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In *Taking the Field: Soldiers, Nature, and Empire on American Frontiers*, Amy Kohout has crafted a vivid and compelling account of how imperial violence shaped the collection of environmental knowledge in the US West and the Philippines. Tracing the careers of US Army personnel between Reconstruction and the turn of the twentieth century, Kohout shows that the violent work of settler colonialism and efforts to catalog the nonhuman world converged in “a tangle of nature and empire and labor” (p. 16). *Taking the Field* makes a persuasive case that as soldier-scientists strove to identify, collect, and preserve the flora and fauna of unfamiliar landscapes, they reproduced the violence of displacement, removal, and extraction that defined imperial expansion. Blending approaches from military history, transnational histories of US empire, and environmental history, *Taking the Field* draws exciting new connections between transcontinental and transpacific imperial projects and thoughtfully interrogates how imperial legacies continue to shape present-day archives and landscapes.

Kohout’s narrative unfolds over five chapters separated by two reflective interludes. The first chapter examines public and private accounts written by soldiers stationed in the Black Hills and along the Yellowstone River during the 1870s and 1880s. Kohout observes that these soldiers described western landscapes as barren, empty, and featureless, excising Indigenous nations from their descriptions even as they built trails, manned forts, policed reservations, and punished those who resisted US authority. Chapter 2 introduces readers to Edgar Alexander Mearns, an army surgeon and amateur ornithologist who was dispatched to Fort Verde, a remote post in the Tonto Basin of present-day Arizona, in 1884. Kohout observes a striking connection between the numbered metal tags the army forced Apache and Yavapai men to wear on reservations and the “collection practices” Mearns relied on to catalog his specimens (p. 110).

Kohout’s middle chapters follow soldiers like Mearns across the Pacific to the Philippines. Chapter 3 examines soldiers’ accounts of tropical
landscapes, highlighting the multiple meanings they assigned to unfamiliar environments. Chapter 4 finds Mearns marching alongside US troops on the southern island of Mindanao, where he listed the numbers of Moro fighters killed in engagements alongside the names of birds he shot and collected. The surgeon shipped his animal specimens and plundered Filipino artifacts to the Smithsonian, and he joined a broader effort to coordinate scientific research in the Philippines that included influential figures like Gifford Pinchot and John Muir.

In her final chapter, Kohout explores how this knowledge recirculated in the American heartland, where it shaped the manufactured landscapes of the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. The fair, also known as the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, linked the mythology of transcontinental empire to the new expansionist enterprise underway across the Pacific. Visitors explored a “Philippine Exposition” where 1,200 Filipino people inhabited model villages designed to introduce Americans to their new imperial subjects (p. 255). These same visitors could cross a replica of Manila's Bridge of Spain to visit the fair's anthropology exhibit, where organizers presented Indigenous people as living artifacts of a vanished western frontier. These persistent threads of continuity between the settler colonial projects of the long nineteenth century and the overseas imperial campaigns of the twentieth are among of the strongest features of Kohout's work. Taking the Field traces an evolving narrative of US empire that drew on rhetoric and imagery from encounters with western landscapes and Indigenous peoples to make sense of the destructive violence unleashed against the landscapes and peoples of the Philippines.

The reflective interludes that divide these sets of chapters contain Kohout's most compelling analysis. As she traces imperial networks of knowledge production, she also reflects thoughtfully on the archives those networks produced. Kohout acknowledges that writing “a history that centers empire's agents” risks reproducing their perspective and obscuring the communities that suffered at their hands (p. 283). Instead, she asks us to think of this book as a kind of “display case” that rearranges these remnants to “preserve a story of conquest, a tangled web of empire that stretches across oceans and across fields” (p. 284). This careful attention to the relationships between different sources ensures that Taking the Field avoids becoming a swashbuckling tale of soldier-scientists or a story of intractable imperial power. And despite the centrality of white male soldiers in this narrative, Kohout makes space for the stories of Indigenous and Filipino people ensnared by their networks, from Weneslao Estrellas, Mearns's Filipino assistant, to the Apache leader Geronimo, who appeared at the 1904 World's Fair as a prisoner of war.

Kohout is also keenly aware of how these imperial networks of knowledge production continue to shape present-day landscapes and archives. To better understand the work Mearns undertook in the Philippines, she visited the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, where she learned how to prepare birds for preservation. She also traveled to many of the western landscapes described in her sources and searched for traces of the Philippine Exposition in St. Louis's Forest Park. In the best tradition of environmental history, Kohout's graceful prose brings these far-flung places to life and invites readers to share an encounter with landscapes, labs, and libraries where material traces of the imperial past persist. Chapters from Taking the Field would work well as readings for undergraduate classes on US environmental history and the nineteenth-century US. Kohout's emphasis on methodology and sources also make this engaging book an ideal assignment for graduate seminars.
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