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At the heart of James V. Mestaz's new book, *Strength from the Waters*, is the great Fuerte River, an ancient waterway in what is now the Mexican state of Sinaola, and the way the native Mayo people care for this river in the face of ecologically devastating irrigation technologies. Mestaz demonstrates how state-imposed hydraulic infrastructures, water policy, and property laws enact unequal power relations in the region—principally, by deliberately constraining and sometimes outright limiting Mayo access to the Fuerte River. Excluding Mayo from the river, Mestaz emphasizes, is part of a larger project of Indigenous elimination because this river underwrites Mayo identity, culture, and sovereignty. In response to these exclusions, however, Mayo practice what Mestaz calls “hydraulic social mobilization”; that is, they leverage modern irrigation technologies, such as pumps, dams, and canals, to challenge their unequal access to the river (p. 2). By engaging in these acts, Mayo continue to practice their ancient reciprocal connection with this river—and, in turn, their sovereignty as Native people. In this way, Mestaz argues, “they rose up and turned the very weapons used against them into tools to ensure their survival” (p. 18). *Strength from the Waters*, therefore, offers a rigorous analysis of the impossible position of colonized Native peoples in a world built on their dispossession and elimination and on the commodification of their ancestral lands. This analysis, however, importantly shows us how Native peoples have and continue to defy settler logics of Indigenous elimination.

An environmental history of the Fuerte River, written largely with an Indigenous studies lens, *Strength from the Waters* draws on Mexican state archives, corporate archival sources, and oral histories with Mayo elders. The book unfolds along five chapters and an epilogue. Mestaz begins by tracing Mayo identity as shaped by the Fuerte River, focusing on the years between 1927 and 1942. Chapter 1 explores how some Mayo villages obtained water rights to the river when they became ejidos in the 1930s. This chapter may be of particular interest to those writing about Mexican
ejidos and Indigenous responses to Mexican property law.

In chapter 2, Mestaz explores the Sociedad de Interés Colectivo Agropecuario Ejidal (SICAE) in producing unequal access to the Fuerte River among Mayo and Yori (settler) farmers through the postwar period (1944-57). This chapter will be of interest to those concerned with the administration of Mexican president Lazaro Cárdenas and its impact on Indigenous peoples and campesino rights in Mexico. Chapter 3 extends these conversations by examining how Mayo responded to the SICAE’s continued control of the river and a growing capitalist class of landowners in the region. During this time, Mestaz explains, Mayo turned to ancient, traditional rituals and weaved this ancestral knowledge with contemporary irrigation technologies. This, Mestaz argues, is a key example of Mayo hydraulic social mobilization. Chapter 4 redirects the reader’s attention to Yori landowners in the region, their growing hydraulic power, and their relationship to a capitalist-minded federal government. Here, Mestaz emphasizes how growing Yori power in the region hinged on disrupting Mayo relations to the Fuerte River.

Next, chapter 5 covers 1955-70, a period in Mexican history when irrigation access became systemically unavailable to most Indigenous ejidatarios. In turn, this chapter shows how younger Mayo generations became estranged from the Fuerte River. In the epilogue, however, Mestaz argues that Mayo identity remains strong, largely due to their continued (albeit strained) relations to the Fuerte River and their hydraulic social mobilizations. As Mayo have always done, he argues, they continue to garner strength from the river. He states, “Mayo culture is much like the river at its center: strong, fluid, and perennially returning. It moves through time, always changing and yet always remaining” (pp. 232-33).

*Strength from the Waters* is an important contribution to Indigenous environmental histories that examine the intersections of white settler colonialism, racial capitalism, environmental racism, water policy, and climate change. Notably, Mestaz demonstrates the significance and necessity of centering Indigenous studies in these analyses. However, given his emphasis on hydraulic infrastructures and their devastating impact on the Fuerte River and Mayo sovereignty, Mestaz could have done more to discuss how the Mexican state’s (dis)regard for this river is yet another example of destructive white settler colonial practices designed to (re)enact settler domination onto the landscape and destroy Indigenous ecology and life. In this vein, it is helpful to consider Farhana Sultana’s work on “climate coloniality,” which identifies how “climate change lays bare the colonialism of not only the past but [also] an ongoing coloniality that governs and structures our lives” and is co-constitutive of, among other things, racial capitalism.[1] In this way, considering climate coloniality within the context of Mayo struggles may open conversations about the environmental and ecological hauntings of settler colonialism in northern Mexico. Mestaz also could have more extensively engaged Donald Worster’s concept of “rivers of empire”—specifically, what Worster identifies as settlers’ “epistemic of blindness.”[2] This blindness—where the settler’s insatiable drive for reconfiguring the land in capitalism’s image loses sight of the very ends of life—has profound and enduring ecological and environmental consequences. This includes those on the Fuerte River as identified by Mestaz. Together, these sources could help further develop an analysis of the settler logics of the Mexican state and perhaps lead to a conversation about how the Mayo people are repeatedly responding to—and successfully disrupting—Mexico’s insatiable appetite for land, resources, and Indigenous elimination.

Fittingly, *Strength from the Waters* opens with a prophecy: a Mayo elder’s vision of an apocalyptic flood at the Fuerte River. This echoes a common thread throughout Indigenous studies, which contends that settler states are deeply fragile and will eventually collapse. Perhaps, then, Mestaz
could have done more to engage this Mayo elder’s vision as a larger foreshadowing of decolonization and Land Back movements with a particular focus on the Fuerte River’s active (flooding) role in these processes. Even so, by focusing on how the Mayo people defy the Mexican settler state’s project of Indigenous elimination, Mestaz powerfully invites readers to consider how white settler colonialism is an incomplete, failed, and doomed project.

*Strength from the Waters* is a great addition to graduate seminars in Indigenous studies and would pair well with courses on environmental history, hydraulic policy and infrastructure, climate change, environmental racism, and contemporary Mexican history. While the book may not be well suited for a general audience, researchers in these specialized fields will find the book rich and meaningful to their academic inquiries and classroom instruction.

Notes


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