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### Suzanne Austin Alchon, *A Pest in the Land: New World Epidemics in a Global Perspective*

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*chichería* as a principal site of feminine transgression; the prevalence of goiter among colonial women as a challenge to scientific explanation, as well as to aesthetic ideals of the female body; efforts to medicalize pregnancy and childbirth, with a corresponding masculine challenge to feminine authority in the form of midwives and healers; and contemporary theories of mental illness among women that attributed dissociative symptoms to physiological causes rooted in the female reproductive organs. Any or all of these topics would make good studies on their own, but none is developed sufficiently here to do much more than appeal to the reader's curiosity.

Although this study, which was the author's master's thesis at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, does not quite live up to the ambition stated in the introduction, that is, to show "the onset of modernity...and the manner in which women participated in or resisted these processes" (p. 33), it is certainly an informative work for anyone interested in women's history or urban history in the Bourbon period. Ramírez makes good use of archival sources, contemporary printed sources, and the existing secondary literature, including much of the more current theoretical literature. She also refers to works of art and objects of material culture, the effect of which is lessened by the fact that the book has no illustrations. Not all readers will benefit from being directed for this purpose to the original thesis archived in Bogotá. A good alternative for the publisher, if unable to bear the cost of reproducing artwork in print, might have been to include a CD-ROM or to place illustrations on the World Wide Web.

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*A Pest in the Land: New World Epidemics in a Global Perspective.* By Suzanne Austin Alchon. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003. ix + 214 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)

As Suzanne Austin Alchon rightly points out, *A Pest in the Land* is a departure for normalized recent arguments (including her own on an earlier occasion) that "overemphasize the long-term impact of disease and minimize the impact of other aspects of European colonialism," in addition to other precontact experiences (p. 5). Alchon sums up its principal argument thusly: "...mortality owing to virgin soil epidemics of smallpox, measles, and plague was no higher in the Americas than it had been in Europe, Asia, and Africa

when those same diseases first appeared there" (p. 3). This is due, in part, because there tends to be "a universal response" to disease, which is not—as fashionably held for the post-contact Americas—to wait patiently to die from it.

Alchon is intent on providing some context to the discussion of the effects of newly introduced diseases in the Americas after contact. To this end, she offers a brief but useful discussion of other factors that must have circumscribed population growth in precontact times, arguing that, while contact initiated an increase in the scale and intensity of disease mortality, there were also continuities with the precontact period, for which the evidence is even sparser. She points out that increased morbidity and mortality resulted from other factors as well, even after contact.

Alchon argues that her study "challenges the widely held notion of New World exceptionalism" (p. 2). The publisher further claims that it "effectively overturns" this hypothesis. A more closely argued and source-based thesis that made better use of the comparatively historical record and eschewed the hoary epidemic-table and depopulation-ratio line of argument would have helped make Alchon's case more persuasive. As to the publisher's claims, even the best argument can become "effective" only when those at whom it is directed are willing to listen. In this particular field of dispute, there is precious little indication of that.

Regrettably, Alchon vitiates the presentations of her case in two important ways. She includes many tables that are largely litanies of possibilities. In this *modus operandi*, her work closely resembles Noble D. Cook's *Born to Die* (1998), even if it is occasionally differently constructed and diagnosed. In these tables, and in general, the word "epidemic" is widely used but never defined.

Besides comparing the pre- and post-contact Americas, Alchon also looks at a wider sample of evidence. Here, Alchon falls short in integrating an effective "global perspective" into her case. There were only a handful of cases where primary sources or arguments based closely on them were consulted for the Old World. Instead, Alchon relies unduly on tertiary and quaternary works by Donald Hopkins, William H. McNeill, Sheldon Watts, and others, who plied a particular argument that made them susceptible to seeing disease, sometimes a specific disease, in every ambiguous historical record. For instance, over twenty candidates have been advanced for the Plague of Athens, several with competitive plausibility. Relying on Hopkins—for whom most historical diseases were smallpox—Alchon necessarily has no doubts herself that it indeed was smallpox (pp. 24, 80).

Alchon's lack of grounding in the wider world shows in her misdatings of the Peloponnesian war and the Mongol expansion (pp. 23, 81). She erroneously (by most interpretations) equates the Hiung-nu and Huns (p. 20), and dates the Edict of Rothari to 635 instead of 643 (p. 26), unlike her source,

which provides the correct date. Individually, none of these errors is crucial, but cumulatively they are inauspicious for the success of her argument by exposing a certain lack of care in using and interpreting her sources.

This book was reviewed during the SARS scare, which reminds us that diseases, whether or not they are epidemics, do indeed affect us frequently and sometimes catastrophically. Alchon's overall argument, enhanced by the departure from her earlier work, is definitely a move in the right direction, since historical processes are seldom, if ever, monocausal, and imbalances in the recent study of the history of disease need correcting. Required now is further work that avoids numbers entirely unless they can be incontrovertibly documented, that provides contextual definitions for key concepts, and that mines the vast comparative historical record more convincingly.

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*Quito 1599: City and Colony in Transition.* By Kris E. Lane. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002. xix + 292 pp. Illustrations, maps, charts, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)

The year 1599 was not, as this title may suggest, a particularly memorable date in Ecuadorian history. Rather, it was the year in which the famous painting of the *Mulattoes* of coastal Ecuador was produced under commission from an *oidor* of the Audiencia de Quito for the coronation of Philip III. The painting shows the *Mulattoes* displaying items as diverse as starched ruffs, nose rings, wooden lances, and velvet hats, thereby raising questions about the mentalities of those being depicted and the artist. The painting acts as a touchstone for the book, for, despite its title, it does not aim to provide a snapshot of the city of Quito and its region in 1599, but rather seeks to explore some of the views that individuals held at the time. In this way, the author hopes to achieve a better understanding of how the seeds of colonial legacies were planted.

The book is structured around six overlapping narratives centered around the themes of human captivity and the lust for gold, which the author regards as the central pillars of life in the city and colony of Quito. These themes are broad, especially since they are interpreted metaphorically as well as literally. Making reference to the painting, the book begins by considering the nature of colonial contacts on the Pacific, then takes up the theme of captivity and redemption in examining African slaves in the city of Quito. Staying