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Book reviews

Steeped in Heritage: The Racial Politics of South African Rooibos Tea by Sarah Ives
Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. 255 pp.

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How are human–environment relations transforming in the wake of climate change? This is surely a central question of our time and one that Sarah Ives poses with urgency and insight in her book *Steeped in Heritage: The Racial Politics of South African Rooibos Tea*. Drawing on ethnographic research among white Afrikaner and “colored” rooibos farmers in the Cederberg region of South Africa, Ives studies the political ecology of one unusual plant: rooibos. This plant grows in a small ecological zone called fynbos, found only in the Western Cape. Set against South Africa's volatile political history, the book shows how farmers avoid problematic claims to ethnic indigeneity or national belonging and instead build a connection to the region's enduring ecological qualities and to rooibos tea itself. Climate change, however, threatens to shift the fynbos landscape southward.

Ives uses Stefan Helmreich's (2009) idea of “symbiopolitics” to conceptualize the relationships among people, place, and plant (p. 67). In Cederberg, these relationships are forged through the life-giving qualities of rooibos tea as a source of livelihood and as an item of daily consumption. Yet, despite the seductively simple idea of a symbiosis between people and ecosystem, the book tells a distressing story of how South Africa's especially brutal history of racialized capitalism is playing out in the post-apartheid era. The region is characterized by long-standing patterns of unequal access to land, with class divisions falling glaringly along racial lines. Housing remains deeply racially segregated; unemployment, alcoholism, and violence are widespread. Most farms are owned by Afrikaners, while the local colored population competes with black South African and Zimbabwean migrants for poorly paid farm work. A minority of colored people have their own small farms or belong to a co-operative, often on church-owned land. These arrangements come with their own microstruggles over land and revenue, but they allow people to work independently from the larger commercial farms.

Ives teases out interesting parallels between Afrikaners' and colored farmers' experiences of the social ecology they share. Afrikaners' sense of indigeneity is located in a deep family history of rooibos farming. Viewing themselves as the stewards of this unique indigenous plant, their “formerly ‘European’ bodies became ‘indigenized’ through exertion in the rooibos soil” (p. 203). Ideals of a resourceful and rugged masculine body are mirrored in the plant's own robustness, the master of its dry and dusty bush-covered landscape. The role and plight of the farmworkers they employ are conveniently blotted out of their narratives. The

book provides only occasional insight into the perspectives of farmworkers, a limitation Ives acknowledges, and she explains their reluctance to participate in the research.

The colored population can no more claim indigeneity on the grounds of ethnicity than can white farmers, Ives maintains. The “Khoisan” (sometimes known as San or, more problematically, “bushmen”) are recognized as the original autochthonous peoples, their descendants dispersed among the colored population. Yet long-standing racist narratives depict them as relics of the past, surviving only in cave paintings, a kind of extinct fauna of the natural environment. For colored people to claim Khoisan identity would render them uncivilized, even not-yet-human. Instead, like the Afrikaners, colored farmers forge their sense of belonging as protectors of rooibos. Yet this is based not on past doing but on intentionality, built around a future-oriented set of aspirations.

Ives implies that there is little mileage in the appeal of Khoisan identity as a source of economic potential, given the derogatory, racialized associations this entails. However, the story becomes more complicated in the conclusion. In 2014, the Department of Environmental Affairs declared that the traditional knowledge for rooibos “rests with the communities who originate in these areas,” the Khoi and San. This study was commissioned following exhortation by the South African San Council, an organization aimed at defending the rights of the “first” indigenous peoples of Africa. Ives poses the questions that many residents were asking regarding the legal and financial implications of this statement for those with and without Khoisan indigeneity yet falls short of providing an answer.

The example of hoodia, another indigenous plant of the area, which is valuable for its hunger-suppressing qualities, offers a revealing comparison. When the plant was patented in 1996, John and Jean Comaroff (2009) explain, it soon became the object of an intense struggle over intellectual property rights. The San Council was established in 2001 as a means to assert collective ethnic and legal identity, and had considerable success in the hoodia case. The Comaroffs concluded that “the San people, as ethno-corporation, is taking increasingly articulate shape” (p. 92; emphasis in original). Why did the council not pursue the rooibos case further? Why did the colored people in Ives's account avoid identifying as San, while those in the Comaroffs' case appear to embrace it? More is needed to connect the dots between these divergent accounts.

Overall, *Steeped in Heritage* is a fascinating and well-written account that refreshingly avoids the dominant paradigms associated with climate change—those of “adaptation,” “vulnerability,” and “resistance.” Instead, it gives us a much-needed analysis of ecological change as a thoroughly social process, inseparable from local politics, which are dominated by structures of race and class. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the contemporary politics of southern Africa or the future of food in a time of ecological crisis.

Comaroff, John L., and Jean Comaroff. 2009. *Ethnicity, Inc.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Helmreich, Stefan. 2009. *Alien Ocean: Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas.* Berkeley: University of California Press.