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Book Review

This is Bram Büscher's review of David McDermott Hughes' 2010 book *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, landscape, and the problem of belonging*, and David McDermott Hughes' response to Bram Büscher's review of this book.

Bram Büscher's Review of *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, landscape, and the problem of belonging*

Hughes, D.M. Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, landscape, and the problem of belonging. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. 2010. Pp. XX+204. Hardcover ISBN 9780230621428, USD 80. Paperback ISBN 9780230621435, USD 30.

At first glance, it might seem that David Hughes' new book *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, lndscape and the problem of belonging* has little to do with conservation. Nothing is further from the truth. This is a highly relevant, thought-provoking and illuminating study of the relations between conservation and society through the prism of race, whose relevance goes far beyond the case of Zimbabwe. At its core, the book is about human bonding with 'nature', though not the type of bonding usually talked about in mainstream conservation. Hughes looks at the consequences of what happens when white people turn to nature and ecology as a way to escape social problems and 'the other', in this case the black peoples living in the same territory. In Zimbabwe, this happened in extreme form: whites constructed irrigation dams, a major lake, and many pockets of people-free, biodiverse 'Edens'. Through such landscape engineering, they felt they would belong to the country and to 'Africa'. Yet, "by writing themselves so single-mindedly into the landscape, many whites wrote themselves out of the society" (p. 25).

For long, whites did not 'cogitate a great deal upon' the blacks in Zimbabwe (p. xviii), but rather tried to legitimate their place as settlers in Africa. This, Hughes argues, is not so much racism, as it is what he calls 'other disregarding'—a particular type of escapism from one's social surroundings (p. xviii). In turn, it is easy to see the relevance beyond the case of Zimbabwe's whites. Indeed, Hughes wants to "challenge them, white Americans, and many others to think differently about conservation and nature-loving—to stop ignoring social problems by romancing the land" (p. xix).

White Zimbabweans, the book shows, were forced to come to terms and negotiate with their black neighbors in the early 2000s. This was widely condemned in Europe and North America, laying bare deep cultural and identity issues when people lose mastery over land and fate. In a changing world, these issues will need to be confronted by whites, not the least so by engaging differently with nature, especially since "popular conservation continues to produce the aesthetics, symbols, and fables of white privilege" (p. 133).

I have two main points of critique on the book. I believe the book could have further enhanced its value by engaging more explicitly with questions of political economy, and by juxtaposing whites' views with blacks' views, and how blacks were incorporated into conservation in Zimbabwe.

First, Hughes touches on, but does not actually engage with, broader questions of political economy. Yet, debates on race, conservation, and especially white privilege cannot be seen outside the global capitalist political economy. For example, a recent study by Catherine Corson (2010) shows how the US government has historically become more active in nature conservation 'abroad' in order to avoid extra costs for the 'domestic' economy. Corson argues that care for the environment was (partly) 'off-set' economically rather than engaged with directly. This implies that Hughes' argument has its limits, and that economic motives indeed play a major role in calculations around conservation, race, identity, and so forth. Had he engaged more with political economy, it might have altered his conclusions. Hughes advocates for cosmopolitanism, for 'humility rather than hubris', and for 'hesitation and contingency, rather than fierce certainties', as whites increasingly lose global power (p. 140–142). Unfortunately, these attitudes fall rather flat in the face of the attitudes and passions unleashed and stimulated by capitalist enterprise. In turn, this might direct attention away from the ways in which conservation continues to be linked to forms of primitive accumulation.

My second point is related, and follows from the framing of conservation in the book. Conservation is almost entirely framed in terms of whites trying to belong in Zimbabwe. In so doing, Hughes sidesteps other conservation debates in Zimbabwe and the wider region and particularly how black Zimbabweans have framed these. Famous 'community-based conservation' programs such as CAMPFIRE are not named in the book, although Hughes was part of the networks that conceptualised and implemented this program. A more explicit engagement with broader environmental debates might have given more voice to the 'black side' of the story, which currently stays very much implicit (to be deducted from the way whites interacted with the environment). This would have considerably widened the scope and length of the book, but considering Hughes' experience, it would definitely have been feasible.

That said, *Whiteness in Zimbabwe* is a truly commendable book and should be read by anyone interested in contemporary conservation and nature-society relations.

REFERENCE

Corson, C. 2010. Shifting environmental governance in a neoliberal world: US AID for conservation. *Antipode* 42(3): 576–602.

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