonialism fundamentally reordered indigenous societies and landscapes, it did so incompletely and intermittently. Radding begins with the formation of market and commercial networks during the Jesuit period and their erosion or outright sacking by clerics non-clerics after the 1767 expulsion. The Jesuit's introduction of European livestock, agriculture, and modes of economic exchange, Radding shows in the following chapter, conditioned the way that Sonoran and Chiquitano peoples conceived of and sought to control landscape and territory. In both areas, livestock pasturage ended up as the driving force of local economy, leading to conflicts over land, water, and labor that, Radding explains, played out quite differently in the two radically distinct ecological and cultural spaces.

Subsequent chapters continue the thematic investigation of colonialism: Radding considers the (re)construction of social divisions based on ethnicity, class, and gender, showing for example that different colonial experiences in each produced alternate

understandings of ethnic categorization and processes of *mestizaje*; the changing and gendered nature of public authority in indigenous communities (and particularly the *cabildo*, or community council); and, in a fascinating chapter on religion, the manner in which Catholicism transformed indigenous faith, adding new beliefs and architectures to indigenous people's existing sacred landscapes.

Independence, Radding shows, brought further change to the two frontier regions. In perhaps one of the most powerful chapters of the book, Radding's discussion of the early republican era shows that the slow unraveling of colonialism after independence renewed the pressures on indigenous communities and their holdings. Unlike Sonora, the mission economy survived in Chiquitos after independence (complete with barter as the main form of exchange), yet drought and illness undermined the provincial economy. While creole landowners depended on the same economy, they nevertheless tentatively began to seek greater control over the land. In Sonora, indigenous peoples had been dragged more fully into the Hispanic world thanks to the commodification of their lands and its fruits, as well as to the existence of military *presidios* and a growing regional economy. To an even greater extent than Chiquitos, non-indigenous historical actors dispossessed indigenous people of their land and colonial privileges, creating tensions that led to an open conflict (and massacre of O'ohdam people) in 1840. Radding concludes by investigating the transformation of southern Chiquitos into a disputed frontier between Bolivia and Paraguay and the parallel efforts to develop it for ranching and agriculture by erasing existing natural and built landscapes. In Sonora as well, the frontier became a borderland, complete with ethnic, economic, and strategic importance.

This somewhat lengthy *précis* was necessary, I think, to give some sense of the book's thematic breadth, and particularly its sensitive treatment of environmental history. Rather than dedicating

a chapter here or there to “the human impact on the environment” or “environmental influences on social forms,” Radding returns once and again to relatively brief examinations of the interrelationship between the environment and social change, as if to remind readers of the constancy of her subjects’ dependence on their respective ecosystems. Of course, this is no accident. As we have seen, Radding intends *Landscapes* as, in large part, an investigation into how environmental factors—which she construes broadly to include geography, the location of political boundaries, climate, disease, drought, and so on—help to account for the differences and similarities in the historical experiences of Chiquitos and Sonora. She does not imply that environmental differences *alone* explain the disparities in the two region’s social histories but rather teases out the multiple interactions between her subjects and the spaces in which they live. *Landscapes of Power and Identity* does not propose to give us a tidy historical social-scientific model; rather, it provides an analytic narrative of political ecology at a particularly pivotal moment in Latin American history.

As such, it is fair to say that Radding’s work inaugurates a new stage in Latin American environmental history. While magisterial works by the late Elinor Melville and Warren Dean foregrounded the human impact on native ecosystems as a unidirectional process, Radding points to a more reciprocal relationship between society and “nature.” In the end, *Landscapes of Power and Identity* traces the rich, fascinating, and sometimes complicated history of how indigenous societies’ interactions with exogenous institutions such as the church, state, hacienda, and other ethnic groups, as well as with the natural and built environments, influenced but did not obliterate their existing social structures, subsistence, and cultural practices. It deserves a broad readership among ethnohistorians, environmental historians, and scholars interested in state-of-the-art comparative history.