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## Book Review: Mascarenhas, M. (2012). *Where the Waters Divide: Neoliberalism, White Privilege, and Environmental Racism in Canada*

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## **Abstract**

This article provides a critical review of Michael Mascarenhas' book, *Where the Waters Divide: Neoliberalism, White Privilege, and Environmental Racism in Canada*.

## **Keywords**

drinking water, governance, environmental policy, First Nations, Canada

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## Book Review

**Mascarenhas, M. (2012). *Where the Waters Divide: Neoliberalism, White Privilege, and Environmental Racism in Canada*. Landham, Maryland: Lexington Books. 161 pp. \$60.00 (hardcover). ISBN-10: 0739168274**

How and why is it that in Canada, a developed country typically thought of as having an abundance of freshwater, over one hundred First Nations reserve communities currently lack access to safe drinking water (Health Canada, 2013)? This is the complex question that Michael Mascarenhas delves into with his book, *Where the Waters Divide: Neoliberalism, White Privilege, and Environmental Racism in Canada*. The book sets out to analyze “how recent changes in environmental, social and economic conditions of production – most commonly referred to as neoliberalism – have influenced the daily and long-term social reproduction of a historically marginalized group: First Nations in Canada” (p. 14). Specifically, Mascarenhas examines how these changes have been manifested in the realm of drinking water governance for First Nations, and the ways in which the process has produced and reinforced racial injustices.

A key effort that Mascarenhas makes throughout the seven chapters of this book is to expose what he calls the racial formation of the Canadian state; in other words, to demonstrate how structural racism operates in Canada such that “unjust impoverishment of First Nations occurs alongside the unearned enrichment of white Canadians” (p. 127). The book adopts Pulido’s conception of white privilege for environmental justice analysis, where racism is defined not as an intentional, deliberate act, but rather as an invisible phenomenon embedded in the “economic arrangements, power relations, government agencies, corporations and industry associations that produces uneven health outcomes on a daily basis” (p. 85). For Mascarenhas, white privilege in contemporary Canadian society is strongly evidenced in the racial formation of drinking water services and governance for First Nations. He points to regulatory abandonment - the fact that there are no legally-binding drinking water standards on reserves unlike the rest of the country - as a key example of the workings of white privilege, by which he means the social systems that put whites at an advantage. This idea is driven home through case studies in Chapters 4 and 6 through which Mascarenhas effectively demonstrates the non-incidental and discriminatory nature of water pollution and access patterns in Canada; for instance, the siting of city sewage treatment plants and landfills directly upstream of First Nations territories in Ontario. The text does an excellent job of contextualizing the drinking water crisis within the history of colonization in Canada, and contributes a novel analysis of First Nations drinking water issues through linking conceptually to theories of environmental justice and racism.

A fundamental premise of *Where the Waters Divide* is that sweeping neoliberal reforms are occurring in Canada (Chapter 3) and, as such, there has been a move from state- to market-based water governance (Chapter 1). The book argues that this neoliberal restructuring has entailed a shift in the dominant form of racism in Canada. Mascarenhas posits that under neoliberalism, the means but not the ends of racism have changed: “Unlike the old racial formation, which was largely delivered by the hand of government and justified using biological categories, this new form of racism is presented in the language of the morality of the marketplace and the primacy of individual solutions to modern environmental and social problems” (p. 123). Linked to this new pattern, a core idea is that neoliberalism is a form of racism without racists. The implications of this form of racism with respect to water governance are highlighted

in the book. Here, Mascarenhas argues that the privileging of expert discourses accompanying neoliberal water reform has resulted in narrow and hegemonic understandings of water management, technical expertise, competency, and knowledge. Through this discourse about “practices that are seen as technical, administrative and *apparently non-racial*” (p. 8), First Nations’ local contextualized knowledge about water and water governance is dismissed as illegitimate. This point is well-illustrated in Chapter 5 with an analysis of the external control-based structure of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada’s (INAC)<sup>1</sup> programs and funding arrangements for water on reserves. Drinking water funding is funnelled through external auditors and consultants instead of directly to First Nations authorities and, despite a discourse of participation, First Nations have little decision-making autonomy in drinking water planning. Mascarenhas argues that this is racism without racists, such that “First Nations are often blamed for their lack of expertise, culture of poverty and traditional approaches to modern problems” (p. 124).

Another consequence of neoliberal reform that Mascarenhas describes lies in its implications for social reproduction for First Nations, which is loosely defined as the elements required to sustain everyday life (Chapter 4). Here, Mascarenhas argues that neoliberal market-based water management and neoliberal nature, “which emphasizes the register of the economy” (p. 75) is “particularly discriminatory towards indigenous peoples because it often ignores and trivializes the importance of water in sustaining the ways of doing things First Nations have developed to survive and prosper” (p. 35). He highlights this through a case study with the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation, whose livelihoods and traditional practices have been undermined by severe water pollution in the St. Lawrence River.

While the book makes these notable contributions, it is also marked by some weaknesses in both content and stylistic aspects. My main critique is that Mascarenhas simply attempts to bring too many themes and details into one narrative. He introduces a wide range of major concepts (e.g. culture, empire building, social reproduction), each of which requires a background explanation. In providing the context to these concepts in the limited space available, Mascarenhas makes passing reference to an extremely wide range of major events and ideas - ranging from Fordism, the early U.S. conservation movement, the Oka crisis, green consumerism, to the events of 9/11, and so on- without always providing information on why these details are relevant and necessary to the story he is telling about water and environmental racism in Canada. At some level, the sheer range of details and coverage of concepts has the effect of obscuring some of the arguments specific to First Nations, racism, and water governance. In a similar vein, I found myself wondering about the engagement with neoliberalism in this work. Many of the phenomena described are situated as consequences of neoliberalism, although the linkages were not always clear. For instance, in Chapter 3, he writes, “In contrast to previous forms of institutional racism in Canada, neoliberal racism operates at the level of social reproduction” (p. 8). A bit more specificity and conceptual work to help us think through how we might understand these novel forms of racism in relation to past policies would have been a welcome addition. For instance, how do we connect contemporary policies to earlier moves such as the 1884 potlatch ban, which certainly had a deep impact on the ability of First Nations to sustain their way of life? To provide another illustrative example, as Mascarenhas writes, “A striking consequence of neoliberal reform... is that the ability to secure safe, healthy, and clean environs is becoming increasingly connected to, and reinforced by, social

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<sup>1</sup> In 2011, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada was renamed Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC).

inequality and social privilege” (p. 9). Again, this claim raises questions as to how it connects to earlier eras, since clearly the connection between inequality, privilege, and environments is not a new phenomenon.

Perhaps being even less generous to the author of this generally well-informed and compelling work, I also had several other points of frustration while reading. Though Mascarenhas clearly is an ally to First Nations, there are problematic aspects related to the politics of representation in the book. Some might object to the author’s claim that the book aims “to make sure...First Nations voices were heard” (p. 19) (cf. Kelm, 1999; Spivak, 1988). As well, the text occasionally slips into some essentializing claims, such as “...women, as life-givers, have a special connection with water according to ATK [Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge] because both women and water are life-givers” (p. 97). While important to acknowledge that such relationships exist, I would suggest that more attention could have been given to the diversity of stories, relationships, and perspectives that exist across a diversity of Nations. Similarly, Mascarenhas writes about a “First Nations perspective” (p. 97) or that “First Nations argue...” (p. 96), which are statements that run the risk of implying the existence of a unified, single First Nations vision (p. 97).

Overall, Mascarenhas has produced a work that contributes a valuable contemporary environmental justice analysis to a growing body of scholarship that addresses First Nations drinking water issues in Canada. While much has been said about the legal, regulatory, and public health dimensions of the First Nations drinking water crisis (see for example Boyd, 2011; MacIntosh, 2008; Phare, 2009), with a few exceptions (see for example Murdocca, 2010), the literature has shied away from explicitly framing the issue in terms of its racial dimensions. This is a critical missing link in the discussion that *Where the Waters Divide* fills.

While Mascarenhas’ work focuses on the Canadian context, the themes of this book are relevant to, and reflective of, the struggles to assert the right to self-determination in the realm of water access and governance faced by Indigenous peoples worldwide. As the 2003 *Indigenous Peoples Kyoto Water Declaration* describes:

We see our waters increasingly governed by imposed economic, foreign and colonial domination, as well as trade agreements and commercial practices that disconnect us as peoples from the ecosystem. Water is being treated as a commodity and as a property interest that can be bought, sold and traded in global and domestic market-based systems. These imposed and inhumane practices do not respect that all life is sacred, that water is sacred. (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2)

*Where the Waters Divide* provides strong theoretical support to this declaration through its environmental justice analysis of the impacts of neoliberal water reform on First Nations in Canada.

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