

Making Deserts, Building States

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Javier Uriarte. *The Desertmakers: Travel, War, and the State in Latin America*. New York: Routledge, 2020. 306 pages. ISBN 978-1-138-6692-8

In this outstanding book, Javier Uriarte studies the relationship between state consolidation, war, and deserts in travel narratives of the second half of the nineteenth century in Latin America. *The Desertmakers* explores the narrative construction of deserts in four different war contexts: the Paraguay War (1864–1870), the bloody conflicts during Uruguayan militarism (1876–1890), the Conquest of the Desert in Argentina (1878–1885), and the War of Canudos in Brazil (1896–1897). The book argues that travel narratives reveal that state consolidation in Latin America depended on “desert-making,” that is, the desertification and emptying of territories that the state could appropriate and incorporate into the national space.

The desert is a mainstream trope in postcolonial Latin American letters. In the aftermath of the independence movements, intellectuals imagined deserts as wastelands that needed to be controlled and rendered productive by nation-states. By the late nineteenth century, that control replaced the desert’s trope, as concrete capitalist operations on the seized lands took over literary discourses on idle wilderness. However, Uriarte argues that the end of literary deserts did not coincide with the establishment of productive spaces, for it was first necessary to make deserts real: to turn the metaphors of emptiness into real voids. Before states appropriated the desert, it needed to be emptied, and its inhabitants decimated. According to this book, it was through internal and external wars that Latin American states transformed imagined idle territories into “desertified” spaces, into voids that could be seized and inserted in a capitalist logic of production. As Uriarte puts it, “a necessary condition for this end of the desert as perceived by the state is the creation of a new void, one that previously existed only in discourse” (2).

As the desert was mainly a metaphoric construction in the first half of the nineteenth century, intellectuals did not need to travel to it to depict it: they just needed to read about it. Instead, in the second half of the century, the concrete desertification triggered by wars required that writers travel to conflict zones. Hence, the relevance of travel narratives in this book. The corpus includes both non-fictional and fictional travel accounts: Richard Burton’s *Letters from the Battle-Fields of Paraguay* (1870), William Henry Hudson’s novel *The Purple Land* (1885), several texts on Patagonia by Francisco Moreno, and Euclides da Cunha’s *Os sertões* (1902).

The study of texts by world travelers like Burton (Chapter 1) and W. H. Hudson (Chapter 2) situates desertification and state consolidation within imperial geopolitics. State control over the territory was a tool for national sovereignty and, at the same time, an instrument to establish neocolonial relations of exploitation that benefited the British Empire. This imperial perspective is productive in discussing “desert-making” beyond the strict national lenses in previous studies on the historical and cultural meanings of deserts by Tulio Halperín Donghi and Fermín Rodríguez. Chapter 1 analyzes how Burton depicted the neocolonial relations that the British Empire sought to establish in South America, his refusal to follow British orders, and his take on the battlefields of the Paraguayan War “as deserted and ruined spaces” (46). Chapter 2 examines Hudson’s novel on Uruguay as a critique against “the official effort to delimit, to control, to oversee movement” (90). *The Purple Land’s* main character, Richard Lamb, resisted state and imperial attempts at controlling spaces and peoples’ movements by embracing the “uncivilized” and unproductive rural ways of living that the militarist Uruguayan state sought to eliminate.

The readings of Moreno’s texts (Chapter 3) and da Cunha’s prose (Chapter 4) display how the imperial logic of domination was replicated by the violence that Latin American urban elites exercised over rural territories and populations. Chapter 3 studies Moreno’s writings on Patagonia in the aftermath of the Conquest of the Desert, arguing that his texts “evinces a shift from the desert as a fantasy, as the invention of a conquerable void, to its construction as another void, now the result of said conquest” (129). Chapter 4 examines how Euclides da Cunha textualized the difficulty of turning the Brazilian backlands into a space that could be measured and ordered by the republican state in *Os sertões* (208–9). In discussing da Cunha’s rendition of the War of Canudos, and throughout *The Desertmakers*, Uriarte pays detailed attention to what wars could not destroy: forms of presence that resist disappearing, like remains, traces, and ruins (220). In the ruins that defy desertification, this book finds an agency against state violence.

Uriarte deploys a variety of theoretical tools, such as the postcolonial notion of “informal empire,” Deleuze’s and Guattari’s “nomadology” and “war machine,” James C. Scott’s survey of state tools for the legibility and manipulation of territories, and Lefevre’s take on the capitalist production of spaces. These tools help establish compelling links between state consolidation, desertification, war, capitalism, and travel writing. Yet, the resistance against state violence that Uriarte finds in natural and cultural “ruins” could have also been analyzed through a critical lens that decenters anthropocentric notions of agency and power while exploring the interconnectivity of human and environmental forces. Indeed, one wonders how productive it could have been to read the logic of desertification, and the human and non-human responses against it, through an ecocritical perspective. The book does seem to advance an initial insight in that direction by using the notion of nomadology to describe ways of occupying territory that pre-exists state formations and can never be fully controlled by them. Moreover, in the book’s “Afterword,” Uriarte deploys Benjamin’s notion of the angel of history to discuss further how the discursive accounts of ruins resist the winds of progress and state modernization. As environmental debates unfold in Latin American cultural studies, such forms of resistance will call for a more comprehensive ecocritical approach in future studies. *The Desertmakers* heralds these ecocritical works.