

2007

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

Andrew Sluyter

Louisiana State University, [asluyter@lsu.edu](mailto:asluyter@lsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/geoanth\\_pubs](http://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/geoanth_pubs)



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Geography Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Sluyter, Andrew, "Landscapes of Power and Identity: Comparative Histories in the Sonoran Desert and the Forests of Amazonia from Colony to Republic" (2007). *Faculty Publications*. 32.

[http://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/geoanth\\_pubs/32](http://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/geoanth_pubs/32)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Geography & Anthropology at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [gcoste1@lsu.edu](mailto:gcoste1@lsu.edu).

attractive as a teaching tool for courses on nationalism, media anthropology, or political anthropology, it also become excessive. This confrontational tone becomes less evident in the latter stages of the book, such as the chapters on media exchanges (principally, the “life cycle” of television sets, especially how they are acquired and disposed of), clock time, and calendar time. These latter chapters are also the most interesting and, arguably, the strongest chapters in the book.

Postill’s inclusive approach to media, his serious reconsideration of older theoretical approaches, his thorough and well-researched case study from a part of the world often overlooked in the anthropology literature, and an extensive review of the media anthropology field all contribute to *Media and Nation Building*’s significance as a useful and provocative addition to our understanding of issues in media anthropology, nationalism, and political anthropology.

#### NOTE

1. Throughout the review, I employ the unhyphenated “nation building” to better reflect Postill’s usage.

**Landscapes of Power and Identity: Comparative Histories in the Sonoran Desert and the Forests of Amazonia from Colony to Republic.** Cynthia Radding. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. 431 pp.

#### ANDREW SLUYTER

Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge

“Landscape” as an analytic concept has endured for several academic generations, perhaps longest in geography but also in anthropology. It increasingly finds application across more of the disciplinary spectrum, in fields as diverse as history and biology. It attracts those who ask questions that encompass the cultural and the biophysical, who range across scales of analysis from local to regional and from daily to centennial, who integrate the historical and the spatial, and who combine ethnographic, archival, and artifactual data. Its eclecticism and elasticity offer the potential to yield original, significant understandings of complex phenomena, but it can also easily dissipate analytic focus.

In this case, Cynthia Radding delivers an exemplary study of the transformations from late precolonial to early (post)colonial times, approximately the 16th through the mid-19th centuries, of the landscapes of two places: the state of Sonora in northwestern Mexico and the Chiquitos region of the department of Santa Cruz in eastern Bolivia. Some 7,000 kilometers and many environmental and cultural attributes separate the arid lowlands and mountains of Sonora from the tropical savannas and forests of the Chiquitos region. Yet both were frontiers of the Spanish empire, where radically altered landscapes emerged through the interactions of environment, native peoples, and colonizers. They thus provide an opportunity to understand how the same colonial frontier institutions, such as Jesuit missions, interacted with otherwise quite different places.

Radding primarily draws on the copious archives of Mexico and Bolivia, analyzing such documents as Jesuit account ledgers, censuses, and land grants. She also employs published reports by the likes of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, the shipwrecked conquistador who traveled across Sonora in the early 1530s and only a decade later was governor of the province of Río de la Plata, which included the Chiquitos region. To address the many types of processes involved in landscapes, she necessarily complements those primary data with syntheses of the relevant archaeological, ethnographical, geographical, and historical literatures. Impressively, the bibliography of secondary sources exceeds 500 items.

The introductory chapter reviews the heterogeneous body of theory concerning colonialism and landscape that has emerged over the past decade in anthropology and archaeology, geography and ecology, and literary studies and history. Then each of the eight numbered chapters incrementally integrates differing aspects of those two places into their overall colonial histories of changing relationships between people and environments. Chapters 1–6 treat production, territory, ethnicity, gender, politics, and spirituality. Lastly, chapters 7–8 address the transitions from colonies to independent republics and the involvement of the two frontiers in border conflicts with neighboring republics: the United States in the Sonoran case, and Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina in the Chiquitos case.

Each chapter concludes with a section that summarizes how the relationships among colonizers, natives, and environments resulted in the contrasting transformations of the two places. For example, regarding production, the differing precolonial landscapes resulted in the Sonoran Jesuit missions using native irrigation technology to produce surpluses of introduced fruits, vegetables, and wheat for sale to miners, while wax, textile, and other craft production dominated the commerce of Chiquitos missions, crops providing sustenance but no marketable surplus.

Following up on those chapter conclusions with an overall concluding chapter would have been worthwhile. Even more than for the typical monograph that focuses on a single aspect of a single place, an ambitiously multifaceted comparative study would seem to require final summary, synthesis, and derivation of generalizations from the considerable results of the preceding chapters. Also, while drawing on theory stemming from such a range of disciplines might result in some significant contribution to each, each will invariably take issue with some of Radding’s interpretations of its particular concerns and contributions, a hazard inherent to transdisciplinary scholarship. A concluding chapter could have explicitly addressed that issue and thereby mitigated it and made this book even more significant.

More minor concerns require no more than representative sampling. Regarding names: No “Robertfonis” authored a *History of America* (p. 123). Regarding Spanish words, *Baranca* does not mean “raised earthworks” (p. 21). Regarding figures, the many historical maps are not numbered, do not

have callouts, are generally reproduced at too small a scale to be legible, and do not clearly relate to the text (pp. 2, 94–95, 122–123). On geography, most of the water from the Chiquitos region drains southward into the Paraná-La Plata river system, not into the Amazon, so to claim that the book concerns “the Forests of Amazonia” seems more calculated to stimulate interest than to be precise (p. iii).

**Troubled Fields: Men, Emotions, and the Crisis in American Farming.** Eric Ramírez-Ferrero. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 240 pp.

**WILLIAM D. SMITH**

Western Oregon University

Critical examinations of the family farm crisis in the United States have focused on the political–economic and ecological dimensions of integrating U.S. farmers into global food and feed markets. Eric Ramírez-Ferrero’s *Troubled Fields*, a study of farm families in northwestern Oklahoma, helps us deepen our understanding of the crisis because it moves the issues to different terrain. Its focus on gender and emotion, both shaped through the cultural history of farming in that region, provides a sensitive analysis of how the crisis has lodged in the psyches and spirits of individual farmers. Ramírez-Ferrero’s objective in *Troubled Fields* is to delineate the consequences of agroindustrialization for family farmers in the Cherokee Strip. Prior to the 1970s, farm families were living links of patriarchal family histories tied originally to land claims, then to lands passed patrilineally down the generations. Farmers conceived themselves to be generative forces and agents of divine creation. Land was likened to a child whose character reflected the attention committed to it.

Ramírez-Ferrero draws on the tropes of colonization and dependency to characterize northwestern Oklahoma’s absorption in the early 1970s into an agroindustrial paradigm engineered in metropolises distant geographically and culturally from the point of production. As grain markets expanded overseas, farmers were induced to develop large-scale monocrop regimes. Land values rose, as did borrowing to finance land and machinery.

During the 1970s and 1980s, overproduction, President Carter’s Soviet grain embargo, and, in particular, the rigors of Reaganomics devastated U.S. agriculture. Ramírez-Ferrero asserts that what it meant to be a “farmer” for many in Cherokee Strip has shifted in step with this trajectory. Once keepers of the land and human family and agents of God’s creation, farmers became managers and decision makers on the front line of agroindustrialization, and then heads-of-household struggling to hold onto the farm. In addition, Cherokee Strip communities, once members of a more cooperative moral economy—sharing labor among farm families, for example—are now aggregates of alienated land managers, many failing to stay afloat in an economy that has turned on them.

Ramírez-Ferrero’s contribution is to define the emotional fallout of these processes. His searching examination of male pride, located at the center of the traditional farming worldview in the Cherokee Strip, argues that emotion must be understood in cultural context. Given the “almost biological” tie between farmer and land there (p. 78) and the cosmology in which that tie is embedded, pride in this context is bound up in relationships between men, work, land, and God. Not only are stressed farmers failing to make their payments, but they are also failing to live up to their history, meet their responsibilities to the future, and fulfill divine design.

Yet if capitalist agriculture is to blame for massive demoralization on the plains, one should not expect from *Troubled Fields* any clear route to a more generous future. One of Ramírez-Ferrero’s most sobering findings is that Cherokee Strip farmers seem to have internalized the directives and the values of agroindustry. Despite farmers recognition that misbegotten farm policy is much to blame for their crushing debt, they suffer their woes largely in silence and blame themselves for failure. Not even the activists of the American Agriculture Movement, who contest the devaluation of the older cosmology, imagine a realizable pre- or noncapitalist moral order. Ramírez-Ferrero tells us that “the men and women with whom I worked, were not opposed to capitalism, but to its contemporary practice in the agricultural sector” (p. 169) and reminds us that many capitalisms are possible. But his own recommendations for reconfiguring the equation rest on the familiar general principles of reining in the market and making economies work for the majority (p. 173). He ends the book fearing that “the experiences of others around the world” will have to point the way: “We in America may be lost—so completely has industrial logic and thinking commodified every aspect of our lives” (p. 177). Such a statement presumes the “we” in “America” and ignores the slow food movements (which gear local markets to seasons) and other food-based initiatives for ecological sanity and social justice in motion all over the United States.

That said, the strength of *Troubled Fields* is that it bridges gaps between structural–economic, cultural, and psychological perspectives and that, in its focus on emotional experience, it provides a distinctive, culture-centric contribution to the literature on the farm crisis.

**Being-in-Christ and Putting Death in Its Place: An Anthropologist’s Account of Christian Performance in Spanish America and the American South.** Miles Richardson. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003. 414 pp.

**MICHAEL V. ANGROSINO**

University of South Florida

Miles Richardson is a specialist in the ethnography of Latin America and of the American South, a four-field anthropologist, a passionate humanist, and a master storyteller.