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Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850 by Andrew J. Torget (review)

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*Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of
the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850* by Andrew J. Torget
(review)

Casey Walsh

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the city was happening in another. In fact, the particulars of place are afforded due importance in her exploration of what geographers may call a good historical geography, and what Alexander refers to as an urban environmental history (p.4). Though as good as the book is from this perspective, better integration with the extant geographical literatures and their well-trodden pathways into these familiar topics would have added depth and a better sense of scale to the analysis—especially with the implicit environmental justice aspects of the book.

There is much more to explore as extensions of this well written and data-rich book. The primary archival sources collected by Alexander alone represent a potentially useful dataset for spatial analysis and historical GIS investigations into fire risks, hazards, and environmental justice scholarship. As historians concerned with environmental topics have recently shown, the most interesting topics of today are often those that cross disciplinary divides. So once again, the careful reader is led by logic, curiosity, and the search for meaning to the need for greater synthesis between history and geography; in this case specifically, by integrating the fine-grained reasoning and qualitative analysis of this book with the spatial analysis that would have added a better sense of geographic scale and proportionality to fire's ability to "transform landscapes and lives" (p. 2). Indeed, map-less references to the many "locations," "proximities," and other events "dotting" the city (pp. 43-5) may either leave the geographer frustrated by the oversight or inspired by future possibilities for integration. I include myself in the second category.

Matthew C. LaFevor
 Department of Geography
University of Alabama

Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850. Andrew J. Torget. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. xii + 368 pp. Maps, charts, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth (ISBN 978-1-4696-2424-2).

Cotton is in season among historians. The humble fiber has been pushed to the fore by scholars who are taking a new look at the conformation of land, labor, and capital accumulation in the Atlantic World in the nineteenth century. A surging interest in the history of slavery (Martin & Brooks, *Linking the Histories of Slavery*, 2015) has engendered a discussion of the commodity that slaves produced more than any other, and around which economy, society, and culture in the nineteenth-century US was conformed. Some scholars have revisited questions about cotton and capitalism in the US South, finding profit-driven modern businesses pushing forward capital accumulation by mobilizing social labor through compulsion and not the wage form (Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, 2014; Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 2016). One much-lauded recent book chalks up the development of capitalism to the cotton economy, from Manchester to Mississippi (Beckett, *Empire of Cotton*, 2014).

In *Seeds of Empire*, Andrew Torget has written a solid contribution to this literature that tells the story of how the Atlantic cotton economy shaped the borderlands of what is today Texas, between 1800 and 1850. After the invention of the cotton gin around 1800, industry demand for the fiber boomed, first in Europe and later in the northeastern United States. Aspiring Anglos moved into the Deep South to create cotton plantations with slaves, and soon began pressing beyond the Mississippi into territory that was nominally under control of Spain and then Mexico. The vast expansion of cotton agriculture drove a market for horses, which were rounded up by Native Americans on the plains of Texas and sold eastward through merchant channels. Cotton also drove the demand for slave labor: free labor was never considered by southern planters, even though the Mexicans, British, and northerners in the US outlawed the slave trade. And this contradiction – an industrial society that demanded cheap cotton yet railed against slavery – was a key dynamic in the evolving political situation of the new Texas borderlands as it lurched toward its emergence as a slaveholding republic and later a slaveholding state.

Torget does a marvelous job managing the complexities of this history of multiple social actors fighting to dominate or simply survive in a nebulous political and social space. Wealthy Anglo farmers from Mississippi; Tejano elites; slaves from the South; European colonists; Mexican, British, French, and US politicians; Comanches; Caribbean smugglers: all these and more were brought together in an often bloody maelstrom by the swirling forces of cotton capitalism, and *Seeds of Empire* manages to weave them into a coherent tapestry. A wealth of regional and national libraries and archives in the US and Mexico were used to generate a close view of economy and society at the local and international levels. In a literature that is mostly focused on events and figures in Texan and US history, Torget is particularly impressive when he integrates a discussion of Mexican struggles over slavery and the relation of Mexico's central government to its far-flung northern reaches during the chaotic early years of that Republic.

Seeds of Empire is excellent borderlands history that locates the lives of people at the crux of cotton capitalism and state formation. Torget masters the historiography of the borderlands, and rather than quickly moving on, is explicit in his engagement with it. *Seeds of Empire* thus works through and reshapes the older literature in a systematic way to push the narrative in new directions. There are always, however, a few things on the wish list of a reviewer that a book does not provide. The book comes up a bit short in its engagement with the conceptual issues in a literature that expands beyond the region and period of the study. For example, there is a missed opportunity here to engage with the theoretical questions driving the new literature on the history of capitalism, slavery and cotton. Torget does not really grapple with issues such as the social organization of the cotton economy, the form of labor that produces value in that economy, the relation of the state to economy, or of liberalism and slavery. So, too, the book has much to offer to scholars studying labor and land in the production of other commodities, of which there has been a good deal of literature lately. Cotton remained central to economy, state, and society in the US/Texan/Mexican borderlands well into the second half of the twentieth century, and having written a book about cotton in the borderlands during this later period (Walsh, *Building the Borderlands*, 2008), I was curious to know what conclusions Torget might draw about land, labor, and polity if he considered that longer time frame. Given

the seriousness and quality of *Seeds of Empire*, such engagements with scholars operating farther afield in history and the social sciences would certainly be fruitful for all of us.

Casey Walsh
 Department of Anthropology
 University of California, Santa Barbara

Colonizing Paradise: Landscape and Empire in the British West Indies. Jefferson Dillman. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2015. 264 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, references, index. \$54.95 cloth (ISBN 978-0-8173-1858-1); \$54.95 electronic (ISBN 978-0-8173-8804-1).

Europeans and European Americans perceived the Caribbean landscape as a locus both of seductive splendor and of horrific lawlessness. Even in Columbus's first letters depicting the "New World," the Admiral depicted the American landscape as embodying both lush beauty and monstrous wilderness, often simultaneously (p. 11). By the end of the sixteenth century, according to Jefferson Dillman, Europeans saw the New World as a location where the struggle between the virtues present in an Edenic paradise battled against the kingdom of the Devil, and their representations of its geography depicted these conflicting views. Dillman argues that the earliest Spanish descriptions of the land provided the foundation for later English perspectives. His analysis of two maps of Jamaica published in the 1670s (pp. 91-4) is particularly effective in showing how cartographic images of pirate-controlled spaces publicized the lawless Caribbean, even before the adoption of large-scale enslavement of Africans. Diverging images, of paradise and hellishness, shaped subsequent European views of the Caribbean landscape.

Over time, according to Dillman, English depictions of the landscape and its significance shifted. Characteristics of bifurcated Edenic paradise and locus of horror persisted, and the latter grew during the era when English settlers turned to brutal enslavement of Africans to cultivate their fertile sugar fields in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Added to these characterizations were new views of the landscape that encompassed a more "scientific" outlook: the cataloguing of once-unfamiliar plants in the published work of Sir Hans Sloane, the "bioprospecting" efforts of Europeans searching for exotic flora for commercially viable export crops (including medicines), and the establishment of public and private botanical gardens "that sought to create knowledge of and thus control over, a wilderness landscape" (p. 107). In Dillman's account, the Edenic landscape, once fallen, could be "recovered" through a cultivation of a "rational landscape vision" merged with "a Christian recovery narrative that placed the restoration of the West Indian wilderness to its God-given potential" (p. 107). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a shift toward picturesque artistic sensibilities among British visitors and colonists introduced a vision of the landscape that made the horrors of slavery as miniscule as the depictions of the enslaved in vast panoramas that highlighted soaring mountains, lush fields, and roaring rivers. In some accounts, the enslaved became