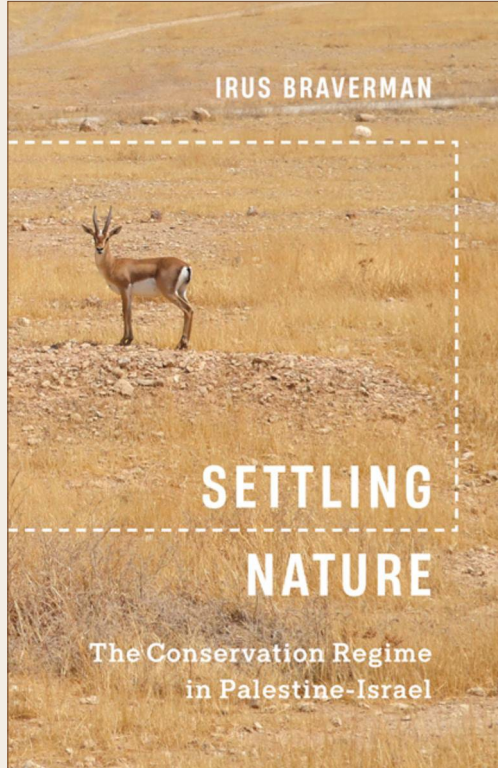


BOOK REVIEW

Animal Nullius

Hannah Boast



Review of:

Irus Braverman, *Settling Nature: The Conservation Regime in Palestine-Israel*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023. 362 pp. 47 b&w photos. \$116.00 (hb), \$29.00 (pb).

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rus Braverman's *Settling Nature: The Conservation Regime in Palestine-Israel* is an invaluable primer on contemporary environmental issues in the region. Braverman argues that nature conservation is a system through which Israel enacts Palestinian dispossession. Nature's invisibility as a political tool, she writes, makes it "the settler state's strongest weapon for territorial takeover" (14). This is an important contribution to scholarship on Israeli settler colonialism where, partly for the same reason, nature is under-explored. The readability of *Settling Nature* makes it an excellent introduction to the environmental dimensions of a much-studied conflict, complementing Alon Tal's classic *Pollution in a Promised Land* (2002) with updated examples and a sharper political lens, and providing a more systematizing approach than Penny Johnson's engaging *Companions in Conflict: Animals in Occupied Palestine* (2019). Scholars in Animal Studies, Environmental History, Settler Colonial Studies, and Political Ecology will recognize the resonances between Israeli environmental practice and settler colonies elsewhere, which Braverman explicitly invokes. *Settling Nature* will find a home on undergraduate and graduate courses on animals and environment, enabling comparative study of a region that confronts us with stark and ongoing illustrations of the inextricable relationship between conservation and colonialism.

Braverman has established herself as a key figure in animal studies through works including *Zooland: The Institution of Captivity* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2013), which considers the recent self-fashioning of zoos as institutions concerned not with exhibiting animals, but saving them. Her newer works, such as *Coral Whisperers: Scientists on the Brink* (2018) and *Blue Legalities: The Life and Law of the Sea* (2020, co-edited with Elizabeth R. Johnson) examine issues in marine conservation. In *Settling Nature*, Braverman returns to the topic of her first book, *Planted Flags: Trees, Land, and Law in Israel/Palestine* (2009). *Planted Flags* examined the politics of tree-planting, particularly the pine and the olive, which have totemic roles in Israeli and Palestinian environmental imaginaries. *Settling Nature* collects some of Braverman's recent essays on environmental politics in Palestine-Israel, the term she now prefers for its

capacity to indicate one conjoined political and geographical unit (on which, more below). These essays are revised alongside previously unpublished work to produce a hyper-contemporary book with an eye on longer historical contexts.

Settling Nature is home territory for Braverman in another sense. Israeli by birth and now living in the United States, Braverman includes personal insights from her childhood and compulsory army service in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). It was in Israel that she began to understand that the landscape she had “previously perceived as a neutral backdrop to my life course, was in fact actively produced, idealized, and normalized” (ix). She reflects on her time as a nature educator to IDF recruits: “not only was I being indoctrinated but I was also indoctrinating others to the value of nature and to its powerful connection with the Jewish people” (xi). These insights into the political valences of nature underlie her wider work. In *Settling Nature* they inform her concept of “settler ecologies”. This term indicates the manifold and contradictory imaginaries and practices that shape Israeli relations with and actions towards nonhuman nature. Readers might question the need for another term alongside “environmental colonialism”, “green militarism”, “ecological imperialism”, and so on. Is this Braverman’s own planted flag? After initial scepticism, I found myself ultimately persuaded. Settler ecologies captures the common thread across different Zionist environmental imaginaries that have prevailed over time yet achieve similar ends. The capacious notion of “ecologies” unites the imaginary, material and scientific features of Zionist environmental thought and practice, highlighting their pervasive structural force.

Braverman is a legal ethnographer and her primary method is interviews with scientific and conservation elites. In *Settling Nature*, her interlocutors are officials from the Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INPA), a state agency to which she has privileged access as an Israeli who previously worked with the country’s conservation establishment. Braverman analyses two facets of nature protection in Palestine-Israel — nature reserves and legal protections of particular species — using a biopolitical framework that will be familiar

to readers of her work. Israel's conservation laws are strong, with twenty-five percent of the country designated as nature reserve or national park (2) and wild animals "legally protected unless stated otherwise" (8). *Settling Nature* alternates between these topics to produce a total picture of an Israeli "conservation regime" that functionally erases the Green Line, the internationally recognized 1949 armistice line which served as Israel's border until its territorial encroachments of the 1967 war. While this claim may not seem controversial to those less familiar with regional debates, Braverman's analysis, as she notes, places her in an unusual political space occupied by the far right and far left (11). In mainstream Israeli and international understanding, Palestine-Israel comprises two spaces: Israel, a democracy governed by law, and the Occupied Territories, an extra-legal space whose status is endlessly deferred to future negotiations. By contrast, Braverman turns to conservation law in order to argue that Palestinians and Israelis live under a single regime. Though she characteristically and perhaps wisely refrains from spelling out the implications, this aligns her work with a growing trend in academia and activism towards viewing Israel as an apartheid state.

Settling Nature combines political acuity with rich detail. It covers "vultures, goats, fallow deer, goldfinches, gazelles, wild asses, camels, boars, cows, olive trees, and za'atar and akkoub" (xiii). The latter two are wild plants favoured in Palestinian cuisine that have become potent national symbols, in part because of Israel's criminalization of Palestinian foraging. Braverman examines landscapes including the Negev/Naqab Desert, the Galilee, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank, analysing "green grabbing", the theft of territory, and what she terms "blue grabbing", the settler theft of Palestinian springs. Braverman considers legal cases against Palestinian, Bedouin, and Druze defendants accused of encroaching on wild nature for practicing traditional lifeways; environmental harm caused as a result of their dispossession by Israel; or building on their own land after it has been enclosed by Israel within a nature reserve. These cases reveal the false separation between humans and nature on which Israeli settler ecologies are premised, and the oscillation between ruthless "hyperlegalities" and "arbitrary and even

whimsical” (174) applications of law through which Israel enacts dispossession in the name of nature. They also offer an unusual take on Israeli “lawfare”, though this is not Braverman’s focus.¹ Crucially, these case studies demonstrate the persistent dignity of Palestinians in the face of Israel’s violent conservation regime. Animal studies scholars will notice from the above that injustice against humans is a core preoccupation for Braverman, and as she is aware, this is not a text significantly concerned with animal agency. In my view this is appropriate to the subject, and what Braverman’s work loses in attention to posthumanist or multispecies thought, it gains in lucidity and ethical credibility.

Braverman is conscious of the role of culture in shaping environmental attitudes, policy and management, something which remains rare in political ecology. Following Palestinian scholar Edward Said, Braverman knows that a compelling story underlies every powerful territorial claim, and that a landscape must be rescripted in the imagination before being remade in practice (62). She references sources including founder of political Zionism Theodor Herzl’s 1902 utopian novel *Altneuland*, canonical Israeli and Palestinian poets Yehuda Amichai and Mahmoud Darwish, Mark Chagall’s paintings, and *The Wanted 18*, a 2014 film which records Palestinian efforts to smuggle cows into the West Bank during the First Intifada. Literary scholars will be interested to see Braverman’s references to Amitav Ghosh, whose *The Nutmeg’s Curse* (2021) provides a touchstone for her readings of the environmental impacts of colonialism. Critic Rob Nixon also appears, not for his relevant if overused concept of slow violence, but his earlier insights as a South African compelled to perceive the flora and fauna of his homeland anew in the light of a developing political consciousness.

Braverman’s cultural references, if always brief, illuminate her account of Israeli and Palestinian efforts to associate themselves and each other with different animals and plants. In one remarkable example, Braverman describes Israel’s reintroductions of the

1 Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London: Verso, 2011); Craig Jones, *The War Lawyers: The United States, Israel, and Juridical Warfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

supposed fauna of the Bible. A retirement project of former 1948 war general Avraham Yoffe, the project began with the illegal smuggling of fallow deer on the last El Al flight out of Tehran in 1978 (58). This animal “return” helped naturalize the Jewish return to Palestine-Israel and erase the intervening Palestinian history, much like Israel’s often dubious biblical archaeology projects (Braverman discusses both in Chapter Three). This seemingly incongruous proximity between militarism and environmentalism is typical, Braverman shows, of the fluid interchange between military institutions and personnel in Israel (and, as Rosaleen Duffy writes, of militarized conservation elsewhere).² A key body is the INPA’s paramilitary arm, the Green Patrol, also established by Yoffe. Notorious for its evictions of Bedouin in the Negev/Naqab, the Green Patrol enacts a range of extreme and illegal tactics in the name of the “protection of national lands” (46) while allowing the INPA to remain at one remove from this violence. Braverman also discusses the green claims of the IDF, which are undermined by the environmental impacts of its actual practices (20). In this way her work aligns with a growing area of research on environmental impacts of war.³ Yet *Settling Nature* is not just a simplistic argument about greenwashing. Braverman’s concern is not to catch Israeli agencies out for past mistakes or portray Israeli conservation as a colonial front. Instead, she shows that colonialism and environmentalism have always been deeply, troublingly intertwined.

Braverman’s interlocutors repeatedly describe Israel as a defender of the universal cause of nature, even making bizarre claims that animals try to stay within Israel’s borders. This reflects a wider national and international perception of Israel as uniquely committed to the environment, which she defines as “ecological exceptionalism”

2 Rosaleen Duffy, *Security and Conservation: The Politics of the Illegal Wildlife Trade* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022).

3 See Benjamin Neimark, Oliver Belcher, Patrick Bigger, “US Military Is a Bigger Polluter than as Many as 140 Countries—Shrinking This War Machine Is a Must”, *The Conversation*, 24 June 2019, <https://theconversation.com/us-military-is-a-bigger-polluter-than-as-many-as-140-countries-shrinking-this-war-machine-is-a-must-119269>; Mark Griffiths, “The Geontological Time-Spaces of Late Modern War”, *Progress in Human Geography* 46, no. 2 (2021), 282–98; and the work of Conflict and Environment Observatory (CEOBS). This topic has received wider attention since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

(81). Braverman shows that these perceptions are part of a binary and mutually reinforcing Israeli environmental schema that positions Israelis and Palestinians as diametrically opposed. Projects like biblical reintroductions associate Israel with “wild” animals like the fallow deer and gazelle, reinforcing its environmentalist image. Palestinians are associated with “problem” species like black goats, jackals, and feral dogs, and viewed as responsible for the environmental decline early Zionist settlers perceived on their arrival in Palestine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Leaders like David Ben-Gurion, Chaim Weizmann, and Yosef Weitz saw Palestine as a *terra nullius* that could only be redeemed by European and American technology paired with Jewish labour, in a vision inspired by European colonial projects. Braverman adds the notion of “*animal nullius*” (169), highlighting the Zionist perception of Palestine as empty not only of humans, but of wild animals. Restoring animals thus became part of restoring the land to its rightful Jewish owners. Similarly, Israeli care for animals is positioned by Braverman’s present-day speakers in opposition to Palestinian cruelty. Love of animals becomes part of a justification for Israeli sovereignty that disregards Palestinian ecologies.

To say that Israelis and Palestinians have been associated with particular species is not to say these attachments are fixed. Braverman identifies intriguing moments at which affiliations have changed or been claimed by both sides, as she did for the olive tree in *Planted Flags*. In Chapter Four, she documents the story of the black goat, once seen by British and Israeli rulers as a primary cause of desertification enabled by Palestinian overgrazing, now understood as a valuable part of the Mediterranean ecosystem. While the state once persecuted goat herders, INPA buys goats and trains Druze shepherds in how to manage them. If this might seem like a renewed appreciation for Palestinian farming, it is only on Israeli terms, in which Israel is the ultimate arbiter of environmental knowledge. In this sense, Braverman astutely argues, practicing Palestinian traditions becomes a form of self-dispossession that reaffirms Jewish land ownership and nativeness (119).

These moments nevertheless suggest fractures at which alternative ecologies might emerge, and indeed Braverman notes that a central aspiration of her project is to reveal “decolonized” or “unsettled” ecologies. Yet her examples are few and she never seems entirely convinced by her own arguments, inadvertently indicating the limitations of these terms. The primary example, to which she returns in the conclusion, is her own intervention to persuade Palestinian zoologist Mazin Qumsiyeh to accept help from an Israeli veterinarian in saving two poisoned golden eagles, against Qumsiyeh’s objection to working with his colonizer (240–241, 265–6). Braverman is reflective and I sympathize with her desire to save the eagles, yet I found this story discomfiting rather than optimistic. Braverman’s reliance on Timothy Morton’s remarks about co-existence in her conclusion also felt incongruous. The evidence presented up to this point seemed precisely to highlight the inadequacy and simplification of Morton’s theorizing, and in turn, the failure of the Environmental Humanities to thoroughly reckon with power — as Braverman so brilliantly does.

Braverman’s final photo caption, which cites a wry line from Mahmoud Darwish on the merits of the donkey as a figure of stoic resistance, felt more promising (266). Yet exactly how the donkey might contribute to undoing settler ecologies remains unclear. As an Israeli anthropologist alert to her positionality, Braverman is reluctant to comment closely on Palestinian practices, while her method of interviews would present practical issues. Nevertheless, I suspect that greater attention to Palestinian environmentalism might generate the “decolonization” of settler ecologies she wishes to see. This might include the efforts to reclaim native plants (159) and consolidate Palestinian ownership of springs through picnics that Braverman touches on (196), or art initiatives like Vivien Sansour’s Palestine Heirloom Seed Library and the Sakiya collective.

In spite of these criticisms, *Settling Nature* is an important intervention that foregrounds Palestine-Israel as a crucial context for animal

studies. Introducing the notion of settler ecologies,⁴ it offers a wealth of examples that show how conservation law enables Israeli settler colonialism. *Settling Nature* arrives amid an emerging field of research on animals and environment in Palestine-Israel.⁵ As such, it heralds the arrival of a new and vital cross-pollination between political ecology and Environmental Humanities.

4 Charis Enns and Brock Bersaglio *Settler Ecologies: The Enduring Nature of Settler Colonialism in Kenya* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

5 See Irus Braverman, ed., “Environmental Justice, Settler Colonialism, and More-than-Humans in the Occupied West Bank”, spec. issue, *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 4, no. 1 (2021); Tamar Novick, *Milk and Honey: Technologies of Plenty in the Making of a Holy Land* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, forthcoming); Sophia Stamatopolou-Robbins, *Waste Siege: The Life of Infrastructure in Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).