“The Conveyor Belt to Nowhere: Identity and resistance at a Western Saharan phosphate mine from 1973-1976”
Author: Sarah Gilkerson

Comments by Gabi Kirk

Sarah Gilkerson’s project is a rare piece of interdisciplinary scholarship that is firmly rooted in a multitude of methodologies in an exciting and important way. She devotes obvious intention and commitment to not only the topic of the colonization of the Western Sahara and Sahrawi sovereignty throughout the twentieth century, but to the political process of methodology. This project would not work without the multiple framings she weaves together – memory studies, critical development studies and political ecology, and a decidedly radical historiography (with some established methods given careful attention), among others. She quite adeptly argues that the material and semiotic relationships between phosphate mining, global agricultural economy, decolonization and class consciousness coalesced to shape the Sahrawi national identity in the mid 1970s. She does not resort to a simplistic analysis, neither does she privilege any one element of this collision. Her timeline leading up to the “place-memory nexus” of the Fosbucra’a mine is deeply historical, while making clear the historical traces left on Sahrawi life in exile today.

In section one, Gilkerson tells the history of the colonial contestations over Western Sahara and the failed armed uprisings for Sahrawi independence in 1973-1976 by exploring the international discursive shift “from independence considerations to development mandates” in the region (8). That development narrative is a global one, with material impacts not just through the development of the Western Sahara through industrial extraction infrastructure, but also from the product of that extraction, phosphate, and its role in the Green Revolution. Thus, this project is an important link in the literature for political ecology or other critical development fields when explaining the paradigm shift into neo-colonialism. Gilkerson makes strong use of the archive here to map out the international power plays, in private business interests and international law, during the moments of failed decolonization. I found the role of the U.S. and its business and security interests right after the tripartite sovereignty agreement confusing (although perhaps marginal to the overall narrative).

Section two outlines the creation of a coherent Sahrawi political identity which prioritizes “displacement over assimilation” (17). Gilkerson historically situates the relatively hard national identity lines drawn by Sahrawi in Tindouf. There is no “convenient” or “partial” Moroccan or Algerian citizenship possible for them, even though the national identity of the Sahrawi is relatively young, and this is unique to draw out from the ethnography. The neo-Marxist analysis holds strong, and this is a distinct contribution to put alongside histories of class affects on ethnic and national formations in other Middle East and North African nations struggling to decolonize. (Iraq comes immediately to mind). Additionally, the Palestinian diaspora’s tenuous relationship to citizenship in their exiled countries has split along class lines. However, it may be interesting to ask an “assimilated” Sahrawi how they considered membership in the community, at this historical moment and today.

The third section, on violence and memory, is powerful and important. It contains some of the richest methodological work. The Sahrawi's self-sovereignty despite exile comes through only because of Gilkerson observations: the political round tables, and the repeated protest camp's symbolic erection and destruction (which gave me chills). Gilkerson opens this section on the lasting symbolism of violence with a story of the intense torture of one Frente POLISARIO saboteur in 1973 (30). Yet this traumatic story feels buried in this article. How do we talk about decolonization and the violent suppression of sovereignty, which includes catastrophic memories like this, without ignoring or airbrushing them, neither sensationalizing them or reducing the Sahrawi identity to one of victims of violence? Additionally, the violence of Spain and Morocco is quite obvious in this chronicle, but one must question if the characterization of the Frente POLISARIO as "violent resistance" implies a parity with the extreme human rights violations of these colonial powers. Why describe the militarized resistance as "violent" here? Bringing in postcolonial theories on violence would be a good direction to take this further, particularly as some comparisons to the French colonization of Algeria are already present (32).

Overall, this project is a welcome addition to interdisciplinary scholarship in history as well as a useful analysis for professionals working in human rights and international law in the region and elsewhere.

<u>Questions/comments moving forward:</u>

1. This project is in refugee studies. However, the Sahrawi, encamped in one place for forty years while still denying citizenship or assimilation, are a unique kind of refugee – not surprisingly, they are most frequently compared to Palestinian refugees (as in the Farah piece cited). Questions to consider to bring refugee studies more clearly into view could include: are the Sahrawi as refugees just a new form of "colonial subject," and why or why not? How does classifying the Sahrawi as refugees by different actors: themselves, international aid agencies/the UN, NGOs, the Algerian or Moroccan governments) challenge certain types of categorization or reify them? How do categories of "refugee" and "indigenous" affect claims to sovereignty, particularly in North Africa?
2. I thought the project was well situated in memory studies literature, but has a different relationship to much of the literature in its geographic approach. How does the Sahrawi relationship to the mines as a "place-memory nexus" (33) change when they are no longer *in that place*?
3. Refugee camps are often imagined as squalid, temporary holding places, so the institutionalization of formal governance by the SADR challenges popular media portrayals and scholarship on refugee camps. Thus interesting questions could be raised about how these institutions in exile have changed over time. For instance, while the narrative of the mines in Sahrawi political institutions (through the popular election of miners) is clear, I would be very interested to learn how the Fosbucra'a mines have been portrayed in formal Sahrawi education (35).
4. When describing the coalescence of multiple nomadic tribes with different historical (yet deep) ties to the Western Sahara, Gilkerson has to navigate Morocco's dismissal of the Sahrawi's claim: the assertion that nomadic people did not and cannot organize into self-governance in bounded territories. Colonization forced Sahwari sedentarization, but Morocco's current colonial logic also claims that because of past nomadism only the

monarchy can claim a continuous governance relationship to this land. Occasionally she seems to fall into the trap set by this narrative common among Middle East and North African states (noting the Sahrawi “wandered” and “roamed” (25) throughout North and West Africa). A clearer answer, possibly through oral history research, should address, why claim sovereignty in this place?