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Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon (review)

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Slater, Candace. *Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon*. Berkeley: U California P, 2002. 332 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index.

Like the complex region she analyzes, Candace Slater's delightful new book uses an interdisciplinary and multilevel approach to explore competing images of the Amazon region from the past to the present. Whereas much of the scholarly literature on the Amazon produced in the wake of the large-scale development projects of the 1970s and 1980s sought to document environmental destruction and the dislocation of "traditional" populations, Slater is more interested in exploring why such images have come to hold such resonance and have crowded other voices from the Amazon. Slater, too, celebrates the unique biodiversity and cultural specificities of the region, but she rebukes environmentalists, documentary makers, and other starry-eyed "outsiders" who have tended to romanticize or vilify the Amazonian population, if not utterly ignore them, in their mission to "save the rainforest." Instead, she insists that we pay attention to the diverse populations of the Amazon—of African, Japanese, Arab, Sephardic Jewish, indigenous, Portuguese, and *nordestino* origins—and how the stories that they tell about their region overlap with or diverge from ours. Like the work of US environmental historians Richard White and William Cronon, Slater is interested in how individuals have constructed the "natural" world and what images about flora and fauna reveal about a society's cultural values and anxieties.

Slater is not the first to explore conflicting images of the Amazon; others have analyzed—and denounced—the dichotomous depictions of the Amazon as Green Hell or El Dorado. But, in juxtaposing multiple (yet select) narratives of the region by "insiders" and "outsiders," she highlights both the interconnectedness and misalignment of these varied discourses freighted with unequal power. The dazzling array of sources that she interrogates—historic, ethnographic, literary, artistic, visual, travelogue, advertisement, pop culture—is a testament to her skill as a cultural critic, and her talent as both listener and storyteller.

The book is divided into three sections, each comprised of two chapters that analyze a dominant trope in the depiction of the Amazon from the perspective of outsiders and insiders. In the first section, she pairs outsiders' centuries-long enthrallment with the Amazon—whether the conquistadors' hankering for El Dorado, nineteenth-century naturalists' focus on species, Levi-Strauss's quest for an unspoiled Eden in *Tristes Tropiques*, or present-day concerns with deforestation—with contemporary Amazonian narratives about the *Encante*, or an enchanted city beneath the waters of the region where aquatic creatures can take human form. These local stories, deriving from indigenous myths, European mermaid stories and African influences, are primarily recounted in the countryside but also circulate in the big cities, thanks to the presence of rural migrants and the mass media's dissemination of regional folklore. While both visions share a sense of mystery and elusiveness, she contends that the Amazonian myths are more diffuse, ethereal, and protean, a recognition of the limitations of human control of the natural environment. Yet while highlighting the richness of a native vision of the Amazon, Slater avoids the trap, so common in

studies of the region, of portraying the local population as hidebound traditionalists. In a particularly memorable passage, one informant scoffs altogether at encantado stories as superstitious and passé, affirming: "Today, no, we are more up-to-date, we know all about the greenhouse effect, biodiversity, and sustainable development" (73).

In the second section, Slater compares the personification of the Amazon as a female figure by colonial chroniclers with the present-day feminization of gold (and its surroundings) in the encantado stories of *garimpeiros* (miners), noting both the divisions and overlaps between such competing visions. The Iberian conquistadors drew on both Old World as well as native American myths about giant women to conjure the bountiful but forbidding realm of the New World. Slater sees the image of the fearsome warrior as the flip side of the magical El Dorado, a harbinger of the Amazon as a green hell that would haunt early twentieth-century Latin American "jungle novels," and Teddy Roosevelt's first-hand account of the treacherous "Brazilian wilderness." In its present day form, the image of the Amazon as temptress surfaces in the ecotourist industry's depictions of a virgin forest brimming with adventure and danger.

In the matching chapter, Slater recounts her forays into gold mining camps in Pará and Rondônia where miners conjure gold in the image of a female who lures and captivates her pursuer. Once again, however, while noting the similarities with the myth of the Amazon warrior, she contends that the gold miners' "woman" is reflective of the mutability of the natural world and its resistance to subjugation. In this vivid ethnographic account of the hardscrabble life of the miners, Slater challenges the caricature of *garimpeiros* as social and environmental outlaws. Although acknowledging the unsavory aspects of mining, she suggests that miners play up their violent image to scare off government regulators and extraregional commercial ventures; she and the miners indict environmentalists for caring little about the social welfare of these marginal men and their families and for outsiders' own implication in the destruction of the Amazon through the consumption of mahogany, hearts of palm, bauxite, and other forest products.

In the final section, Slater offers a comparison between outsiders' obsession with the endangered biodiversity of the rainforest and tales by the descendants of runaway black slaves on the Trombetas and Erepecuru Rivers that tell of an enchanted lake within a lake. The former, a product of an international environmental movement that blossomed in the 1970s in response to a series of large-scale developmental projects in the Amazon and other tropical forests, branded the destruction of local rainforests a threat to humanity. Ominous words like "jungle" and "wilderness" were replaced with "rain forest" and "environment," terms imbued with a scientific and sacred aura, yet preserving the region's primary identity as a forest. In casting the region as an endangered Green Cathedral—a foil for or projection of closer-to-home anxieties—outsiders called attention to environmental destruction, but also obscured the diverse populations of the region and centuries of human transformations of the land and rivers. Yet the rain forest's exotic, feel-good appeal continues to make it a crowd-pleaser for

McDonald's and other environmentally "concerned" corporations as well as savvy marketing firms.

Slater juxtaposes these tales of natural abundance and imperilment with the stories of a small group of descendants of runaway African slaves (*remanescentes*) in Pará whose ancestors fled the local cacao plantations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These communities, now hemmed in by a large multinational bauxite processing plant and two federal biological reserves, have had their access to natural resources crimped. The stories that the *remanescentes* recount affirm the transformative and liberating power of nature, embodied in "traditional" tales of enchanted waterfalls and lakes; they also condemn not only injustice in the past but the "new slavery" imposed by environmental reserves that displace local populations and discount their relationship to the natural surroundings. These stories engage and manipulate environmentalist discourse, yet the *remanescentes*' focus on water—rather than outsiders' fascination with forest or land—points to a distinctly Amazonian spin that suggests nature's defiance to domination and the precarious balance between land and water.

As Slater concludes, images and perceptions of the Amazon influence individual actions and government policies. In highlighting the all-too-often ignored visions of Amazonians—and their points of contention and convergence with outsiders' views—Slater seeks both to complicate and enrich our understanding of people's complex and contested relationship with nature. As intellectual precursors, she cites Euclides da Cunha's ambiguous rendering of the Amazon's geographic and social composition, and the work of modernists Mário de Andrade, Raul Bopp, and Heitor Villa-Lobos, who drew upon Amazonian folk traditions in honoring the exhilarating yet elusive nature of the region. But the final word in this uneven dialogue about the Amazon is fittingly given to one of the *remanescentes*: "Perhaps in listening to nature they will come to hear us also, and the future will be different, and better than the past" (204).

In the postmodern spirit that has frowned on master narratives and Orientalist gazes, Slater cautions against essentialist or dichotomizing images. We are repeatedly reminded that these are the visions of some, not all, Amazonians and outsiders, just as we are aware of the author's hand in arraying this montage of documentary evidence to structure her argument. Still, it is surprising that although Slater alludes to the overwhelmingly urban character of Amazonia's population of 23 million (3), none of the "visions of the Amazon" that she has collated offers any deeper insight into day-to-day life in the region's cities. Given the book's objective in enhancing, if not problematizing, outsiders' perceptions of the Amazon—particularly the image of an unspoiled or endangered Eden—the author's reluctance to devote greater attention to the urban experience of the majority of the region's populace is rather curious. Nevertheless, Slater has written a trenchant study that will shatter damaging myths and serve as a benchmark for future studies of the Amazon.

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