

Charis Enns and Brock Bersaglio. 2024. *Settler ecologies: The enduring nature of settler colonialism in Kenya*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. ISBN 9781487553616. \$34.95.

Daphne Matziaraki and Peter Murimi (dirs.). 2024. *The Battle for Laikipia* (film). One Story Up Productions, in association with We Are Not the Machine.

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Fences do not simply divide land. They separate people and nature (Ramson Karmushu, in Enns and Bersaglio 2024, p. 177)

It's peaceful here, as far as the eye can see there's no human scar on the landscape, it's all natural, as it was (Tom Silverster, CEO of the Loisaba Conservancy, in *The battle for Laikipia*)

Charis Enns and Brock Bersaglio's *Settler ecologies: The enduring nature of settler colonialism in Kenya*, and Daphne Matziaraki and Peter Murimi's feature length documentary *The Battle for Laikipia*, both focus on the relationship between settler colonialism, conservation, and Indigenous land rights in the Laikipia region of Kenya. Both were researched and produced over an eight-year period during which the region was under the grip of one of the most severe and prolonged droughts on record and reveal how conservation practices in Laikipia remain shaped by settler colonial interests. More broadly, for those with an interest in political ecology beyond Laikipia and the east Africa region, they each also offer important critiques of the way in which responses to the climate and biodiversity crises often end up reinforcing the very same power relations and inequalities that brought about the crises in the first place.

Enns and Bersaglio describe how the Laikipia district of Kenya is today considered something of a 'global biodiversity hotspot,' known for its 'elite and luxury safari experiences,' boasting the second highest abundance of wildlife in east Africa (after the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem), and a higher concentration of endangered large mammals than any other area of Kenya, including its national parks (pp. 7-8). However, in the early to mid-twentieth century, "...most land in Laikipia was used for large-scale wheat farming and cattle ranching in what was then known as Kenya's White Highlands" (p. 9). Land alienation policies and racialized property laws formally excluded Indigenous social groups, such as the Maasai, from their traditional grazing lands in the district, and big game hunting led to the eradication or near eradication of many, now protected, species. Land ownership in Laikipia remains shaped by this period, with forty white settler families controlling nearly 40% of the total land area in the county (p. 15). The transformation of many of these white-owned farms into Laikipia's celebrated 'wildlife conservancies,' Enns and Bersaglio show, has been a key mechanism through which settlers have been able to maintain their social standing in the context of decolonization.

Settler ecologies offers a rich and detailed analysis of this process, drawing on a combination of participant observations recorded while accompanying Indigenous pastoralists, conservationists, conservancy owners, and safari guides; over 150 formal interviews; and historical and documentary analysis, showing "how settler colonialism has impacted and endures through ecological relations" (p. 9). The book is organized into chapters which each focus on a different moment or 'mode' of ecological change enacted by 'settler ecologists' who work to "secure settler colonial advances and a future for settler colonialism" (p. 9).

Chapter one "Eliminating" focuses on the early colonial period and the destruction of existing social and ecological relations in Laikipia through land grabs, the expulsion of Indigenous groups, the introduction of export crops and more desirable livestock breeds for ranching, hunting safaris, and the enduring effect of non-native species on Indigenous ecologies. Chapter two "Rewilding" focuses on the selective 'reversal' of this process, as settlers claimed the mantle of "custodians and guardians of wildlife rather than hunters and adversaries" (p. 57), in a bid to "secure their land, diversify their livelihoods, and improve their chances of economic survival in post-colonial Kenya" (p. 80). 'Rewilding' in this context, is exposed as anything but a

return to some primordial 'nature,' and heavily implicated in the power relations that brought about the ecological changes ostensibly being 'reversed' through rewilding.

Chapter three "Repeopling" focuses on efforts to incorporate some dimensions of pastoralism into conservation initiatives in Laikipia, capitalizing on the biodiversity gains associated with pastoralism (or attempting to reverse some of the biodiversity losses associated with the prior expulsion of pastoralists), and helping signify a switch to a more "progressive conservation model and gain local support" (p. 91). The chapter demonstrates the increasing number of actors, institutions, and organizations involved in the reproduction of settler ecologies, including settlers and their immediate descendants, an increasingly diverse conservation labor force, international conservation organizations and researchers, and new property relations established through community land trusts. Such 'repeopling' failed in restoring historic land rights, as revealed by conservancy owner opposition to pastoral practices of transhumance important during periods of drought and increasingly important in the context of climate change.

Chapters four "Rescuing" and five "Scaling" explore how the rescuing of threatened species and attempts to carry out conservation initiatives at increasingly larger scales in Laikipia, driven in part by global biodiversity targets such as '30 by 30,' are not politically neutral but "shaped by and contribute to the reproduction of existing power relations" (p. 123). The chapters show how Laikipia's private wildlife conservancies are well placed to attract international funding available for threatened species initiatives and landscape scale nature recovery. The development of wildlife sanctuaries created "renewed demand for settler ecologists' expertise, land, and labor" (p. 124) and the development of "ecologically connected conservation" strategies tending to "reinforce settler landholdings as strongholds of biodiversity conservation" (p. 132). While each of the five chapters is primarily focused on a different historical period, the logics of 'elimination,' 'rewilding,' 'repeopling,' 'rescuing,' and 'scaling' are also analyzed in their combined and overlapping dimensions too. Discussing proposals for landscape scale conservation across the Samburu-Laikipia Ecosystem, for instance, Enns and Bersaglio warn of the potential for a return to, or reiteration of, the "ecological apartheid" of the early colonial period, in which "divisions between different groups—including different groups of humans, as well as nonhumans—are extremely stark" (p. 155).

Where *Settler ecologies* employs a historicizing strategy to develop a 'multispecies perspective' on settler colonialism, *The battle for Laikipia* advances a radically humanizing critique of the social and ecological problems produced by settler colonialism in present day Laikipia. The main protagonists are Simeon, a Samburu pastoralist and his family and community; Maria Dodds and her family at Kifuku cattle ranch; owners and representatives from the Ol Maisor cattle ranch and eco-tourism venture; and representatives from Loisaba Wildlife Conservancy, owned and managed through the Loisaba Conservancy Trust. The film opens with a group of tourists photographing a giraffe from a vehicle on a guided safari, before cutting to Tom Silvester, CEO of the Loisaba Conservancy, communicating with security personnel in a bid to clear pastoralists from conservancy land before the tourists see them. Silvester is then shown chasing a young goat herder from the conservancy, ordering the boy to leave immediately: "I have cursed you and you will die if you ever set foot in this ranch again!"

The film captures many powerful vignettes of this sort, which resonate with and bring to life the stories and reports recounted in *Settler ecologies*. Through a focus on the deteriorating relationship between pastoralists seeking access to grazing areas during intensifying droughts in the region, and ranch owners and conservancy managers, seeking to reserve grazing for ranch herds and wildlife, the film provides a window into how the reproduction of both settler and pastoralist identities are powerfully bound up with ecological relations. A voiceover accompanying footage of an armed patrol of the Kifuku cattle ranch expresses the settler perspective, articulated by the son of ranch owners Maria and Anthony Dodds:

We were always very friendly with the Samburu and all the pastoralist communities, I never even thought of it even once, it never occurred to me that it was awkward or anything like that... This is our land, and we have the right to protect it, and to stay here. Without it I would be lost. I don't know anything else. I don't want to know anything else. It is who I am.

Simeon provides a pastoralist's perspective, explaining that the Samburu word for life is *Nkishon*, which derives from *Ngishu*, the Samburu word for cattle. For the Samburu, Simeon says, "cattle is life." To explain the impact

of fences surrounding settler ranches and conservancies on his community, Simeon recounts how "we have always migrated [across this landscape] and that is a big part of being Samburu," but "our home is not the same anymore for our people and animals." Later Simeon will be shown addressing community elders, pursuing a court case, and presenting petitions and lobbying politicians regarding the plight of the Samburu: "We have migrated for centuries following the rains and grass... We will go through all the channels of justice to get our rights back."

In a discussion of the aims of the film broadcast after a screening in Manchester in November 2024, director Peter Murimi described his desire to make a film that could help understand "why people are like they are" and the "different positions which human beings find themselves in." The film certainly exposes the ignorance and at-times outright racism and violence of the settler community, but not without empathy and sensitivity. The film closes with Simeon searching for a solution, suggesting "it will require everyone to work together, to think outside the box." Enns and Bersaglio's *Settler ecologies* similarly concludes with an alternative vision for people and nature, another ecology beyond fences and divisions. A young member of Il Ng'wesi is quoted as challenging the Global Biodiversity Framework target of 30% of land and water set aside for nature by 2030: "30 by 30, is not enough. We want 100 by 30. One hundred percent of the land for people and nature" (p. 158). Both *Settler ecologies* and *The battle for Laikipia* offer important resources for thinking through the limitations of existing approaches to the climate and biodiversity crises, especially those that fail to grapple with power and inequality at the same time.

References

- Enns, C., & Bersaglio, B. (2024). *Settler ecologies: The enduring nature of settler colonialism in Kenya*. University of Toronto Press.
- Matziararki, D., & Murimi, P. (Directors). (2024). *The battle for Laikipia*. One Story Up Productions, in association with We Are Not the Machine.

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