

YBARRA, MEGAN. *Green Wars: Conservation and Decolonization in the Maya Forest*. Oakland: University of California Press. 2018. Pp. 204. ISBN:9780520295162 (cloth); ISBN: 9780520295186 (paperback); ISBN: 9780520968035 (E-book).

Green Wars' starting point is the question of how nature conservation in Guatemala has come to rely upon violent dispossession to achieve its goals. The case examined is one of ongoing contemporary violence against Q'eqchi Mayas around Lake Lachuá national park. However, this book born of Megan Ybarra's ten year engagement with often violent development and conservation issues is much broader in scope than that. Ybarra places contemporary violence into historic context, highlighting the continuities with earlier and concurrent conflicts, each of which reinforces patterns of racialized dispossession that are directly harmful to Q'eqchi lives beyond the conflict at Lake Lachuá. In this, international conservation organisations and US anti-drug trafficking measures are directly implicated. Simply put, integral to the imaginary of the Guatemalan state is the subordination of indigenous peoples to 'settlers' in on-going colonial processes. 'Civil war insurgency sought communists, drug war policing seeks narcos, and green war conservation seeks park invaders' (p. 147) and, consequently, indigenous Q'eqchi' contesting the legitimacy of protected areas are framed as narco-criminals deserving of lethal force from state security forces. Because of this, conservation efforts are undermined by their illegitimacy in the eyes of local communities and the consequent resistance. However, Ybarra is also interested in the ways that Q'eqchi' seek to act—'reimagining' territoriality, constructing a 'cartography of refusal' of selective engagement

with 'settler legal systems' whilst rejecting the 'settler gaze' (p. 107). In Q'eqchi' and other contemporary Guatemalan indigenous politics Ybarra seeks lessons to move beyond 'settler states'. This includes switching the analyst's gaze and arguing for positive actions at home (the USA) in order to decolonise national and international development and conservation efforts. 'Settlers' everywhere need to see solidarity with indigenous people as coming to terms with the fact that our societies are predicated on injustices that need to be righted before progress can be made. *Green Wars* is a tale of 'epistemic' conflict where conflicting orderings of reality are made visible and their material effects discussed, concluding with calls to unmake settler states.

In exploring these two themes the book focuses on a series of linked if slightly disparate cases drawn from the material available. Following a broad, summarizing introduction outlining the argument that state structures criminalise Q'eqchi's, legitimizing violence against them, Chapters 1 and 2 describe how indigenous Q'eqchi' came to be framed as 'migrants' and 'park invaders'. Ybarra highlights how park-based conservation became established at a time of great civil war induced displacement and how threats of violence directly affect the timing and nature of resistance. Thus war and peacetime are shown to afford opportunities for 'military and international conservation organizations to engage in supposedly apolitical projects for the global good' (p. 21) that embody

ongoing processes of racialized dispossession. People forced off land under threat of violence conveniently leave it 'empty' and ideal for conservation after all. However, as Ybarra repeatedly shows, past silence over boundary issues is a survival strategy, not acquiescence—a fact the conservationists described in *Green Wars* fail to grasp. Chapter 3 then focuses on post-plantation, post conflict, and post 'reconciliation' Guatemalan society, where calls to move on are met with Q'eqchi' counterclaims that colonial matters have never been settled. In doing this Ybarra brings into focus the complicated identity politics at play, ultimately rooted on ossified, iniquitous power-relations, where current and former land owners play a role as cultural brokers within development and conservation projects. Chapter 4 focuses on an explicit case of land appropriation, a foreign ecotourism venture, which expropriates sacred caves within the national park. This case brings the differential application of the rule of law strongly into focus. However, this is not the end of the story, as Ybarra also uses the case of the caves as a means to show Q'eqchi' 'radical politics of hope' (p. 23) and articulations of an alternative indigenous imaginary. Chapter 5 then shows how Q'eqchi' land claims have become tangled up with an on-going war on drugs—once again people contesting imaginaries of an empty wilderness landscape are framed as legitimate targets for evictions and killing. Indeed, the Guatemalan court that hears drug cases and crimes against the environment is the same, highlighting how multiple social wars reinforce one another, operating on the same racialized terrain. Contemporary conflict around Lake Lachuá thus becomes the latest battle in continued colonial processes.

Green Wars is a book with a lot going on, and at times the amount of information

is boggling (at least for this non-Latin Americanist); Ybarra clearly has in-depth knowledge of the research area. The book is well written, with large amounts of information rendered fairly explicable to the reader, along with frequent call-backs bringing sometimes disparate topics together. Indeed, at times Ybarra shows an enviable turn of phrase. Ybarra is upfront that she does not seek to write an ethnography of Q'eqchi' daily life (p. 28), rather using ethnographic moments to illustrate how different imaginaries play out. There are several reasons for this: a desire for breadth, concerns for respondents, and a vision for the book to make a broader point about conservation, development, and settler states. Ethnographic moments bring home the violence inherent to much of what is going on. Thus tales of sneaking over park boundaries with 'park invaders' tending their lands, shots being fired, and hurriedly taking photos of armed men are integral to the feel of the book, which describes histories of scorched-earth policies, kidnappings, and mass murder. This is not a simply stylistic choice, it also brings a sense of the reality of people faced with considerable violence, something that is integral to understanding the Q'eqchi' cartography of refusal.

The ethnographic moments recounted also serve a further methodological function: they bring Ybarra herself into focus. Whilst the book is not Barley's *The Innocent Anthropologist*, I appreciated these moments that bring to the fore the messy reality of any fieldwork. They also serve an important function by humanizing Ybarra's role and the people she is working with. Thus the harrowing stories recounted are given greater impact when juxtaposed with moments of levity provided by research mishaps (such as Ybarra falling on her arse in public or being discomforted by the obligation to observe

a ritual pig slaughter), which aid the reader in empathizing with people in extremely difficult situations.

However, there are times when the Ybarra's desire for breadth and need for selectivity clash. Indeed, Ybarra acknowledges conscious omissions, often to protect respondents or to respect respondents own views of what should be told. For example, the views of a Q'eqchi' women's group are not drawn upon at their request (p. 28). This is commendable, but it does mean the reader at times gets little sense of internal Q'eqchi' politics and social structures. There are also times when certain points could have been further developed, with the basis of certain claims appearing a little light. For example, the depiction of *ladino* development workers' motivation as largely a form of *noblesse oblige* to Q'eqchi' felt at times a bit too neat. Similarly, I found distinctions between 'imaginaries', 'epistemic conflict', and 'ontologies' somewhat confusing and occasionally jarring.

In sum, *Green Wars* is an interesting and thorough study of a complicated case with relevance to many anthropologists, geographers, and sociologists of development, particularly those interested in political ecology and (post) colonial Latin America. The central plank that mainstream global nature conservation is predicated on integrally violent, racialized dispossession is provocative and will invite reflection, if not necessarily agreement, among development and conservation practitioners. As such, one feels many may struggle with the pragmatic aspects of Ybarra's prescriptions for a decolonised nature conservation.

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