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BOOK REVIEW

Living ruins: Native engagements with past materialities in contemporary Mesoamerica, Amazonia, and the Andes

Edited by Philippe Erikson and Valentina Vapnarsky. Louisville: University of Colorado Press, 2022. 269 pp.

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"The aim of life is to transcend the apparently obvious: the stone we stub our toe against, or the body as the core of our sensuous existence"

—Miller (2005, 1)

Living Ruins: Native Engagements with Past Materialities in Contemporary Mesoamerica, Amazonia, and the Andes offers an insightfully written introduction and eight substantive analytical chapters that on the whole explore "Native South American and Mesoamerican peoples' perceptions and conceptions of ruins and other highly significant traces of the past" (p. 3) in the greater effort to "decenter and decolonize—and thereby recenter and revernacularize—the study of relationships between Indigenous people and the vestiges they live among" (p. 5). Each chapter offers insights on a particular geographical and sociocultural area, group, and ecosystem within the broader areas of Mesoamerica (two chapters), Amazonia (three chapters) and the Andes (three chapters), creating both a general and particularized view of the ontological and philosophical diversity that exists and is expressed in the Americas around the topic of "vestiges" and "salient spaces," especially among its Native peoples, who in fact find themselves at crucial points in their paths of cultural survival and the development, or application, of persuasive abilities, narratives, and agentive strategies in these struggles. To elucidate, while the Yanesha of the Peruvian Amazonia (as per chapter 1, by Santos-Granero) resist the patrimonialization, commemoration, or "zombification" of their vestiges in fear of defilement, the Bolivian Amazon Chácobo (chapter 4, by Philippe Erikson) have reconceptualized a recently abandoned village site, Xabaya—the scene of suffering and death in the 1960s—as a celebrated place of postmortem festive reunion and part of their collective identity. In joint contrast, Vapnarsky (chapter 2) finds among the Mexican Lowland Yucatec Maya, as do Becquey and Chosson (chapter 3) for the Mexican Maya Tzeltal and Ch'ol of Chiapas, that remains of past human activity in Maya territories are actually considered to be part of collectively remembered and enacted living memorial and biocultural landscapes: insightfully and ontologically accommodated, these remains are, thus, visualized as having been produced by previous expressions or versions of humanity. The differences that emerge from the discussions in these two chapters on differing Maya groups emphasize that even significant cultural and historical variance exists among the different Maya ethnicities and communities of Mesoamerica, resonating with the larger point of the book that the Americas contain and are characterized by a vast and complex ontological, philosophical, and sociocultural diversity. This is a characteristic that muddles, at times, but precisely is required always, and called forth inherently, in any discussion of heritage, patrimony, and human sociocultural survival and expression in general. Chapters on the Brazilian Amazonia and the Peruvian and Bolivian Andes (chapters 5–8, respectively) illustrate in fascinating detail the tensions and developmental processes of what the editors call "shifting narratives," as local autochthonous populations face the lucrative and incessant demands of tourism while also needing to address the imminent need of evidence to validate land claims in the face of greatly invasive and massively destructive resource-extraction industries.

Springing forth from a "major international research program devoted to heritage and patrimonialization (or cultural heritagization) in Amerindian societies, with a strong emphasis on emic perspectives" (p. 4), these eight analyses facilitate a "deep" understanding. Daniel Miller (2005) identifies that "the aim of life is to transcend the apparently obvious." The international team of researchers who wrote the chapters for

Living Ruins achieves this without a doubt and emphasizes concomitantly that the fundamental aim of the social sciences is to provide insight into the composition of those (our) lives, its (our) norms, its (our) behaviors, and the structures (meso, macro, and micro) that contain as well as circumscribe our humanity (and its lack thereof, which is always and stubbornly equally present). *Living Ruins* thus touches upon the deeper themes of ontology and glocal axiology, which, in a world that has only in recent years become fully and consciously planetary (Chakrabarty, 2021), socio-culturally diverse, and/or pluriversal in legal recognition and theoretical definition, is greatly necessary as we all also continue to experience and undergo severe environmental and social degradation. It is logical that discussions and expositions on how people, populations, and regions conceptualize and relate to the vestiges and specific legacies of the past facilitate in great measure the examinations and potential solutions on how life, things, present, past, and future are, should, and might be defined relationally, positively, and sustainably, both locally and globally. To achieve this “deep” reading, *Living Ruins* needs to be read carefully and thoughtfully, both by students and investigators of the social sciences as well as any other stakeholders and “voices” that walk these terrains—murky and enchanting at once.

The topics covered are, clearly, not limited in pertinence to those who focus principally on Mesoamerica, Amazonia, and the Andes, or on the “Indigenous peoples/question.” As anthropologists, we thrive on the empirical and sociocultural-symbolic “fact” that all humans are the same, and yet unique, and that we operate both individually and collectively. Poorly explored, however, as the editors elucidate in their introduction, is how one achieves that balance and subsists among these multiple contradictions and from within multiple personally situated, planetary, dynamic, and multilayered socio-historical contexts. The question “why should Amerindian peoples be governed by the same obsessions,” referring to the “Western” proclivity “to automatically ascribe [e] ‘cultural’ value to just about any old heap of stones” (p. 9), is, unfortunately, only indirectly addressed and could have formed the substantive subject of a concluding chapter providing an even deeper understanding. The observation made by Becquey and Chosson, writing on the Maya Tzeltal and Ch’ol of Chiapas, Mexico, that “memory is preserved at those sites where it is possible to visit entities that are liable to move about to conduct constantly renewed negotiations relevant to present concerns” (p. 120), contains some such wisdom, but is left somewhat unpacked.

We, as humans and as anthropologists, need to increase our progress in establishing and accompanying the necessary and significant planetary biocultural dialogues that contain the ontological, epistemological, and gnoseological dimensions exhibited in *Living Ruins*. Reading and thinking about the contents of all the chapters of *Living Ruins* will be a rewarding experience and an important step toward these broader goals.

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