PROJECT MUSE®

Islands of Women and Amazons: Representations and Realities
(review)

Cynthia Pope

Journal of Latin American Geography, Volume 2, Number 1, 2003, pp.
111-112 (Review)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lag.2004.0012>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/174026>

Book Reviews

Cynthia S. Simmons, Book Review Editor

Islands of Women and Amazons: Representations and Realities. Batya Weinbaum. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999. xxii and 296 pages, prefaces, notes and index. \$45.00 cloth, \$22.50 paper (ISBN 0-292-79127-5).

Reviewed by Cynthia Pope, Department of Geography, Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, CT, USA.

This interdisciplinary work is an adventure in cultural-historical representations of Polynesian sirens, single-breasted Amazons, Greek goddesses, utopian matriarchal societies and other incarnations of mythical women and female-dominated societies. This book takes the reader to places and time periods not generally covered in a single volume, and highlights Weinbaum's scholarly dexterity in analyzing how the Amazon archetype has been created to fulfill the psychological needs of various cultures. The author uses an impressive variety of methodologies to examine her topic—primary texts from explorers; Greek mythology; ethnographic fieldwork conducted throughout the world; participant observation; discourse analysis; content analysis of tourist pamphlets, art on Isla, oral traditions; and an analysis of current Western media representations from Wonder Woman to Xena.

The motivation for this book was to “search for the beginnings of patriarchy” (p. xix). In doing so, she was confronted with the myth of the Amazon through different literary forms, and material culture throughout the world. To begin, there are three interrelated parts. Part one addresses how the Amazonian archetype is depicted in American popular culture, literature, and criticism. The three categories she uses here and throughout the rest of her work to explain how and why the Amazon

archetype varies in literature across times and cultures are reclamation, revitalization, and reaction. Some writings use the Amazon as a symbol to reclaim what is perceived as women's historical social power. Other authors use the archetype to portray the evils of women's autonomy. According to Weinbaum, missing from most literature about Amazons was the cultural construction of this archetype, about their fertility practices, and the social relations in these sometimes mythical Amazonian societies.

The second part discusses the evolution in the physical form of this Amazonian archetype, using as evidence “Homeric, classical Greek, and European medieval and early Renaissance literary representations of Amazons” (p. xix). The author notes a change in the Amazon archetype during this time period as literature shifted from oral tradition to written, primarily penned by men. This period corresponded to the increasing oppression (social, economic, and political) of women. Before Homer, Amazons were often written about as androgynous, autonomous, flesh-eating members of self-sufficient societies. As civilizations developed and expanded (particularly in Europe), the Amazon archetype shifted to “beautiful, well-mannered, helpful, and sweet” individuals whose value was defined through male-proscribed images of femininity.

Montalvo's *Sergas de Esplandian* finishes the chapter, and is of particular interest for Latin Americanists. His work highlights (male) Western explorers' penchant for exoticizing the newly-encountered Americas and categorizing its "primitive" inhabitants through accounts of isolated locales dominated by women.

Part three, "The Island of Women as Fiction in American Tourism," examines the gendered political, social, and economic transformations resulting from increased U.S. tourism to Isla de Mujeres (Island of Women), off the Yucatan coast. The last section deals with Weinbaum's on-island birthing experience. This experience highlights how the author embodies the modern-day Amazonian archetype for the local islanders. As with the original sighting of the various forms of Amazons by the explorers, she is placed ("looked at") somewhere between a curiosity and oddity for both the foreign and Mexican tourists, as well as the islanders herself. Her experience of giving birth using traditional Mayan techniques encapsulates many of the processes that are brought forth in this book—primarily the Amazon as the exotic "Other," the idea of traditional society as backward or even dangerous, and the imperialistic irony of a foreigner reclaiming Isla's past. Through her birthing experience, she notes that "what is known as 'primitive' is really a rather complex way of being in the world, perhaps more complex than what modern, atomized Western individuals can know" (p. 221).

This book highlights many subthemes useful for feminist geographers, cultural geographers, and those involved in the geography of tourism. The conceptual framework opens up a new interpretation of *Isla de Mujeres* and other "cultural" and resort destinations in Latin America and the Caribbean in light of globalization, and through the lens of feminist eyes. The author investigates how citizens of *Isla de Mujeres* have appropriated the myths surrounding Ix Chel (the Mayan goddess) and re-packaged them to tourists from different

backgrounds. For example, the author theorizes why modern renditions of Ix Chel on Isla de Mujeres is sometimes represented as a mermaid who becomes whiter and bustier with each passing generation. This small example highlights the issue of commodification of the archetype on Isla. How does *Isla* "package" the myth that created the island's name to gain symbolic and material capital in the tourism sector? How is the Amazonian archetype currently commodified? Answers may be found in the complex relations between history, culture, gender, and literature. It is this last aspect of explanation that Weinbaum excels at in this "encyclopedic" work.

Additionally, this study serves as a useful template for geographers looking at the cultural construction of place as a gendered process. It is a dense text; however, a careful reading is worth the effort as this text can provide the reader, and particularly the geographer, with a nuanced understanding of how development in Mexico can be understood and analyzed. This book's influence extends beyond Weinbaum's stance that her work contributes to "feminist, literary, Latin American, classical, and American studies" (p. ix). For example, the photographs of folk art and other cultural representations of goddesses/mermaids/maids-in-waiting on Isla will be particularly interesting for students of popular cultures. The extensive bibliography is also useful for archaeologists, social scientists, and humanities scholars.

Ultimately, this book offers a conceptual framework to expose how the Amazonian myth is interpreted in modern times, and what it means to "reclaim" that myth. One is left wondering, however, about whether the march of globalization, as in the case study in *Isla de Mujeres*, will completely destroy any semblance of the goddess culture that may have existed during Mayan times to be replaced by capitalist, Western renditions of what a "real woman" should look like and her roles in society.