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Rainforest Capitalism: Power and Masculinity in a Congolese Timber Concession

Thomas Hendriks

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. 320 pp.

As an anthropologist who cares deeply about the Congo Basin, I clung to the pages of Hendriks's account as to a life raft. They conveyed me, along with him, back to field research in the ethically trepidatious, emotionally wrenching, and economically inscrutable sites of extractive industry in equatorial Africa. For readers who haven't attempted sustained study within timber concessions, the book is still riveting, due to three factors: the suspense of its "return to a troubled field study," its tackling of understudied research questions and sites, and its courageous queering of the research frames and findings.

First, in a world imperiled by the exchange of immediate, volatile reactions, the book offers attenuated ethnographic attention woven in with integrative theory. "Rediscovering attachments to an ecstatic world of rainforest logging from which I had tried to distance myself," writes Hendriks in his acknowledgments. I was hooked. Nostalgia shifts like light through dense foliage within the book, and bibliographic buttress roots reach wide, from classics of cultural anthropological thought to postcolonial theory, corporate ethnography, and porn studies. Hendriks creates an intellectual ecosystem that spans African, Asian, European, and US communities but also generations of ethnographers studying capitalism—specifically extractivism.

Research itself can be extractive, and Hendriks lays bare incommensurate salaries, disparate and racialized residential arrangements, and logistical privileges deriving from his fraught complicity with a major logging company, all of which distance him from his Congolese research collaborators. Nor is the company's risk in welcoming him analytically undervalued as a gift that influenced the mandate and moral imperatives of the ethnographer (following Mauss, see Hardin 2016). Hendriks also deftly considers his family's colonial history in Belgium, a resource that rendered him legible (not always positively) to his informants, allies, and subjects of study. These range from the dubious (but dedicated) white European managers and supervisors to the defiant (but deeply thoughtful) African mechanics and machine laborers on the front lines of felling valuable trees.


These social and institutional dynamics are a second appeal of the book. Its substance is an exquisite contribution to two lacunae in published ethnographic work: that on extractive industries organized through concessions, and that on the rural worlds of densely forested francophone Africa. On the former, Hendriks is right that, while many critical ethnographic accounts of forest management, conservation, and development through community forestry exist, little about the heart of logging operations has been written "from within, and from its core." In so doing, he raises three crucial challenges. First, asymmetrical power relations persist between ethnographers and corporate actors. Second, ethical ambiguities about consent are related to wider accountability issues when doing ethnographies of capitalist practice. Third, the elaborate anatomies of most transnational corporations make focused ethnographic attention within them a challenge. On all these fronts the book is a revelation and a roadmap for future work. No longer as starkly challenging as Nader's (1972) "studying up," Hendriks attains what one might call "studying out" from within the opaque and high-stakes epicenter of resource-mining activity.

The actors he describes are enacting masculinities and/as mastery, analysis of which is a third reason to read this book. It departs from critical normativity in ethnographic writing and from heteronormativity in our ethnographic engagements. Especially for heavily male-dominated, industrialized, colonially rooted sectors involving trucks, chainsaws, and swagger, these concomitant moves are salutary. They are also, importantly, entwined. Hendriks takes us into explicit (at times pornographic) dynamics of racial identification for these contemporary lumberjacks. The way all that works is of course about white fragility and dominance, yet the account does not rest unhelpfully there. The book wraps ludic elements together with other strands of the account about labor, knowledge, management and machismo to culminate in an accessible and well-articulated concluding essay on Johannes Fabian's notion of ecstasis. That concept—a practice, a state—enables experiences of connection across cultures, scales, selves, and sentiments (of boredom, of fear, of excitement). Ecstasis links the many vivid descriptions of the book in a complex and fluid whole, contributing to a vision of extractive economies as capitalist co-creations, contingent on connective experiential—even existential—phenomena.

Due to the themes, time, and circumstances of the study, most of the descriptions focus on men (though they do reference younger women). Hendriks shows exemplary commitment to feminist conceptual framing. But as he describes expatriate loggers deriding the looks of female Greenpeace activists and calling them "sissies" for their short-term experience "on the ground," it seems worth noting empirical studies by women who have returned to the Congo Basin repeatedly for sustained human ecological and economic research (Doremus 2019; Jost Robinson and Remis 2016). Their results show Indigenous women are suffering stress and starvation where the excesses of timber extraction meet the constraints of Forest Stewardship Council certification (or FSC certification, an important backdrop for Hendriks). Gender in policy and practice are not his focus, though he alludes to conflicts with women over availability of caterpillars to harvest and eat. We are left wondering whether the socially reparative power of ecstasis can be sustained during extreme ecological cycles, or stark food insufficiency, or if it might even somehow address these problems. Women seem largely excluded from many of the intertwined, variously phallic elements of ecstasis described here, or perhaps just from the

technologies that mediate them: computer screens in complex identifications with “live” interracial sex videos, chainsaws in contingent experiences felling trees in forest clearings. More depth on questions of what ecstasis has meant in erotically charged activities, such as animal hunting, or honey harvesting, and how that changes when industry “booms,” might make important further study, triangulating this work with studies of gender, food security, and environmental justice in equatorial Africa and beyond.

In sum, Hendriks writes wisely and with just enough reflexivity about how ethnographers of extractive capitalism develop theories through challenges of fieldwork, at last venturing our accounts. His work offers, to me anyway, the courage to reflect on what we saw but also on who we were, and are becoming, and on what our world might become. Signaling a postcritical, reparative turn that is no less engaged with violence and harm, Hendriks’s work avoids the trap of “villains” and “victims.” Instead, he sketches the ubiquitous, fleetingly shared ontological terrain where deep personal and social transformation could occur, if only we open ourselves to it. In the spirit of learning to see and feel those possibilities, this brave book is well worth reading, teaching, and taking up for further research in gender studies and studies of capitalism, of Africa(s), and of ethnography itself.

Rebecca Hardin 

University of Michigan

ORCID

Rebecca Hardin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9047-5821>

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Amazonian Kichwa of the Curaray River: Kinship and History in the Western Amazon

Mary-Elizabeth Reeve

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022. 206 pp.

Mary-Elizabeth Reeve’s work on Indigenous histories of the Amazon is definitive, and her articles are staples of graduate-level education on the subject. *Amazonian Kichwa of the Curaray River*, her first full-length work in English, builds on these previous successes by integrating regional history with long-term ethnographic fieldwork, informed by more-recent scholarship on landscape, kinship, and the ontological turn. The result is an ethnographic hologram of social interaction at various scales and across several time periods that illuminates the complex and ever-changing set of relationships and ethnic identities embodied in lowland Kichwa culture.

Amazonian Kichwa peoples of Ecuador and Peru have their origins in the Catholic missions of the early colonial period, where Indigenous families fleeing from intertribal warfare and from the predations of Brazilian slave raiders and Spanish conquistadors sought refuge in the Catholic Church and in the new Kichwa names and identities promulgated there. Amazonian Kichwa, those of the Curaray River among them, are classic examples of ethnogenesis, a theoretical field that has been productive for Amazonianists. Reeve, whose work has contributed substantially to our understanding of these processes, further clarifies but also complicates the picture. She demonstrates that identity is a product of behavior rather than form and that language is tied to territory. As such, the mutability of ethnicity is multidirectional, as what she calls “old peoples”—linguistic and cultural groups such as the Sápara and Shiwiar, who for centuries had hidden beneath the mantle of Kichwa language and identity—are reemerging with claims for land and representation, their own language and territory remarkably intact.

Reeve’s bigger goal in this book, however, is not to critique or to complexify ethnogenesis but to examine “what can be learned by shifting the scale of kinship studies to a regional perspective, grounded in recent advances in the understanding of kinship and landscape from our interlocutors’