

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Mascarenhas, Michael, *Where the Waters Divide: Neoliberalism, White Privilege, and Environmental Racism in Canada*. Toronto: Lexington Books, 2012, 161 pp., \$60.00 (978-0-7391-6827-1)

In *Where the Waters Divide*, Michael Mascarenhas has provided a detailed set of case studies which explore the racial structure of water governance in Ontario. The great strength of this book is that it systematically names and explores how neoliberalism is a racial formation highlighting not simply how water policy disadvantages First Nations communities but also how concomitant water practices privilege the environmental and social conditions that most white Canadians take for granted. Mascarenhas draws on the literatures regarding environmental justice, social reproduction, and critiques of neoliberal reform, and incorporates ethnographic interviews with twenty-seven participants, most of whom work in or with six First Nations communities in southern Ontario. The author highlights the history of dispossession, water diversion, and dam projects that have characterized Canadian-First Nations relationships, while demonstrating how contemporary technologies of administration, expertise, and entrepreneurialism are reinscribing deeply hierarchical racial inequalities. Through four case studies (from the dispossession of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation on the St. Lawrence River to the contemporary practices of technoscientific knowledge that remove issues of power and equity from broader environmental concerns) Mascarenhas shows how neoliberal water policy enacts a form of “racism without racists” insofar as it ensures that poor, minoritized, and especially Indigenous communities carry the burden of being unable to access clean and safe water.

Mascarenhas’ research was inspired, in part, by a little reported but key finding from the Walkerton reports which observed that First Nations reserves had some of the poorest quality drinking water in the province. The question driving the book is how the stunning inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in their access to clean water has been normalized, or to use a phrase from W.E.B. Dubois, has come to be viewed with a kind of “peculiar indifference” (Dubois 1899:157 quoted on p. 145).

I highlight two examples to illustrate the major themes and contributions of the book. Statistics from the Minister of Supply and Services

Canada confirm, “most of the water treatment plans on First Nations reserves in Ontario are in need of repair, upgrading or replacement” (p. 21). While the regulatory regime governing water quality on reserves is structured through multiple and overlapping departments, the primary branch responsible for drinking water services is Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). Through analysis of the Walkerton reports and interviews with First Nations water technicians Mascarenhas details INAC’s approach to this widely acknowledged, yet stubbornly persistent problem. His analysis suggests that INAC fails to consult with the very people most responsible for water management on reserves, and often takes years to approve applications to repair failing infrastructure. As federal and provincial departments have been cut back, audit type practices have become a common strategy for monitoring water quality in municipal and reserve contexts. However, many of the most experienced First Nations water operators believe that this shift from “service provider” to “service supervisor” modes of governance has less to do with the improvement of water quality and “more to do government’s efforts to distance itself from what they saw as highly political and racial decisions that border on dereliction of government responsibility” (p. 104). Pointing out that this lack of consultation, funding, and service provision would never be tolerated in primarily white communities, Mascarenhas highlights that INAC’s adoption of auditable standards of performance reinscribes contemporary racial stereotypes which brand Indigenous people as incompetent, lazy, and unintelligent, while defining competency and knowledge in ways that further cement racial inequality.

In another example Mascarenhas highlights how rural and “periphery” spaces — often Indigenous — emerge as “zones of sacrifice” when pitted against urban and suburban areas in the siting of waste treatment facilities (p. 110). In a detailed study of the siting of the Southside Sewage Treatment Plant in London, the author examines how the restructuring of public services, the repeal of land use planning requirements and a lack of public hearings worked to create new forms of white privilege and environmental racism which particularly affect three First Nations territories, the Chippewas of the Thames, Munsee-Delaware Nation, and Oneida Nation of the Thames, who are downriver from the new facility. Here Mascarenhas argues that neoliberal streamlining of the approval process functioned as a form of “laissez faire racism” (p. 110), as the affluent suburbs in the southwest area of London were able to benefit from competition and choice, and a market-driven framework took precedence over social and environmental justice.

Overall, Mascarenhas illuminates how environmental racism is produced in a contemporary Canadian context through neoliberal water

governance operating under racial logics that continue to privilege mostly white communities. The author challenges the common stereotype that poor water services on First Nations reserves are simply “their own fault.” In contrast he unpacks how neoliberal discourses shape access to clean water in ways that ensure Indigenous communities have limited control, and that normalize sustained underinvestment by the federal government. While some technical aspects of the book (a thin index and typographical errors) are a minor concern, *Where the Waters Divide* makes a significant contribution to theorizing the relationship between Indigenous exclusion and white privilege, and should be considered an important achievement. This book would be appropriate for courses in globalization and economic life, Canadian studies, environmental issues, critical race theory and Indigenous issues.

Brock University

Margot Francis

Margot Francis is an Associate Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies and Sociology at Brock University in St. Catharines Ontario. She is the author of *Creative Subversions: Whiteness, Indigeneity, and the National Imaginary* (UBC Press, 2011). *Creative Subversions* re-reads key images in the visual history of Canadianness and highlights the role of contemporary artists for re-imagining power, memory and national identity.

mfrancis@brocku.ca