

Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 16

June 2008

Landscapes of Power and Identity: Comparative Histories in the Sonoran Desert and the Forests of Amazonia from Colony to Republic

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Recommended Citation

Brown, Michael F. (2008). "Landscapes of Power and Identity: Comparative Histories in the Sonoran Desert and the Forests of Amazonia from Colony to Republic," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 16.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol6/iss1/16>

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En suma, se trata de un libro que es bienvenido para aquellos que presos de las taxonomías académicas hemos olvidado el carácter cultural de nuestro modo de escuchar y consecuentemente, cerrado nuestros oídos a aquellas prácticas culturales que, como la música, encienden los principios del conocimiento y la acción de sociedades cuyo modo de representar y actuar se cifra precisamente “*en todas esas pequeñas cosas que no hace falta decir*” (Descola 2001: 106). Una deuda pendiente en una disciplina que se jacta de tener como su principal habilidad el saber mirar, escuchar y escribir (Cardoso de Oliveira 2001) y que sin embargo, ha cerrado sus oídos al carácter vertebral de la música en la cultura.

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Landscapes of Power and Identity: Comparative Histories in the Sonoran Desert and the Forests of Amazonia from Colony to Republic. Cynthia Radding. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005. 432 pp., 27 figures, 2 maps, 19 tables, bibliography, index. \$89.95 (cloth), \$24.95 (paper). ISBN 0-8223-3652-9. [www.dukeupress.edu]

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Comparison has fallen on hard times in anthropology, a discipline in which comparing one society’s institution or practice to another’s is increasingly said to misrepresent both. At a recent conference, I heard it declared that comparison is an intrinsically colonialist practice, and no voices were raised in objection. In this milieu, the book under review represents an act of startling intellectual boldness, perhaps because as a historian its author feels unburdened by anthropology’s new pieties. The result is a work of prodigious erudition and

rigor that exemplifies the possibilities of comparison as well as its challenges.

Cynthia Radding, much of whose research has previously focused on the Mexican borderlands in the colonial and early republican periods, conceives of this book as an attempt at systematic comparison of two regions, Sonora in Northern Mexico and Chiquitos Province in eastern Bolivia. Her perspective, as she defines it, is primarily that of social ecology, which “conveys the linkages between human and material resources *and* the political implications for their possession and use by competing social groups” (5). Sonora and Chiquitos have radically different natural environments—the former arid and mountainous, the latter tropical and mostly flat—but they share several important social ecological features, including their location on the edge of the Spanish colonial empire and the important formative role played in both by Jesuit missions. Radding’s goal is to triangulate natural environments, human communities (both indigenous and settler), and state power to offer a more nuanced understanding of role of borderlands in the Latin American colonial and postcolonial world.

The book is organized around chapters that explore discrete themes: environmental features, the political economy of mission settlements, differing notions of territory and property, cultural and gendered identities, governance strategies, attitudes toward the spiritual world, and the impact of the collapse of the Spanish empire and its replacement by a mosaic of republican nation-states. In each chapter, analyses of Sonora and Chiquitos are developed separately, then compared in a concluding section.

Radding’s narrative explicitly incorporates the insights of contemporary historical anthropology and research on the gendered dimensions of colonial experience. Indigenous social organization and self-identity are assumed to be contingent and flexible rather than primordial. Indeed, a feature of the work likely to be admired by anthropologists is Radding’s meticulous tracing of the process by which some indigenous groups were fragmented by the colonial experience while others emerged as larger, culturally and linguistically hybridized polities. The focus on gender is less convincingly realized in concrete historical evidence despite being a constantly reiterated theme. The problem, one can only infer, is that the documentary resources did not allow Radding to explore gender to the extent that she would have liked.

The burden of the work’s comparative project becomes evident as the book unfolds. On the most superficial level, comparison doubles the number of names, dates, and places that the reader must master to follow the analysis, no small matter given the level of detail presented throughout, which can be heavy sledding for those interested less in particulars than in portable insights. A more significant problem is the difficulty of drawing useful lessons from such disparate environments. Radding concludes one chapter, for example, by declaring: “[T]he efficacy of imperial policies and the contours of commercial networks of exchange were conditioned in both regions by the ecological

constraints of tropical and desert environments and by cultural patterns of resistance” (88)—hardly news to most readers, I expect. Her concluding observations about borderlands are more robust, if still frustratingly generic:

The emergence of regions in the nineteenth century with recognizable spatial and social coherence in Sonora and Chiquitos proved integral to the transition from imperial to transnational flows that created frontiers of difference and contention, but also of confluence and synthesis. Regionality became increasingly important for constructing identities that denied or superseded the histories of conflict and the multiple local identities that had given depth and meaning to both areas (325).

Although *Landscapes of Power and Identity* is less than completely satisfying as a comparative project, it does a number of things extremely well. It offers a wealth of information on a broad spectrum of indigenous responses to New World colonialism: rebellion, collaboration, flight, canny negotiation, creative borrowing and syncretism, and ethnogenesis. It complicates in useful ways our understanding of “traditional” religious practices, which for many of the indigenous peoples of both regions were subtly reshaped by the mission experience in ways that would be easy to miss without a historian’s sharp eye. It provides a richly detailed account of the Jesuit mission system (dating roughly to 1591-1767 in Sonora and 1691-1767 in Chiquitos), which despite its flaws proved to be one of the most sophisticated, benign, and durable colonization schemes implemented in the New World. And for Amazonianists interested in eastern Bolivia, it offers a data-rich and theoretically sophisticated account of how Chiquitos has been reshaped by nearly five centuries of encounters between the indigenous and European worlds.

Of Passionate Curves and Desirable Cadences: Themes on Waiwai Social Being. George Mentore. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xiv + 378 pp., illustrations, notes, references, index. \$49.90 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-8032-3175-7. [www.nebraskapress.unl.edu]

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Some thirty years have passed since George Mentore set foot in the village of Shepariymo, in the interior rain forest of Guyana, to commence his fieldwork among its Waiwai inhabitants. By his own admission, this book—the fruit of his sojourns with the Waiwai—has been a long time coming. One of the first things he tells us about it is that the manuscript has been completely rewritten at least three times. It shows. Every single sentence, it seems, has