

Book and Film Reviews

Structural Belonging

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At Home in the Okavango: White Batswana Narratives of Emplacement and Belonging. By Catie Gressier. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015.

The more global the world becomes, the more relevant it is to understand how “belonging” and “autochthony” are framed and constructed. The complexities of these dynamics are anthropologically valuable because under the influence of the many different constructions of belonging a large variety of sociocultural processes are being shaped in the cultural spheres of our political economy, while in media and populist politics the presentation of who belongs and why is often presented simplistically. Clear examples of this can be found in the recent uproar in Europe about refugees or in the discussions in the United States about Mexican immigrants. Also in southern Africa, ideas about belonging have long been important, as exemplified by the various violent outbreaks of xenophobia in South African townships after apartheid or by Zimbabwe’s program of fast-track land reform, which received worldwide attention ever since it started in 2000. In the latter case, postcolonial “whiteness” played a central role. In addition to numerous black victims, many white owners of large commercial farms were evicted, often violently, because they were not seen as autochthons, as those who truly belonged. Not so much about contemporary migration streams or violence but about structural processes of white belonging in southern Africa, *At Home in the Okavango: White Batswana Narratives of Emplacement and Belonging* presents a magnifying glass by which to view the postcolonial context of the Okavango Delta area of Botswana (in particular the town of Maun) and how the whites here are rooted deeply in nature and society. Here, too, they are often not viewed as if they are “really” autochthons, as they are of European descent and white.

At Home in the Okavango makes an important contribution to the existing literature about belonging because it provides important insights into the dynamics of belonging of a group that, despite its insecurities, is not directly threatened in their way of life, as opposed to migrants or large land owners elsewhere in southern Africa. The well-structured book is easy to read with exciting narratives that provide visual pictures of the lives and times of white Batswana (citizens of Botswana). This

is a minority group that consists of only around 500 people. On the basis of local ethnographic data, Gressier explains in fine detail how this economically privileged group has made—and continues to make—the Okavango their home in various ways. Most of her informants are white men who work in the tourism industry, either as safari guides or as trophy hunters. They speak Setswana (the national language) fluently and strongly identify with nature (conservation), the local black cultures, and the nation Botswana. Moreover, they position themselves as very different from other whites, such as the tourists with whom they work and the expatriates also working in the industry. The latter group dominates Okavango tourism economically and consists of people from all over the world, but most are South African. Throughout the book examples are used in which the white Batswana show their belonging in opposition to these other whites. In particular, the South Africans and Zimbabweans are considered rough and racist, whereas white Batswana see themselves as mostly nonracist, respectful to other (black) groups, and relatively equal. As Gressier explains, “while white Batswana may hold racist views, they seldom express these sentiments publicly, even within ‘in-group’ settings” (195). However, white supremacy (e.g., shown by a sheer rejection of interracial marriage) and paternalism tend to be there more subtly, albeit suppressed in daily behavior.

Theoretically, the book explores what Gressier calls the white Batswana’s “experiential autochthony” (6), which she differentiates from “political autochthony” (12–14), but this separation is undervaluing her own work. A particular strength of the book is its political side; arguably it is at least as political as it is experiential, which also shows that it is debatable if the two are in fact processes that need to be—or can be—separated. As Gressier herself explains, “the usage of autochthony by no means excludes the politics of belonging” (12), and *At Home in the Okavango* indeed often shows this. For example, chapter 4 is completely about a mainly political way of belonging to the state Botswana, showing the whites’ patriotism. Citizenship, Gressier argues, is a crucial determinant for this group in their politics of belonging. Furthermore, chapters 1, 2, and 3, about belonging to nature and the tourism industry, cannot be seen apart from the government’s strategy to stimulate the country’s upper-class enclave tourism, a strategy for which they are largely dependent on the white population and expatriates.

What remains for me are two questions. First, what are the perceptions about white Batswana by other groups? Although they are there, in particular in chapter 5, these perceptions remain marginal, but they are important to provide for the strong legitimacy of belonging as is done in this book, as belonging is often constructed in relation to others. Therefore, it is important what the other (black) Batswana, in particular, but also expatriates and tourists think about the white citizens’ claims of belonging and how relational issues between the groups (e.g., paternalism, inequality) are constructed in this

context. Second, being in such a privileged position, how does white Batswana's belonging relate to the global political economy? Since "their bush-based identities are mobilized as a commodity within the tourism industry" (90), these seem to have strengthened their economic position. Arguably, whites play an important role in spreading global neoliberal capitalist values and ideas and the inequality this creates locally. Paradoxically, their "love of freedom clashes with the increasingly regulated, organized, capitalist machine that is global tourism" (80), but they are also important players in the Okavango, supporting the global growth of tourism, an industry that "has been one of the core drivers of neoliberalism in the last 20 years" (Duffy 2013:606). This contradiction needs further exploration and could well relate to contemporary hegemonic ideas about neoliberal capitalist values in which the whites' role in nature conservation and development legitimates their belonging in relation to various other groups, such as the government and local black groups. Furthermore, another reason why the small group of white Batswana of the Okavango belong so harmoniously could be that they do not own commercial farms to the same degree as their white counterparts in Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa and their fellow citizens in the Ghanzi district. Land in this part of the world is highly symbolic and more than a mere commodity. As well outlined in chapter 1, however, they are still among the privileged in the country to obtain access to land but not to become land owners. This is a crucial difference with the other white southern Africans.

These concerns are more questions that I believe need further clarification than criticisms; Gressier's *At Home in the Okavango* is a great read for anyone interested in studies about belonging, tourism, and southern Africa. Its particular value is that it shows the importance of belonging as a broad phenomenon; groups that are not under pressure also use structural ideas of belonging. Gressier shows how important these ideas can be in the whereabouts of a society.

References Cited

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Distinctiveness and Totality

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From Acorns to Warehouses: Historical Political Economy of Southern California's Inland Empire. By Thomas C. Patterson. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2015.

From Acorns to Warehouses is a long material history of Southern California's "Inland Empire," a "distinctive space in its own right" (7) that includes parts of Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, east of Los Angeles. The Inland Empire is often maligned in Southern California and beyond for thick smog, sprawling suburbs of foreclosed homes, and enormous warehouses. In 2013, 45% of US imports from China and Asia passed through the 1.65 billion square feet of warehouse space that has been built in this area since the 1980s (227). These warehouses are largely staffed by temporary and part-time, near-minimum-wage workers, a precariat generated by a regime of accumulation organized around production overseas and debt-driven consumption in the United States. Thomas Patterson's book makes sense of the political economy of the Inland Empire by tracing evolving constellations of land resource use, colonization and conquest, immigration and settlement, state formation, capital, and labor.

This book is a valuable model for doing historical political economy and makes a sometimes-rarefied perspective accessible to a wide range of readers. At a time when people in the Inland Empire and all over the globe are keenly aware of the problems of social inequality and environmental destruction, this book provides an intelligent Marxist perspective on these issues. It is not an overly scholarly or theoretical work but rather seems directed at undergraduate college students and a wider public interested in Southern California. Concepts of world history are quickly explained and then deployed to good effect in interpreting the complexity of the region's past. *From Acorns to Warehouses* reflects Patterson's commitment to the Inland Empire, in the presentation of fine-grained details of regional history, in a pace and tone suited to a wide readership from and in the region, and in the larger project of explaining how folks there make their lives within conditions they have not chosen and likely would not choose.

The book starts with a brief first chapter that displays the theoretical assumption of the book that people make their lives and livelihoods within material conditions and schematically discusses the long evolution of these human-environment relations, framed in terms of "modes of production" in chapter 2. The rest of the chapters take a chronological order, guided by a series of concepts that explain the particular issues that stand out in each moment: social class, class struggle, social formation, primitive accumulation, social identity, capital (venture, merchant, industrial), land, plunder economy, labor, profit, state formation, and so on. Chapter 2 is about the First Nations peoples before conquest. Chapter 3 deals with a Spanish colonial economy based on ranching, church and state power, and native labor. Chapter 4 concerns the period between Mexico's independence from Spain in 1822 (California was part of the Spanish Empire) and the military annexation of the state of California by the United States in 1848. Chapter 5 describes the transition from an economy based in ranching and to one oriented toward extensive production of grains. In chapter 6, Patterson identifies another phase of the historical political economy of Southern California between