

### **Bookreview: American commodities in an age of empire. By Mona Domosh. New York: Routledge 2006. ISBN 0415945720**

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That 'gardens signify' and 'landscapes are contested' will not surprise cultural geographers. And while *Garden plots* does not seek to critically engage, at the intellectual level sustained in its core approach, with geographical approaches to landscape, it might well have benefited from this, not least because cultural geography has itself gained much from feminist, psychoanalytical and postcolonial theories. That said, Saguaro offers a valuable, readable perspective on the politics of landscape and identity in recent history and the global reach of even small, anonymous plots.

Kingston University

REBECCA PRESTON

**American commodities in an age of empire.** By Mona Domosh. New York: Routledge. 2006. ix + 202 pp. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 0415945720.

Few historical geographers whose research is archival-based could write such a small, succinct book on the subject of American empire building in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This book convinces the reader that American imperialism – whether or not one believes it to have been 'informal,' 'peaceful,' 'free,' or 'exceptional' – was fundamentally a business venture of producing commodities and cornering markets for them overseas. Domosh examines American commercial imperialism primarily through three US corporations: Singer Manufacturing, McCormick Harvesting Machine Company, and the H. J. Heinz Company. She argues that American foreign economic and cultural dominance were achieved through the civilizing 'uplift' that commodities such as sewing machines, harvesting machines, and manufactured food products such as pickles and jellies brought to the less developed. American imperialism, according to Domosh, was enacted 'not through laws but through everyday acts of desiring and consuming' (p. 9).

*American commodities* resonates closely with Anne McClintock's work. To Domosh, consumer products do the 'work' of civilization, so political, military, religious, and other means were unnecessary to the American project. Domosh highlights in her final chapter her notion of the 'flexible racism' that was required for economic and cultural integration and dominance; that is, other nations and peoples 'became white' and modern through consumption of American products. Progress of such nations and peoples, then, could be measured not through some racial schema or hierarchy but through economic development measures. In all of this, the role of the US government and military apparatus in developing a foreign policy to enable these ventures is elided, in favor of foregrounding the role of businessmen, advertising executives, and so on who were set to directly make the profits (although in many cases, these and 'the government' were probably the same people).

One might wonder how this book, written by a geographer, differs from other similar works on the topic. In that respect, readers will find an especially useful model for historical economic geography in Chapter 2, where Domosh carefully lays out the developing organizational and manufacturing structure of these companies at various scales. The volume is also loaded with visual images, especially product advertising, and the author is as proficient at engaging the reader with these texts as any others.

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