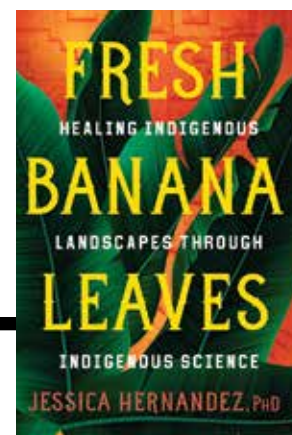


BE A GUEST

FRESH BANANA LEAVES: HEALING INDIGENOUS LANDSCAPES THROUGH INDIGENOUS SCIENCE

**BY JESSICA HERNANDEZ; BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA:
NORTH ATLANTIC BOOKS, 2022; 256 PAGES, \$17.95.**

REVIEWED BY CATHERINE DE ALMEIDA, ASLA



When invited to someone's home for dinner, what do you do? How do you behave? I was taught that guests never arrive empty-handed, and to express gratitude by bringing a gift or something to share—a bottle of wine, salad, or dessert, or flowers in a vase, a small token to spark a warm smile. Mutual forms of respect are exchanged by offering greetings, thanks, and appreciation, a helping hand in preparing a shared meal or cleaning up afterward. Such rituals might be conveyed differently in other cultures, but at the heart of such exchanges are the values of shared practices: care, respect, empathy, community, and connection.

Social relations take place between people, but they also apply to relationships between humans, the broader environment, and other-than-human life. Yet these connections go unrecognized and have deteriorated. Jessica Hernandez, a Maya Ch'orti' and Zapotec environmental scientist, offers perspectives for how relations can be mindfully recovered. *Fresh Banana Leaves: Healing Indigenous Landscapes Through Indigenous Science* weaves together documented histories with personal stories. In direct, personal prose, she brings care and respect to a discussion

of the relations Indigenous cultures have with all abiotic and biotic life sustained by landscapes. By sharing experiences and stories from her family and other Indigenous people she has interviewed, she subverts common narratives about the natural world and highlights the harms and consequences of white settler colonialism and ecocolonialism, the subsequent impacts and alterations of land and environments. She describes decolonization as “peeling onions,” layers of violence and disenfranchisement against people and landscapes that need to be dismantled, peeled away, until you arrive at the core.

Fresh Banana Leaves is both an excellent introduction into understanding Indigenous landscapes and the harmful effects of settler colonialism and a helpful resource for those who have already immersed themselves in this subject matter. Hernandez integrates the definitions of key terms as they are introduced throughout the book. She describes settler colonialism as “the systems that continue to grant settlers the power to lead political regimes, government institutions, and natural resource allocation over the Indigenous peoples who used to coexist with the lands that are now colonized. Settler colonialism

favors settlers, and thus everyone must understand whether their positionality on Indigenous lands is that of a settler, an unwelcome guest, or a welcomed guest.”

To help make such distinctions, Hernandez uses symbolism throughout the book—the titular “fresh banana leaves” are heavy with meaning. They carry both stories of displacement and those of adaptation and resistance (as discussed in chapters titled “Indigenous Teaching” and “Ancestral Foods”). And there is significance embedded in weaving and embroidering *huipiles*. The tunics are a major part of the Zapotec community’s traditional regalia and connect people to the Earth. As she writes in the chapter “Tierra Madre,” “My grandmother always told me that when we weaved or embroidered, we weaved our legacies and embroidered our resistance” and “our landscapes and plant relatives.”

Western settler-colonial societies often assume a given right. Manifest destiny justifies endless taking and disposing without consequence, with no care or respect for those affected by such actions. What would happen if this perception shifted to a mindset of being guests? As Hernandez reminds the reader, “We should never take more from nature than what we need,” because everything is interconnected. By including and practicing Indigenous ways of knowing, learning, and sharing of knowledge, she pushes against Western academic and scientific norms. In doing so, she sheds light on the many ways in which white settler colonialism manifests in hierarchical systems designed to maintain power for white males. Hernandez shares how her Indigenous epistemologies and methods were discredited during her graduate studies for not being cited sources under Western environmental scientific



standards, but as she demonstrates, these stories are indeed a science that offers important knowledge that is gained through lived experience.

“Expertise is an ongoing process,” she notes, and in fact, rejects the concept of “expertise” as there is always “something to learn and, in some cases, unlearn and relearn because the way we have been taught has not always been equitable, inclusive, or understanding of non-Western ways of knowing.” In many

ways, her book offers insights into beginning the journey to unlearn the linear tendencies of Western science approaches that seek to establish expertise by answering questions with a single answer or a one-size-fits-all approach, and to relearn holistic ways of thinking that do not assume, for example, that all is known once it is mapped, and that design is problem solving that leads to the “right” answer.

Hernandez repeats definitions and key concepts by situating them within multiple arguments, histories, and stories throughout her book. Her writing is logical and embodies multitudes that allow for nonlinear reading. As such, she operates within a tradition of feminist and queer scholarly approaches that push back against white male, heteronormative establishments.

Fresh Banana Leaves includes firsthand accounts and genocidal histories of Indigenous experiences across Central America, Mexico, and the United States. Hernandez relays them to guide readers through the complexities and nuances of how settler colonialism, racism, and patriarchy persist and manifest across the Americas. Powerful, these stories carry a sadness, and they also suggest ways of processing intergenerational traumas. For

RIGHT

From an early age, Jessica Hernandez grappled with a sense of belonging and racial hierarchical systems in both Latin America and the United States.

HERNANDEZ CRITIQUES CERTAIN SPOKES OF THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE WHEEL.



Indigenous cultures, environmental losses are cultural losses because of their close relationships with place, environments, and, as Hernandez describes, plant and animal relatives or “kincentric ecology.” All loss creates grief, and Hernandez refers to this particular loss due to ecocolonialism and climate change as “ecological grief.” I would add, however, that climate change is an extension of ecocolonialism, not separate, since colonialism and extractive practices are causing climate change.

The triple-layered concept is unpacked in the chapter “Ecocolonialism of Indigenous Landscapes.” “Ecocolonialism ultimately is the altering of our environments and landscapes due to colonization of Indigenous lands and the paradigms that are upheld to grant settlers (white people) the power to continue managing our environments and landscapes,” writes Hernandez, defining the term before identifying culpabilities that carry through to today. “Every environmental scientist, researcher, policy maker, and anyone else who ever took a decision over our environments without consulting the Indigenous peoples of those

environments has practiced some form of ecocolonization.” Landscape architecture is one such profession that has contributed and continues to contribute to ecocolonization by imposing Western ideologies onto Indigenous landscapes through design and reconstruction. Frederick Law Olmsted designated landscape architecture as a professional practice, yet he displaced communities to make room for his projects in the name of a “greater public good”—more specifically, a greater good for white communities. Such uncomfortable legacies carry through to today. Landscape architects continue—actively or passively—to participate in acts of displacement by being uncritical of the communities that benefit from and are harmed by design-oriented decision-making. As Hernandez points out, unflinchingly calling out academics in the sciences (although her message applies to design professionals as well): “There is a failure to reflect on the founding history of these fields and how these founding histories continue to play a major role within the fields and disciplines that have been created from within.”

Although her book was not written specifically for landscape architects, Hernandez critiques certain spokes of the landscape architecture wheel. Conservation and the National Parks System, for example, are Western constructs created as an antidote to



TOP
Hernandez stitching her *huipil*, a traditional Zapotec garment.

RIGHT
Members of Hernandez’s family. Wearing a *huipil* is like wearing a part of nature that can be carried anywhere.

COURTESY, JESSICA HERNANDEZ, TOP; EDUARDO SALINAS VILLATORO, BOTTOM

the overexploitation of Indigenous lands and natural resources by settlers. These movements continue to displace and cause harm to Indigenous communities by failing to uplift and center Indigenous peoples, even if the intention is to “undo some of the harm settlers generated.” Additionally, she points out that permaculture is “co-opted global Indigenous knowledge that was introduced into the Western science world.” Institutions profit from teaching it without crediting or sending funds to the Palawa people.

In a field that alters landscapes, aspires to cultivate human–environment relationships, and offers avenues for thinking and designing across multiple scales, there is much landscape architects can learn from the stories Hernandez shares. Such lessons require a slowing down, an art of appreciating and noticing the life that surrounds us, and an expression of care and gratitude of occupied lands and planetary gifts provided by this Earth. But such lessons are at odds with the extractive practices and stolen lands that landscape architecture as a field relies on. There is a misperception that tribal lands only exist in rural areas.

RIGHT

For displaced Indigenous women, huipiles are sometimes the only piece of their ancestral lands they carry. Hernandez wearing her grandmother's huipil at her grad school graduation.

Hernandez points out that “urban settings and built environments...are also built on Indigenous lands.” Although urban metropolitan areas have been so heavily altered, she reminds the reader that these lands are also ancestral homelands of Indigenous communities. Due to such extreme modifications of urban environments

over time, organizations and governmental entities often fail to consult or include Indigenous communities in planning and policy decision-making. Treating Indigenous communities as afterthoughts perpetuates ecocolonialism, and in ignoring tribal sovereignty, “continues to grant only white people the right to govern over” Indigenous lands. This is especially challenging for tribes that are not federally recognized, such as the Duwamish Tribe in Seattle, which filed a lawsuit in May 2022 against the U.S. Department of the Interior to request federal recognition as a first, but critical, step in working toward tribal sovereignty. The lack of recognition limits their ability to “establish their own form of government, determine membership requirements, enact legislation, and establish law enforcement and court systems.”

To work toward curbing climate change, Hernandez argues that urban Indigenous communities must be consulted and included in climate change and environmental policies. She critiques top-down approaches that are prevalent in conservation sciences—but are also true for landscape architecture—that fail to consult and center communities from the beginning, often resulting in a “one-size-fits-all” mentality. She instead advocates for a bottom-up approach that allows initiatives to come from within. She developed six helpful principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR) for Indigenous communities during her



VICTOR HERNANDEZ



ABOVE
A loom is a space of expression, a blank canvas in which weaving and embroidering capture intergenerational knowledge.

doctoral research that center respect for Indigenous peoples and their ways of being and doing things in their communities to ensure such projects are led by Indigenous communities.

The first principle of CBPR is to “follow and create fluid and dynamic approaches that do not follow the linear research method.” It advocates for ensuring Indigenous communities are informed and allowed to participate in decision-making, and not treated as “test subjects” or informed of decisions after they have been made, an important consideration when conducting community engagement activities for projects. This relates to another principle, which is to “embrace all Indigenous epistemologies relevant to the community.” Hernandez suggests recognizing the difference between how Western understandings of time diverge from those of Indigenous communities and emphasizes the importance of making space for participatory processes and consultation to take more time.

While I found it difficult to discern the audience for this book—white settlers, other Indigenous scholars, academics, environmental scientists, students, or all of the above—Hernandez seems to have written it more as activism that might begin the

healing process for the atrocities many Indigenous peoples have experienced and continue to experience because of settler colonialism. In this sense, a specific audience may not matter. Her book offers an opportunity to engage in deep listening through reading. As she reminds the reader, it is critical that Indigenous ways of knowing and Indigenous stories are written and shared by Indigenous peoples, not observed, extracted, and written by non-Indigenous peoples as historically has been the Western approach.

Values motivate what we do and how we do it. What would happen if expressions of gratitude, appreciation, and respect translated to place histories?

What effect would this have on how one moves through, occupies, and exists in relation to all other places and life forms one encounters during their everyday life? How would we behave and navigate this world knowing we occupy this planet or unceded ancestral lands as a guest? As Hernandez advocates, “In order to start healing Indigenous landscapes, everyone must understand their positionality as either settlers, unwanted guests, or welcomed guests, and that is ultimately determined by the Indigenous communities whose land you currently reside on or occupy.” In other words, what would happen if you arrived as an unwelcome guest and crashed someone else’s dinner party? There are so many layers to racism, patriarchy, and settler colonialism that manifest in all factions of societies. Hernandez’s book is deeply personal and courageous. As an act of resistance that moves toward healing Indigenous landscapes, the book is a reflection on her own identities and experiences, and inevitably causes us to reflect on our own and how we might have unwittingly contributed to the harms she describes. ●

CATHERINE DE ALMEIDA, ASLA, IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON.

ANA LAURA PALACIOS CEPEDA