

Bookreview: Garden plots: the politics and poetics of gardens

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The strength of the book lies in the intriguing stories and thick descriptions of the chapters, such as Margarita Gutman's discussion of the metropolis-like future visions for Buenos Aires from the 1920's conceptualization and wider reflection. Moreover, Steven Ward's insightful concluding chapter on the origins and dissemination of the 'Baltimore model' of waterfront regeneration shows what might have been achieved by the other chapters in terms of linking case studies to broader conceptual concerns. Ultimately, however, too many contributions feel like they are conference papers rather than fully worked book chapters. *Culture, urbanism and planning* will probably have limited appeal for most cultural geographers.

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AIDAN WHILE

Garden plots: the politics and poetics of gardens. By Shelley Saguaro. Aldershot, Hants and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited. 2006. xiii + 249 pp. £50.00 hardback. ISBN: 9780754637530.

The mass movement of people across and between continents in the modern period engendered new responses to land in literature as in other areas of culture. Urban and imperial expansion, voluntary and enforced migration, exile and resettlement brought to the fore interdependent ideas about belonging and loss, wilderness and cultivation, homelands and promised lands, which were reflected and constructed in contemporary texts. Borrowing from the Antiguan-born writer Jamaica Kincaid, the fundamental premise of *Garden plots* is that 'gardens and gardening are political' (p. xiii). Informed by feminist, postcolonialist and psychoanalytic theories, this is a work primarily of literary criticism and history, focusing on the place and role of the garden in the works of about 20 authors writing in English in the 20th and 21st centuries. The material is organized by chapters in broadly chronological categories – modernism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, cyberpunk – giving voice to Other voices and gardens, offering multiple perspectives of landscape through literature.

'Gardens' are broadly defined, embracing the material geographies of imperial botanical gardens, domestic plots and allotments but also the politics of plant collecting and biotechnology. At the same time, the book explores imagined landscapes and their relationship with literary processes: writing as cultural journey becomes a sub-theme of the book. Its geographical scope is equally wide-ranging, reaching through Britain, Ireland, India, Nepal, the Caribbean, the Americas, South Africa and New Zealand. In short, Shelley Saguaro shows that, far from being a neutral plot (in all senses of the word), the garden in these texts is materially and symbolically central to political, social and personal understandings of place, mobilized, for example, to articulate and remedy dislocation. These gardens, then, are the lens through which to explore power relations – in gender and race, and between colonizer and colonized. These are most compellingly explored through the works of J. M. Coetzee, Toni Morrison, V. S. Naipaul and Leslie Marmon Silko and their role in writing the 'post-colonial landscape'. This reveals, to cite one example, why, according to Morrison, the dominant, white, meanings of 'country' could never be shared by African Americans: 'country life through Black eyes produced visions of lynchings, share croppers [and] slavery' (p. 164).

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.

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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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