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# Review of: Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge by Linda Nash

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*Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* by Linda Nash

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cers began to locate the archipelago's biggest health threats not in the tropical environment *per se*, but in the indigenous population that harbored a host of pathogens dangerous to everyone, white and non-white. Public health measures thus shifted away from environmental tactics to behavioral modification. People had to be taught—or forced—to stop spreading germs through practices such as indiscriminate defecation and to adopt civically responsible sanitary habits. Since those policies assumed that indigenous people were capable of “improving” themselves, overt racism waned during the course of this shift, but disease concepts remained racialized in the cultural practices of the indigenous population. When social-management campaigns failed to produce ideal new hygienic citizens (with the ironic exception of the lepers of Cullion), Americans were forced to see their own failings of various sorts reflected in what they disparaged as Philippine shortcomings. U.S. medical officers turned finally to external control of disease, primarily in the form of mosquito suppression, and then took their unsettling public health lessons back home, where they influenced U.S. domestic policy through mid-century.

This is not an easy book to read, in part because Anderson's presentation demonstrates that the physicians he writes about were themselves often confused and unsure about questions of race and culture; indeed, their confusions and inconsistencies constitute a key part of the story. But for this very complexity, Anderson is much to be commended. As he points out, many previous historians in the field of colonial medicine have offered overly simplified impressions of Western medical attitudes toward race and culture. *Colonial Pathologies* helps us understand just how complex and changing the reciprocal interactions between various imperial projects—in this case, the American project in the Philippines—and Western medical thinking really were.

*University of Oregon*

JAMES C. MOHR

*Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge.* By Linda Nash. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006. xiii + 332 pp. \$24.95 paper)

In this innovative and exciting book, Linda Nash productively joins the history of science and medicine with social and environmental history. It thus makes an important contribution to a growing body of work that includes studies by Christopher Sellers,



Conevery Valenčius, Alexandra Stern, and Gregg Mitman, among others. Grounding her study in an examination of California's Central Valley, Nash shows how conceptions of the body and human health were fluidly connected to landscape in the nineteenth century, how a modern construction of the body divorced it from its surroundings in the first half of the twentieth century, and how in the postwar period an ecological understanding of human health was reborn in the struggle to make visible the effects of a landscape doused in chemical pesticides on agricultural workers' health.

It is no longer news to note that what has been considered most natural about human beings—their bodies—in fact has a history. But that does not mean that the body is simply a shifting mental image, as those who wish to caricature the constructivist position would have it. Nash explains that she views bodies and diseases “as at once material realities and products of language and culture” (p. 11). This is a sensible position, but it makes for a complex narrative since Nash is always obliged to trace the dense interplay between the ideological and the material. Perhaps because of her orientation as an environmental historian with an abiding interest in “what happened on the ground—the changing pattern of disease, the changing uses of the land, the changing qualities of air, water, and soil” (p. 10), Nash is unusually successful in jointly deploying ideological and material analysis without any reductionism or obfuscation.

Chapters 1 and 2 document the ways a variety of Californians in the nineteenth century—physicians, medical geographers, boosters, settlers—“located disease *and* health in the landscape” (p. 56). In this, Nash uncovers a set of perspectives similar to what Conevery Valenčius discovered for Arkansas and Missouri in her book *The Health of the Country*, although these are grounded in somewhat different agroecological, economic, and institutional contexts. Chapter 3 deftly traces the rise of a modernist perspective on disease and the body that attended the ascendancy of germ theory and a faith in the sanitary engineering of the California landscape. The new knowledge allowed public health officials and eventually the bulk of physicians to “separate and compartmentalize diseased bodies and their environments” (p. 84).

Chapter 4, which documents growers's massive postwar use of such pesticides as DDT and parathion in crops across the Central Valley, is the book's *tour de force*: It compellingly traces the interplay between changing material circumstances and competing ideas of health and the body. Nash presents the voices of afflicted farmworkers and shows how laboratory-generated knowledge of chemicals, risk, and health increasingly appeared to be in tension with



local and embodied knowledge of the effects of pesticides on workers' health. It is in this context that Nash positions Rachel Carson's powerful challenge to the modern conception of the body as isolated from its environment. Carson's exposé instead presented human beings as porous and thus articulated the ecological body. Thanks to Nash's history, we can now see to just what an extent this was a rearticulation, a return of the repressed understanding of the intimate relationship among health, the body, and landscape prevalent in the nineteenth century.

Still, readers may be confused by Nash's argument that pesticide-induced illness "pointed to the environment's active role in shaping health" (p. 129). Nash is here indicating how some observers were led to change their minds about the role of the environment in human health, but the statement also seems to reflect one of Nash's larger positions: that nature should be seen as an actor shaping human beings and, by extension, history. In this context, it seems less the case that the environment was the actor than that human agents—that is, growers and chemical companies—shaped the environment in ways that then shaped the life and health of other people. To transpose a famous dictum of C. S. Lewis, one could say that what we call nature's power over the human body turns out to be a power exercised by some bodies over other bodies with a nature they have transformed serving as its instrument. The book's final chapter clearly covers the struggle to restore health to the California landscape that some people had turned into a hazardous place; in the process, it sheds light on the relationship among place, race, and environmental justice.

*Inescapable Ecologies* should itself become inescapable reading for historians of California, the West, agriculture, science, medicine, and the environment. It should also be read by physicians, public health officials, and anyone interested in health, disease, and the body, for it is a scholarly contribution of the most vital kind.

*University of Puget Sound*

DOUGLAS CAZAUX SACKMAN

*Empire's Edge: American Society in Nome, Alaska 1898–1934.* By Preston Jones. (Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press, 2007. x + 158 pp. \$19.95 paper)

This engaging account of Nome makes a powerful case for a de-romanticized history of Alaskan towns. Moving beyond the mining adventure that drove works like Terrence Cole's *Nome: City of*

