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Book Reviews

The Möbius Strip: A Spatial History of Colonial Society in Guerrero, Mexico. By Jonathan D. Amith. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005. xvii + 661 pp. Maps, charts, tables, notes, glossary, bibliography, index. \$75.00 cloth.)

The Möbius Strip, a history of central Guerrero that includes cultural geography and anthropology, constitutes an ambitious study, one that is meticulously researched and artfully crafted, combining the methods and materials of economic, social, and environmental history. Jonathan D. Amith conceptualizes his study within the framework of "spatial history," following the works of Edward W. Soja (*Postmodern Geographies*, 1989), David Harvey (*The Condition of Postmodernity*, 1989), and Johann Von Thünen (*"Isolated State": An English Translation*, ed. Peter Hall, 1966), among others. His principal argument is that regionally focused histories do not occur naturally, rather that spaces emerge as meaningful entities through historical processes of change. The story line, developed in eleven chapters grouped into three parts, revisits themes that are familiar to all historians who work on the history of New Spain and, for that matter, on other Iberian colonies of the Americas: land tenure and competing forms of possession and usufruct of productive resources among Indian pueblos, private estates, and ecclesiastical corporations; population decline, displacement and migrations; and grain markets, subsistence, and the distribution of produce among different sectors of the population.

Amith's analysis and presentation of the empirical data, in exquisite detail, is woven into a polychrome tapestry of interpretations culled principally from theoretical works and points of reference drawn from European history. He reworks the familiar story lines of this history into theoretically informed discussions of absolute and conditional claims to property, "place-making" and "place-breaking" of communities and social identities, and the principles of commerce in transition from state-controlled mercantilism to liberal capitalism. Amith weaves his narrative back and forth across the Atlantic from the *tierra caliente* of southern New Spain (central Guerrero, the reference point used throughout the book, did not exist as an administrative entity or as a spatial identity in the colonial period) and the European theatres of Bourbon France and Spain. Amith divides the territorial spaces of his history into three areas: the northern provinces surrounding the mining center of Taxco, the fertile and ultimately prosperous Iguala Valley, and the relatively arid and impoverished southern provinces of Tixtla and Chilapa. Much of the dynamic of this history flows from the movement of people and goods across these micro-regions, converging in the productive estates and indigenous *cuadrillas* (settlements of peasant renters and sharecroppers) of eighteenth-century Iguala that reconfigured the spatial and human geographies of the ancient *āltepētīl* of Tepecuacuilco. It is focused on the rural contours of colonial territorialization;

the urban centers of Taxco and Acapulco, frequently referenced in terms of markets and nodes of transportation, do not figure as central points of analysis in this spatial history of population movement and economic expansion.

The erudition of this profoundly regional study is impressive; yet, one questions whether the weight of the author's theoretical framework overshadows the history it is meant to explicate. For example, Amith's discussions of sentiment and moral economy, in reference to places and processes of community formation, rely on citations of theoretical texts but do not include descriptive subject matter concerning religion, ritual, and the imagery of particular places. It is surprising to find only a few references in this work to the rich scholarship in history, art history, literature, and anthropology concerning the symbolic meanings of the *āltepētī* and the legends of ancient migrations through watery worlds and different terrestrial spaces in Mesoamerican traditions. Had Amith engaged more fully with recent works on other regions of Mexico that document and theorize the cultural import of demographic displacements and resettlements for colonial spaces and social/ethnic identities, he would have anchored his research even more firmly in the richly varied historiography that provides the context for spatial histories like *The Möbius Strip*. Taking into account such caveats, this book contributes in important ways to interdisciplinary research on the particularities of place, the global consequences of colonialism, and the dialogic quality of history understood as process.

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Experiencing Nature: The Spanish American Empire and the Early Scientific Revolution. By Antonio Barrera-Osorio. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006. xi + 211 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth.)

Antonio Barrera-Osorio's work is an incisive look at the Spanish contribution to the modern Scientific Revolution. Based on his dissertation research, Barrera-Osorio's book makes a convincing argument about how the Spanish approach to the exploration and resource exploitation of the Americas set the foundation for the empirical study of nature that is at the heart of the Scientific Revolution. As the Spanish undertook the exploration and colonization of an entirely new world that had never been encountered before, classical thought and theory could not explain this new world, and the Spanish needed practical information about it in order to use it for Spain's benefit. The Spanish Crown institutionalized the practice of relying on empirical data and experimentation to gain knowledge about the New World, and this approach to the study of nature and the body of knowledge amassed by Spain was