

## [Campuzano Duque on Nobbs-Thiessen, 'Landscape of Migration: Mobility and Environmental Change on Bolivia's Tropical Frontier, 1952 to the Present'](#)

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**Ben Nobbs-Thiessen.** *Landscape of Migration: Mobility and Environmental Change on Bolivia's Tropical Frontier, 1952 to the Present.* Flows, Migrations, and Exchanges Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. 342 pp. \$37.50 (paper), [ISBN 978-1-4696-5610-6](#).



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Mostly focused on Argentina, colonial Bolivia, Peru, Mexico, and the Caribbean world, scholars of Latin American agrarian history have usually written from the perspectives of peasant studies and land struggles. More recently, new literature has widened the study of the transformation of the Latin American agrarian world in the twentieth century following new actors and themes, such as development practitioners and institutions, agrarian technologies and new crops that came out of the green revolution, nontraditional peasantries, and Cold War politics. As part of this emerging literature, Ben Nobbs-Thiessen's *Landscapes of Migration* draws from cultural, transnational, and environmental history to understand the peculiar transformation of Bolivian eastern lowlands from a forested and seldomly populated frontier in the 1950s into a cultivated landscape that became a center of national wealth by the end of the twentieth century. While Nobbs-Thiessen does an admirable job of locating Bolivian agrarian history within the transnational context of migration, the Cold War, and religious presence in Latin America, he does so at the expense of a more detailed understanding of local environmental change. Nobbs-Thiessen follows national and foreign migrants to the Bolivian lowlands and the state policies of frontier expansion during three broad political periods. He concludes that no matter the political program of these periods there was consensus about fomenting frontier expansion to the East. Thus, the book begins with the "March to the East," a plan for the colonization of the internal Bolivian frontiers devised by the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (MNR) when they took power in 1952, follows the transition to authoritarianism between 1964 and 1982, and ends during the neoliberal period between 1982 and the 2000s.

The first three chapters analyze the Bolivian eastern lowlands' colonization during the populist period between 1952 and 1968 from the perspectives of five groups of actors: state agencies created to promote colonization; local *Cruceños* (people from Santa Cruz, the main city in the Bolivian lowlands); and the Okinawan, Mennonite, and Andean migrants. Setting the stage, the first chapter details mid-twentieth-century Bolivia's frontier mythmaking through the analysis of Jorge Ruiz's films, commissioned by the MNR to promote and give meaning to the March to the East. Exemplarily crafted, this chapter analyzes not only how the films created a discourse of unity that promoted interregional mobility but also how *Cruceños* produced their own interpretations of the March to the

East. Using local responses to the propaganda films and Santa Cruz's famous newspaper *El Deber*, Nobbs-Thiessen shows how Cruceños' interpretations conflicted and merged with the central government's views. Turning to the transnational impacts of Ruiz's propaganda films, the chapter ends with how they were used by both communist and capitalist community development promoting an example of self-driven modernization. This chapter masterfully connects national, regional, and global political, social, and economic processes, using Ruiz's films as a contested space with multiple meanings for different actors.

The second chapter of the book focuses on the Okinawan and Mennonite migrants to understand not only how they ended up migrating to the Bolivian lowlands near Santa Cruz but also how they faced local opposition and environmental challenges as they established their colonies. The third chapter does the same for Andean Bolivians who also migrated to the lowlands through governmental programs. Nobbs-Thiessen shows how Mennonites, Okinawans, and Bolivian nationals who migrated to the lowlands of Santa Cruz, the Alto Beni, and the Chapare regions framed their mobility in terms of the goals of the March to the East. In doing so, they used the language of agrarian citizenship, a key term that Nobbs-Thiessen uses throughout the book to define how different actors appealed to the government for help, framing themselves as deserving citizens of the nation because of their role in cultivating the frontier and producing food for the nation. Fulfilling his promise of transnational history, Nobbs-Thiessen traces Okinawans' and Mennonites' transnational trajectories back to Japan, Canada, Mexico, and Argentina and describes the global conditions that Cold War policies created for the displacement and resettlement of these communities. He also studies the trajectories of the Andeans who migrated to the lowlands, showing how their political culture in the mining heritage informed their relationship with the government and the difficulties they encountered in establishing themselves in the lowlands. This perspective allows him to pose new explanations of the rationale of foreign migrants and to explore the reasons why they employed agrarian citizenship as a genre to appeal to the government and defend from local opposition. In doing so, Nobbs-Thiessen frames the March to the East as a part of global and regional trends produced by the green revolution, Cold War politics, and state-building projects of rural modernization, successfully moving between local, national, and international politics.

Starting again in 1952, but pushing ahead into 1982, chapter 4 pinpoints the transformation of the state-led colonization efforts into a private enterprise where religious institutions and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) acted as proxies for an absent state. As Nobbs-Thiessen documents it, postrevolutionary secularization led to a dramatic increase in Protestant participation as developmental agents and providers of health, education, and infrastructure, services that the state failed to provide in some regions in Latin America. Following such prominent religious figures as Jaime Bravo and Harry Peacock as well as developmental programs with ties to American universities, Nobbs-Thiessen shows the significant role of faith-based development workers in shaping the financing, the discourse, and the material colonization of the Bolivian lowlands and the ways this type of colonization opened the door to the growth of NGO-led development.

The last chapter goes back to 1967 when Mexican Mennonites started flooding the Bolivian lowlands. In this chapter, Nobbs-Thiessen describes the strategies Mexican Mennonites used to establish first a dairy industry and later a soybean landscape. Mexican Mennonites lobbied the Bolivian government to secure legislation that protected their privileges to import machinery, cattle, and other goods they needed to set up their agricultural colonies. Nobbs-Thiessen follows key actors of the Mexican

Mennonite communities established in the Bolivian lowlands to understand how a community that seemed opposed to technological improvement ended up adopting international agricultural innovations in the 1970s and 1980s. After dairy, the chapter details how soybean came to dominate the Bolivian lowlands and the role Mennonites played in its cultivation. As in other parts of the book, Nobbs-Thiessen turns to transnational studies to understand how the international flux of actors, seeds, and machinery shaped soybean production in Bolivia. He finds that the development of Brazilian soy technology, the Mennonite importation of machinery, and local alliances with the Croatian “Marinovic” family set the stage for the establishment of soybean production by the 1980s. Although the soy boom arrived during a deep economic crisis, it ultimately benefited from the neoliberal measures taken by president Victor Paz Estenssoro in 1982, who, advised by the US economist Jeffrey Sachs, removed protective tariffs, price control on foods, and export restrictions. The chapter closes with the socio-environmental consequences of the soybean boom in the late 1980s. High soybean prices invited Mennonites and other locals to expand soy cultivation, which drove significant deforestation in the region. In the end, however, deforestation, settlement patterns that did not acknowledge local conditions, wind erosion, and recurring droughts created a debt crisis among Mennonites invested in soybean production. In the face of these crises, Mennonites appealed to the government again and expanded their agricultural frontier even further.

Fulfilling the promise of transnational history, the book draws from archives in Mexico, Bolivia, Canada, and the United States. Nobbs-Thiessen taps into extraordinarily rich sources: local newspapers, personal account books of Mennonite farmers, institutional videos, annual reports of agricultural organizations such as the Asociación Nacional de Productores de Oleoginosas, and oral interviews of locals and prominent international actors in the Bolivian lowlands. This richness in sources and its commitment to moving between different scales (local, national, and international) makes *Landscape of Migration* appealing to a wide range of scholars and students. Moreover, the book is an excellent contribution to the literature aiming to decenter Latin American stories from the Andes and move to the frontier regions, which, notwithstanding their national importance, have been overlooked by academic works. Scholars working in modern Bolivia, scholars interested in analyzing migration, those working in cultural and visual studies of the Cold War in Latin America, and those interested in the development and modernization of the Latin American agrarian world will find the methodology and the information very useful. It may also appeal to scholars studying the impact of faith-based missionaries in Latin America during the Cold War as well as the emergence of NGO-led development. As an excellent example of using visual documentaries and nonconventional sources, chapter 1 could stand on its own for use with undergraduate and graduate students. Chapter 4 (on faith-based development) and chapter 5 (on the establishment of soybean production) could also stand on their own as examples of how to use oral sources in historical narratives.

Nobbs-Thiessen privileges myriad voices, a truly transnational narrative, and multiple angles to understand mobility and colonization of frontier lands in the second half of the twentieth century. However, because of its ambitious scope, the book is unable to do justice to the extent of environmental change in the Bolivian lowlands. Only by the end of the book does the reader get a sense of the environmental transformation implied by the soybean boom. Maybe better maps in the first chapters of the book would have helped to understand the spatial distribution of the colonization and the extent of the significant changes. Nevertheless, as a transnational account of Bolivian agrarian history, *Landscape of Migration* succeeds in its goal to understand how divergent actors shaped the landscape of the Bolivian lowland in the second half of the twentieth century.

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