



HAL
open science

Review of Christopher M. Parsons, *A Not-So-New World: Empire and Environment in French Colonial North America*. Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018

José Beltrán

► **To cite this version:**

José Beltrán. Review of Christopher M. Parsons, *A Not-So-New World: Empire and Environment in French Colonial North America*. Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. *H-France Review*, 2019, 19. hal-04258486

HAL Id: hal-04258486

<https://hal.science/hal-04258486v1>

Submitted on 25 Oct 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

H-France Review

Christopher M. Parsons, *A Not-So-New World: Empire and Environment in French Colonial North America*. Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 264 pp. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780812250589.

Review by José Beltrán, École normale supérieure, Paris.

Christopher M. Parson's book constitutes a salutary counterpoint to the generalized idea that the engagement of early modern Europeans with the Americas—and with their natural worlds in particular—was invariably marked by a sense of shocking novelty and strangeness that the Western tradition had to assimilate laboriously. While that remains true in many cases, the author sets out to demonstrate that, for the first generations of French settlers in northeastern North America, the environments of the New World seemed decidedly familiar to those they had left behind. For Old Regime France, the distinctness of the environments of those regions appeared gradually. Much more importantly, Parsons tells us, that sense of familiarity, which lasted until at least the early eighteenth century, marked the path to the early French colonization of the region. *A Not-So-New World* is first and foremost a history of the nature of New France, and especially of its flora, as early modern French settlers, travelers, administrators, and *curiosi* tried to understand it and use it in ways that were often different and occasionally conflicting. And, as the author brilliantly shows, the bonds that those agents of French empire tied with North American natural milieux are crucially important, because they derived from them, and in turn considerably shaped, ideas and projects about the colonization of the region.

Parsons operates on a timespan that broadly coincides with that of New France itself, stretching roughly from the early settlements at the turn of the seventeenth century to the Treaty of Paris of 1763, which put an end to both the Seven Years' War and France's colonial presence in North America. Geographically, the book is more focalized: although Parsons uses cases from all over the territory of New France, which eventually extended from Acadia to Louisiana, his attention throughout the book is mainly focused on the regions around the Saint Lawrence River, where French settlements first took hold.

The thread that ties together the different chapters is the notion of cultivation. The purpose of the book is to “follo[w] the rise and subsequent fall of cultivation as an organizing ideology of French colonialism in northeastern North America as a means to bring an otherwise obscured political ecology to light” (10-11). For several generations of Frenchmen, the nature they encountered on the other side of the North Atlantic was not radically different from that in their homeland, but an uncultured version of it: it was, as one traveler put it, “lacking only a little culture” (38). New France's natural and, by extension, human environments were, as the first settlers put it, *sauvage*, that is, wild, undomesticated: “the discourse of the *sauvage* was in this way overtly ecological and blurred ethnographic and environmental knowledge” (7).

The book is divided into six chapters: each of them analyzes a particular aspect of the story while structuring the whole upon a clear chronological arc. The first chapter focuses on the early stages of

French presence in North America. It also serves as an introduction to the thesis that Samuel Champlain and other explorers and settlers around the turn of the seventeenth century perceived the New World's flora in terms of relatedness to that of Europe. A good case in point is that of the vine, a plant charged with meaning for early modern Christians: for the Récollet Gabriel Sagard, for instance, North American grapes produced bad wine not because they were different from the French, but because indigenous people "did not cultivate them" (18). Parsons also re-contextualizes this episode within a broader ecological history by putting to use different studies in paleo-natural sciences to explain that feeling of familiarity.

The natural and human environments that French found upon their arrival to North America could then be tamed, and that possibility gave a natural justification for French rule in the region. The next two chapters aim at developing this thesis from two different angles. Chapter two aims at analyzing the ways seventeenth-century travelers and settlers used this sense of familiarity to articulate their colonial projects in writing. There are many interesting parts in this chapter, including the link between the "georgic vision" of French imperialism in New France and the agricultural projects for the improvement of rural France that were charged with moral values. Parsons analyzes fascinating cases (although he tends to do so sketchily), such as the delegation of the lieutenant governor of Acadia to the court of Henri IV: in their attempt to gain back the crown's support for the colonization of North America, they brought to the king not shocking *exotica* but "grain, wheat, rye, barley and oats" (51).

Parsons is less persuasive in bringing into fruition this chapter's main theme about the forms of communication through which New France's settlers tried to convince their metropolitan audiences about the "cultivability" of the new lands. It remains unclear how different genres participated differently or not to the transformations of the representation of North American environments. The analysis of writing practices remains superficial, partly because the author has paid attention to discourses rather than to the changing material forms through which those discourses circulated. Parsons uses mostly edited sources, and it would have been interesting to pursue a more material approach to those documents in order to see how printed narratives, for instance, were transformed from edition to edition, how they were received and appropriated by readers, and how the ways in which they were received affected subsequent narratives. While the chapter shows that writers of New France's nature showcased the fact that they were first-hand witnesses of what they were describing, what they read before or during their stay in North America and how these readings shaped (or not) the ways in which they communicated those natures is not analyzed here.¹

Chapter three studies closely the interrelatedness of human and natural environments in the eyes of French colonists through the prism of religious apostolates among the region's indigenous communities. A good part of the chapter is devoted to looking at how missionaries tried (often unsuccessfully) to understand and appropriate indigenous uses of the natural world. Closer to his general thesis are the sections in which he considers how Récollet and Jesuit missionaries created a link between the taming of aboriginal communities and that of their natural environments, an association that was deployed at the level of both metaphor and action. Missionaries used florid horticultural expressions to describe their task—my favorite in the book comes from the Jesuit Pierre Biard, for whom the Mi'kmaq were like "a great field of stunted and ill-begotten wild plants"

(70). More important, as Parsons points out, was the fact that some of these missionaries “came to understand that transforming indigenous relationships with their environment was an essential prerequisite for the sort of religious conversion that they expected” (72). For instance, when they attempted to sedentarize aboriginal communities (something at which they also failed more often than not), they did so by the promotion of agricultural practices among them.

Chapter four retraces the fall of this environmental and imperial “recuperative project.” Through interesting cases, such as that of engineer and surveyor Gédéon de Catalogne, the chapter argues that the “cultivation ideology” fell slowly apart as settlers acquired a more in-depth knowledge of New France and its environments. Gradually, the distinctiveness of the nature of French North America began to impose itself. Since New France’s environments began to seem more new than French, attempts were made to clearly delineate French spaces, which ultimately contributed to the “emergence of Canada as a distinctive cultural and ecological space” around the end of the seventeenth century (108).

The last two chapters offer more focused analyses of French conceptualizations of North American environments around the mid-eighteenth century. Chapter 5 concentrates on the field of botany, with a special focus on the scholars around the Académie royale des sciences. By the accent it placed on novelty, Parsons tells us, the new science of botany contributed to disintegrating the ideology of cultivation based on familiarity. Detached from their ecological environments, New France’s plants were treated by botanists as items in a catalog of the world’s natures. (I would like to point out, however, that European scholars were not alone in doing this.²) Particularly interesting is the case of Michel Sarrazin, New France’s physician and only correspondent of the Académie in the region. But I wonder if the “fundamental tension” Parsons identifies between an “arrogant” center and a silenced periphery is not exaggerated to a certain extent by his exclusive focus on the Académie, whose monopoly on French science was much more contested and uncertain than we are led to believe here.

Chapter 6 is the richest of the book in historical detail. It traces Jesuit Joseph-François Lafitau’s purported discovery and study of the American ginseng and the discussions that followed on the connection of that plant to the Chinese ginseng. Lafitau’s contested focus on the resemblance of American ginseng to its Asian counterpart was part of the broader global goals of the Society of Jesus. Parsons shows how Lafitau’s claims were appropriated in a variety of ways: while the botanists at the Académie challenged his claim on the similarity of the two ginsengs, indigenous and European traders used his study to exploit the American plant for their benefit.

A Not-So-New World makes an important contribution to the developments by which the question of nature has become, in the last decades, a central issue within the social sciences. The history of science is a good example: the classical focus on constructivism has been giving way, in recent years, to research on how different peoples have related differently to nature and the environment and on how these divergent forms of naturalism entered into contact in a global context. One undeniable cause of this shift is the environmental movement, but also the influence—in the French context at least—of anthropologists of nature, who have questioned in fundamental ways the universality of European naturalism. For historians like Alice Ingold, however, the path to follow

does not only require us to free ourselves from dichotomies such as nature/culture, but above all to inquire into the ways that this partition operated in both different historical contexts and, crucially, in our own historical practice.³

Parsons's contribution is fully in line with these new complex ways in which historians are dealing with the question of nature. Refusing to adopt a linear narrative of imperial environmental history based on degradation, Parsons is committed to a strong contextualization and historicization of the case of New France. The book demonstrates that the relationships of peoples to their environments in the long term was marked by a variety of situations. It shows that the story of Spanish and English colonization of the Americas does not provide a blueprint for explaining all forms of European experience on the other side of the Atlantic. Europeans engaged with the Americas and their environments in occasionally very different ways. Through the case of New France and Parsons's outstanding historicizing of notions, the book uncovers the conflictual ways in which dichotomies such as *cultivé* and *sauvage* were negotiated by historical actors.

Two other strengths of this book stand out, in my opinion. First, Parsons makes use of non-historical literature, both across and beyond the social sciences, to sustain his arguments. He mobilizes studies in biogeography, ecology, and systematics on the botanical continuities between Europe and North America to contextualize the sense of environmental familiarity by early French settlers and travelers to New France. He also uses works of archeology and paleoecology to contextualize his story within a larger history of the earth. And he draws from anthropological research, such as that of A. Irving Hallowell on the Ojibwe, to better understand indigenous peoples' binds to their environment as they were perceived and often misunderstood by French explorers such as the Jesuit missionaries. Some readers will miss, however, a more serious engagement with anthropologists such as Philippe Descola, Tim Ingold, or Bruno Latour, who have contributed decisively to the shift of history—and the history of science in particular—towards the question of nature.⁴

Second, Parsons pays careful attention to the role that indigenous communities and their knowledge of their environment played in this story. Throughout the book, the author shows that North American aboriginal peoples were not only an object of observation for Europeans, but indispensable informants whose contribution was more often than not effaced. Despite the early settlers' insistence on the uncultivated character of North American nature, those environments had long been shaped by the human action of aboriginal communities. Moreover, indigenous forms of knowledge held an unequal epistemological status in the eyes of different Europeans: while Lafitau gave voice to aboriginal sources and mobilized the opinion of a "*sauvagesse*" in his arguments on the American ginseng, Parisian scholars were more unwilling to accord epistemological authority to aboriginal botanical and ecological knowledge. By tracing different categories of nature among both Europeans and aboriginal peoples, Parsons succeeds in making more complex the story of the encounter between colonial and indigenous forms of knowledge.

Generally, the book makes a number of broad claims that would have gained in strength by contextualizing them within contexts larger than that of New France. It would have been useful to see how the evolutions of French environmental colonialism in northeastern North America were

related to those in other contexts of French and European imperialism. Moreover, the book mobilizes a great number of case studies, but a number of them are treated superficially and the reader often remains thirsty for more detail. It is clear, however, that Parsons's book complicates the narrative of European understanding of and intervention in American natures in refreshing ways. He succeeds in strongly historicizing the specific set of ideals and practices through which France engaged with North American environments. All in all, this book shows us a promising way for exploring how people related to nature in a variety of ways across time and space.

José Beltrán

École normale supérieure, Paris

jose.beltran@ens.fr

¹ For an example of how an approach inspired from a material book history can contribute to the history of American environments, see Neil Safier, "Les transformations de la zone torride. Les répertoires de la nature tropicale à l'époque des Lumières," *Annales HSS* 66, no. 1 (2011), 143-72.

² Federico Marco, for instance, has studied how *honzōgaku* (a scholarly field having nature as its object) scholars and amateurs in early modern Japan "tended to examine plants and animals as intellectual commodities in isolation from their ecosystems, to be cataloged as concrete samples of abstract species in encyclopedias, atlases, monographs, and collections." Natural species were then treated as *meibutsu* (names) in the form of discrete encyclopedia entries, with an emphasis on morphological descriptions and juxtapositions. Federico Marcon, *The Knowledge of Nature and the Nature of Knowledge in Early Modern Japan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 6.

³ Alice Ingold, "Écrire la nature. De l'histoire sociale à la question environnementale?," *Annales HSS* 66, no. 1 (2011), 11-29. For a questioning of the split between constructivism and naturalism from the social sciences, see Michel de Fornel and Cyril Lemieux (eds.), *Naturalisme versus constructivisme* (Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS, 2008).

⁴ For example, Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005) and Bruno Latour, *Face à Gaïa. Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2015), esp. the first conference, "Sur l'instabilité de la (notion de) nature." For an overview of the impact of this anthropology of nature on environmental history, see Alice Ingold, "Écrire la nature. De l'histoire sociale à la question environnementale?," *Annales HSS* 66, no. 1 (2011), 11-29; for its effect on the history of science, see Antonella Romano, "Fabriquer l'histoire des sciences modernes. Réflexions sur une discipline à l'ère de la mondialisation," *Annales HSS* 70, no. 2 (2015), 381-408, esp. 391-4.