

# H-Net Reviews

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**Cynthia Radding.** *Landscapes of Power and Identity: Comparative Histories in the Sonoran Desert and the Forests of Amazonia from Colony to Republic.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. xxiv + 432 pp. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-3652-5.

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## **Comparative Frontiers, Borderlands, Cultures, and Environments in Colonial and Early Republican Latin America**

Although *Landscapes of Power and Identity* has now been out for a few years and has been widely reviewed in many venues, it is worthwhile to consider here. Cynthia Radding has written a very fine work of ethnohistory that examines the native peoples of northwestern Mexico and compares their experience during the Spanish colonial and early Mexican national years with that of the peoples of the eastern province of Chiquitos in Bolivia during the same time periods. Perhaps the author should have made the Bolivian aspect a bit clearer in the book's subtitle, instead of the imprecise "forests of Amazonia" that will lead only a few people to think of Bolivia.

It also is not entirely clear why Radding chose Chiquitos as the comparative of Sonora, where she has done extensive previous research and for which she is best known. In her introduction, she tries to explain her reasons: "Why compare these two regions that, at first glance, appear so dramatically distant from each other?" Replying, she suggests that the two regions "are not merely case studies of colonial formations in the Americas; rather their histories together illustrate the cultural and environmental complexities of frontier societies better than each could do alone" (p. xviii). But to this reader, that argument and comparison is not convincing, and instead they come across as forced. More understandable would be a comparison of two desert areas in the Spanish New World (perhaps the Chaco region of Paraguay

and Bolivia that is similar in many ways to the Sonoran Desert, or the Atacama Desert of northern Chile). In many ways, her choice of regions makes the book different and provocative (almost like two books in one, given its length), but not necessarily useful as a comparative tool. It is not that I do not agree with what the intended goals are here; it is more that Radding did not convince me that these two regions are worthy of this in-depth comparison. Operationally, each chapter deals with various themes from both regions alternating between discussing Sonora or Chiquitos first, and always with some concluding analysis tying the two together, or pointing to their differences. But the uniqueness is missing; many of the same conclusions could apply to anywhere in the Spanish colonial realm. Like contrasting any two regions in the world, some of the comparisons are predictably the same and some are predictably not.

Comparisons aside, the book shines as a work of carefully crafted ethnohistorical research and writing. Readers will be especially impressed with Radding's attention to a wide variety of themes relating to the native peoples in her areas of study. Those include the "linkages between power and ethnic identity" expressed through caciques and native councils, the roles of men and women in indigenous communities, the role of spiritual power and rituals, shamans, sacred spaces, and the blending of religions (p. 162). As she explains, the book "ex-

amines ethnic mosaics in the world that Indians and Spaniards created through the Jesuit mission enterprise and in the landscapes they molded from the eighteenth century to the end of colonial rule.â Further, Radding explores âthe colonial society that enveloped Indian communities in webs of interdependency, by comparing different rhythms of ethnic mixture in Sonora and Chiquitosâ (p. 118). By studying Jesuit records, colonial texts, and censuses, she discovered how various indigenous groups in both regions negotiated their sense of place under colonial rule, and reworked their âcultural identities that connoted lines of commonality and affiliation, as well as boundaries of difference and exclusion—expressed through territorial claims, linguistic patterns, and societal normsâ (p. 121). Over time, these indigenous communities mixed with mestizos to form new social organizations and relationships within the Spanish frontier system. Thus, she argues, âethnicity is not so much a fixed category as a historical process of changing identities and translationsâ that, along with âgendered relationships,â created the âconfiguration of secular and spiritual power within native communities across the colonial divideâ (pp. 159-160).

But *Landscapes of Power and Identity* offers far more than just a comparative and ethnohistorical look at the histories of Sonora, Mexico, and Chiquitos, Bolivia. The bookâs great strength is that it is rich in cultural history, political economy, gender history (analysis that is nicely folded into each chapter, not ghettoized apart), and social and cultural ecology. It is very much an environmental history that should be considered as a keystone work in the fast growing Latin American historiography of that subdiscipline. As the main title of the book suggests, there is a great deal of landscape (read, âlived spaces,â [p. 5]) history here and it is central, not tangential, to Raddingâs focus. To help explore this environmental history dimension, she employs the concept of social ecology that links âterritory, space, and humanly crafted landscapes to explain different rhythms and stakes of conflict over material resources in mixed environments of foraging..., cultivation, and pastoralismâ (p. 89). She thus concludes the book by stating that, for her study, ânature matters not so much because the environment conditions what people do, but because the landscapes through which we perceive nature are themselves the work of human agencyâ (p. 326). That is well put and

applies well to this study.

Finally, the book is very much a model in borderlands history. In fact, it covers two distinct bordered regions: the old Spanish borderlands of North America (northwest New Spain) and that fascinating intersection of Spanish and Portuguese colonies in interior South America. Radding discusses these two regions equally, analyzing them in terms of frontier zones of interaction and their natural environments between and among a variety of indigenous peoples, and the invading European societies and religious orders that imposed new ways on them. Radding explains that the âecological, ethnic, and geopolitical boundaries that intersected both of these provinces belie a fixed notion of regionality and lead us to examine the historical construction of space comparatively over timeâ (p. 8). These âcultural and ecological borderlandsâ are most pronounced in chapter 8, entitled âContested Landscapes in Continental Borderlandsâ (p. 162). There, Radding offers insightful information and analysis on the geopolitics of the two regions, especially as they ended being colonial spaces of Spain and became peripheral provinces of emerging new nations.

Radding defines all of these interwoven subdisciplines in her work as being âmultistranded approachesâ (p. 5). But her work is also multidisciplinary in that it draws heavily on history, geography, and anthropology. Mixing those disciplines at times results in jargonistic language throughout the book. Jargon is not necessarily bad; however, in some places in the book it becomes repetitive and cumbersome, thereby distracting from a fuller understanding of some of the central themes. Other distractions can be seen in some odd inconsistencies throughout the book—e.g., some chapters have subtitles and others do not, some chapters have epigraphs and others do not, some of the early maps in the book are not placed where they applied to the chapter or theme at hand, and, oddest of all, the book includes a very comprehensive introduction without any corresponding conclusion. The book simply stops at the end of chapter 8. These inconsistencies, however, are merely that, and possibly could be more the decision of the publisher than of the author. Otherwise, this is a soundly researched and well-written book about the ethnohistory of peoples and regions on two distinct peripheries of the Spanish colonial empire.

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