In her new book, Gisela Heffes offers a broad-based study that covers literature, film and visual art in relation to Latin American ecocritical practice, activism and theory. A welcome addition to the ecocritical field, Heffes’s latest work builds on her previous work on Latin American urban imaginaries.

The book begins by offering a thorough review of ecological theory, mostly from the U.S. and Europe. While these extensive theoretical discussions could have been more smoothly integrated into the analysis, this part of the book is comprehensive and offers a very useful overview of ecocritical positions. Examples from the poet Gary Snyder to Marxist urbanist Mike Davis, from theorists Lawrence Buell to Timothy Morton, from social theory by Raymond Williams to biopolitics by Giorgio Agamben, Heffes sweeps through many years, and varying genres and critical traditions, of North American and European thought to reveal its limits, demonstrating how it cannot fully account for Latin America’s environmental predicament. Heffes concurs with Michael Bennet who questions the distinction of “nature” from the built environment, urging readers to recognize them as historically intertwined. He points out the need to look at deteriorating and polluted urban landscapes as well as so-called pristine rural landscapes. Heffes then highlights Latin Americanist ecocritical scholarship, citing special issues of journals (such as an issue of Hispanic Journal in 1998), articles and books that turn the lens on Latin America (including work by Jennifer French, Jorge Marcone, Laura Barbas-Rhoden, Gabriela Nouzeilles, among other important authors). After this lengthy (more than 70 pages) theoretical section, Heffes calls for articulating a Latin American-based ecocriticism and proposes a “new critical episteme” located at the “intersección entre lo medioambiental, urbano y latinoamericano” (21). From this new critical approach, Heffes will focus on urban degradation, protection, resistance and renewal from a variety of cultural projects.

Heffes organizes her study around three main foci: “Destrucción,” “Sostenibilidad,” and “Preservación,” allowing for a conceptual and activist approach to the cultural expression and representation of urban environments. In the first of these main sections, “Destrucción. El vertedero de basura como tropo de una biopolítica global,” Heffes examines marginality and the detritus of consumerism. She discusses works that represent favelas and shantytowns, theories of garbage and waste, and environmental degradation in works such as Nicaraguan Gioconda Belli’s novel Waslala and Brazilian Eduardo Coutinho’s film A margem do lixo. The next section, “Sostenibilidad. Los desechos y sus resignificaciones sociales, culturales y estéticas,” addresses garbage, refuse, recycling and reusing in urban contexts. It is here that Heffes includes a discussion of cartoneros/pepenadores/catadores, and the collective cartonera publishing initiatives that began with Eloísa Cartonera in Buenos Aires in 2003. The last section, “Preservación. Naturaleza y urbanismo: de las utopías sociales del siglo XX a las sociedades utópicas/distópicas del siglo XXI,” explores new urban planning and the emergence of isolated gated communities, ecological idealism (“ecotopías”) or
cataclysmic distopias. Here she compares futuristic works by Argentine Ana María Shúa and Mexican Homero Aridjis, the latter a well-known ecological activist. In all of these areas, she proposes an “ecocrítica social” that takes into account not only aesthetic concerns but how they intersect with social and economic conditions in local urban situations. Brief sections that Heffes calls “Interludios” allow for a spotlight on two significant Argentine cultural producers: Bernardo Verbitsky, whose 1957 novel Villa Miseria también es América is a seminal text on poverty and urban housing crises, and visual artist Antonio Berni, whose paintings and collages incorporate garbage into the canvas. As these and many other examples illustrate, Heffes takes a longer view historically, from the foundational discursive utopian vision of “America” that launched the European colonial enterprise to mid-twentieth century works to contemporary texts, films and art collectives.

While the study covers all regions of Latin America including Brazil, many of the examples, and in fact the ones most thoroughly articulated, are from the Southern Cone region. A study like this with a large corpus of works from many countries and various genres and media leads to sometimes rushed or less detailed analysis; in the case of this book, the breadth of the corpus is one of its strengths, and although the discussion of the films tends to lean toward the thematic with little attention to visual and directorial technique, the literary examples and analysis are well contextualized. Her comparatist methodology leads to new categories of observation such as what she calls “una geografía móvil” (163), and a sophisticated interpretation of multimedia eco-collectives such as Residual in Mexico.

Políticas de la destrucción/poéticas de la preservación is highly original and makes a major statement by covering so much ground geographically as well as in its wide range of examples and disciplinary approaches. This book received honorable mention in 2015 in the LASA Southern Cone section book prize for its originality, interdisciplinarity and breadth. Heffes has made another valuable contribution to the field, bridging ecocriticism with Latin American urban and cultural studies. She launches a bio-eco-ethics rooted in a critique of several decades of neoliberal economic policies in Latin America that have disastrously widened inequality. Heffes’s study reveals the emergence of visual art, film and literature that take on this urgent social and environmental crisis to resist and contest its destruction, to track its sustainability and applaud its efforts at preservation.

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Mención de Honor en Humanidades

Is World Literature a relevant concept for Latin America? The answer Mariano Siskind gives in Cosmopolitan Desires is a resounding yes. And it is a convincing yes, too, as Siskind studies the production of the “world” in a number of key cases of Latin American literature, in a sustained analysis of Latin American modernizing and cosmopolitan discourses. Cosmopolitan Desires asks and proceeds to illustrate what it means to open up