

BOOK REVIEW

Annette A. LaRocco. *The Nature of Politics: State Building and the Conservation Estate in Postcolonial Botswana*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2024. 408 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. \$34.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780896803343.

Annette A. LaRocco's *The Nature of Politics: State Building and the Conservation Estate in Postcolonial Botswana* is a timely contribution to the entangled fields of political science and the study of conservation practices. Situated at the nexus point of postcolonial eco-politics and conservation studies, LaRocco's central argument in the book is that there exists a hierarchy of citizen relationships with the centralized state in contemporary Botswana observable through the analytic frame of the conservation estate. As a result of this hierarchized relationship, any account of statehood in Botswana must account for the state's relationship with the broader conservation estate and the citizens who live in proximity to these spaces. The conservation estate is a broader category of land than protected conservation area because it includes both private and state-owned protected areas of land set aside for the business of conservation. Instead of a direct "citizen-state" relationship, LaRocco describes a position of mediation for communities who live adjacent to the conservation estate: "citizen-state-charismatic megafauna" (102). Any interaction with the Botswanan state for "conservation adjacent" citizens is mediated by the charismatic mega-fauna emblematic of the "multi-scalar" but "hyperlocal" project of conservation (14). The conservation estate, thus, presents an "apt empirical venue for studying the nature of the state, state building, and citizen-state relationships" because of the collation of global and local actors within an expanding network of protected areas science (305).

The book unfolds in three sections each containing two chapters. In Section One, "Authority," the chapters are organized around how the state securitizes conservation estates, simultaneously stymying democratic procedures that operate as the justification for the deployment of the military to these regions. The "qualitatively different kind of citizenship" experience of conservation adjacent citizens to Botswana not living near these regions is enabled by discourses of consent to protection and securitization (75). Attempts to respond through the *kgotla* (public meeting, the word refers to both the meeting but also the space) and the state's self-conception as participatory, democratic, and consultative are restricted by the discourses of protection built upon anti-poaching rhetoric (146). Importantly, LaRocco notes that conversations with conservation adjacent residents revealed how they understood her work to be a "mechanism" through which they could "communicate and convey their positions to the state" (147). The failure of traditional *kgotla* and local

electoral politics in favor of international advocacy speaks to the unique imbrication of the global imaginary of Botswana in everyday life for conservation adjacent citizens.

In Section Two, “Territory,” the first of two chapters describes an interplay between “spaces of ‘property’ and spaces of ‘territory’, which coexist, and are often contiguous, on the conservation estate” (172). The conservation estate is governed by centralized state policies, but these policies affect property-less citizens differently than the propertied. Wildlife on private game lodges, for example, are the property of the land owner, absolving these spaces of centralized policies like Botswana’s infamous 2013–2019 “hunting ban” (175). Beyond the forced removals, restricted mobilities, and forced changes in subsistence lifestyles effected by centralized mandates, the experience of hierarchized citizenship in a Botswana which ignores racial politics makes the conservation estate a fecund empirical site for challenging state-endorsed discourses of Botswana as an “African miracle” (51–56). From property, LaRocco moves to infrastructure, tourism, and conservation. The absence of state infrastructure in the Okavango Delta in the North of Botswana offers an analysis of “state building” in the country (193). The collusion of tourist imaginaries of untouched wilderness and neoliberal profiteering means that the state has “an incentive to mask” its own population and present “an image of wilderness spaces as devoid of people” (196). Building infrastructure acts to “induce state preferences” for spaces of settlement through either enticing or disincentivizing “citizens to live in particular places” (224). The concretization of a particular aesthetic experience of wilderness directly contributes to this, and LaRocco’s work enables further analysis in this field.

In Section Three, “Identity,” *The Nature of Politics* shifts to explore the complex relationships between people, the land, and livelihood. This section examines how the state uses “development processes” to homogenize a modern citizen-subjecthood (230). Building on the previous chapters, LaRocco here connects ethnic identities, the San in particular, with oppressive dictates handed down by a perceived Tswanan dominance. By denying the San’s cultural and identity forming practices of Ostrich eggshell gathering and subsistence hunting, their lifestyles are criminalized through state-led bureaucratic obfuscation (250–52). The “more-than-economic” (263) relation between gathering and hunting in identity formation are deployed by conservation adjacent residents as a discursive strategy to “push back against the state narratives ... which conceive of hunting and gathering practices as strategies of last resort” (303).

Drawing on a methodology of empirically based interview analysis and a wide array of theoretical and historical works, LaRocco’s book concisely engages with incredibly complex and multifaceted terrain. The introduction establishes much of the complexity of the topic and provides a sweeping, but thorough, overview of Botswana’s history and the scholarship around the politics of conservation, land, and wildlife tourism in Africa writ large. One area that I thought was underplayed in the analysis was the unique day-to-day experience of living in close proximity to charismatic megafauna. In some ways this is a product of LaRocco’s attempts to expand the definition of the conservation estate to include carbon sinks and land set aside “for renewable energy production like solar

farms” (318). It seems important that conservation adjacent life is lived in proximity to nonhuman megafauna and expanding the “aperture” of conservation estates, as the conclusion proposes, to include more directly extractive operations potentially relegates animal life to the position of commodified resource (318). But this debate is a fecund entry point into these emerging fields of discourse in postcolonial environmental studies and LaRocco’s work is incredibly lucid, well articulated, and cogent—an essential and accessible resource for anyone interested in this field.

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