Yolanda Ariadne Collins. 2024. *Forests of refuge: Decolonizing environmental governance in the Amazonian Guiana Shield*. University of California Press. ISBN 9780520396074. $29.95.

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Forests of Refuge takes issue with carbon forestry from a decolonial perspective. By looking at REDD+ in two nonsettler colonial states, Guyana and Suriname, it aims to dispel the belief that REDD+ is challenged by the structural failings of global carbon markets. Instead—the author argues—REDD+ is undermined "by its proponents' inattentiveness to colonial histories that have positioned the forests as places of refuge and resistance" (p. 22). "Nonsettler" is used by Collins to refer to those countries where colonial control was mostly exerted remotely, i.e. with no large-scale permanent settlement by colonizers, thereby making conflicts over land less palpable than in settler-colonial states.

In the first chapter, Collins outlines the economic and political rationale underlying Guyana and Suriname's reception of REDD+. While an effort is made to avoid a narrative tracing all societal ills to colonial domination, she seeks to escape the teleological developmentalist agenda post-colonial countries (or rather, their hegemonic narratives) come imbued with.

The second chapter delves into the exploitative colonial pasts that shaped the stratified socio-economic fabric of the two countries and stresses the continued relevance of racialized relations with the environment for the purposes of forest conservation. Collins posits that decolonizing environmental governance requires nothing less than "cutting off the sovereign head of the state," meaning that the State should not be the "default actor of top-down government" (p. 81).

Chapter 3 examines the different but parallel post-independence pathways of Guyana and Suriname and the processes through which forests went from a place of refuge for runaway groups to a source of raw materials to be exploited. REDD+ takes this one step further, as standing forests, made legible through modern technologies, are "recast as cheap, effective allies in the fight against climate change" (p. 11), becoming a 'place of refuge' for the whole of humanity. Competing local forest uses are sidelined.

In Chapter 4, Collins shows how this imagined reality clashes with local communities' practices and perceptions, a discrepancy she defines "fragmented subjectivity." She highlights how localized forms of resistance are opposed by pro-REDD+ officials, which at one time exceptionalize forest communities in light of their historical relationship with the environment and require them to play the predetermined role of rational market actors. Instead of relying on a simplified framing of stakeholders, one must be attentive to the different ontologies, or "truths" (a term taken from Foucault) of local inhabitants. Thus, Collins contends that decolonial governance requires the "undisciplining" of subjects.

Chapter 5 traces the efforts undertaken by the state to discipline communities for REDD-sponsored conservation and contrasts them with the "truths" relating to the long-standing issue of land rights. In Guyana's "Community Development Plans," government authorities essentialize the Amerindian people as communal "by nature," which suggests an urban-rural divide that crosses over into internal colonialism. Similarly, in Suriname the "REDD+ assistant" was created to assuage Indigenous and maroon communities' resistance (the latter being the descendants of runaway African slaves). In the authorities' view, the empowerment of communities depends on market access and capacity building—matters of land rights are conveniently eschewed. Potentially thriving communities are thus construed as poor and further subsumed into the capitalist paradigm through top-down REDD+ policies.

In Guyana and Suriname, Collins argues that race is an insufficient significant, as subjectivities depend on racialized relations to the environment shaped by region-specific colonial histories. As such, colonization is best described as "the coerced relocation and racialization of people alongside the claiming of land" (p 178). In this context, relocation is as foundational a concept as racialization, as both ancestral inhabitants and (former) slaves have been repeatedly displaced by violence and extraction. This problematization of racial identities also serves to challenge the "commonsense logic … that indigenous people, racialized as such, are better able to protect nature" (p. 180). In fact, material conditions are a much better predictor of one's care for the environment. The author argues that decolonization, at least as far as environmental governance is concerned, should start by critically approaching (repurposing, one might say) precisely the strategies and world-forming events that fueled colonization in the first place.

However, colonization has not only left material legacies: Collins also hints at what could be called an extractive 'habitus' of gold miners, who recognize environmental degradation caused by gold mining yet keep up the digging, not only due to market dynamics but also as a deeply rooted way of life. This identity dimension, overlooked by REDD+ architects, "limits the ability of REDD+ to incentivize behavior away from gold mining" (p. 139). It reminds the reader that, amid socio-environmental change, there are always those who stand to gain and those who stand to lose. The former, however, are not necessarily the 'bad guys' of the story. In Latin America, these are often small-scale peasants or miners who "cannot in good conscience be prevented from engaging in this means of earning income given that their precarious situation is the result of unremedied historical injustices" (p. 139).

One of the book's most significant contributions to the political ecology discourse is that it shows how REDD+ is in continuity with past waves of colonial extractivism, as it charts its course along the same epistemic and material routes towards the colonization of a new 'outside' of capital. Although the author is not fully clear about whether she opposes REDD+ altogether or just in the way it was designed in the two countries examined, she suggests that it is problematic in any former colony. Indeed, decolonization should "be expanded to hold space for ways of being that do not default to capitalist and colonially charted pathways" (p. 180).

Collins' effort to pull together Guyana and Suriname, while justified by her own research and by geographical proximity, appears at times as a balancing act. The author herself teases out the differences between the two countries, from their ethnic make-up to local communities' (lacking) acceptance of carbon forestry. Still, the focus on precisely these two countries, whose multiethnicity is markedly different from other Latin American countries, allows Collins to bring into relief the differentiated ontologies, needs, and forest practices of Indigenous and maroon communities. In bird's-eye narratives of the region—those that REDD+ schemes typically rely on—these distinctions often disappear.

'Lurking' between the lines throughout the text are seminal conceptual frameworks such as environmentality (Agrawal, 2005) and developmentalism (Escobar, 1995). These authors are cursorily cited, but an explicit engagement would have been warranted in a book that, ultimately, deals with the construction of environmental subjects for the purpose of market-centered development. Not merely out of deference, of course; instead, to build on these frameworks, or challenge them, for the benefit of future research.

Additionally, Collins' neologism "truth (de)colonial mentality" is a somewhat intricate formula that, for all its conceptual merits, is unlikely to gain currency in the literature. Particularly, the heavily laden word "truth" is an uneasy fit in a field like political ecology, whose debt to constructivist philosophies is not limited to Foucault. In this case, the use or repurposing of existing concepts might have been more effective.

Overall, *Forests of Refuge* is a commendable work delving into well-known processes in an area of the world often neglected in academic and political discourse—even within Latin American contexts. Collins' book answers many questions and opens space to pose several more. Her emphasis on the co-production of human and environmental history is a reminder that political ecology is best positioned to—and can 'speak truth to power' only if it does—account for the unescapable colonial genesis of today's world-ecology.

References

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