Doro on Wynn and Carruthers and Jacobs, 'Environment, Power, and Justice: Southern African Histories'

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This edited volume contextualizes and explores environmental justice within narratives of colonial and postcolonial experiences in southern Africa, illuminating social struggles against hegemonic and structural forces that disrupt local knowledge systems, livelihoods, human well-being, and heritage. The chapters in the book reveal how “the past hangs over the present and shapes the future” and how historical power structures have been appropriated and reactivated in the socio-environmental politics of the present (p. 305). In the introduction, the coeditors, Graeme Wynn, Jane Carruthers, and Nancy J. Jacobs, provide context for subsequent chapters in the book by locating environmental justice within the broader historiography of southern Africa’s colonial experiences steeped in rural social histories and encounters of environmental violence and by critiquing the fragmented and disparate nature of environmental justice movements in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. A regional overview of environmental justice movements could have given a much more extensive background than the disproportionate focus on South Africa.

The transition from the apartheid state to independence was historic and auspicious for South Africa as it ushered in dreams of democracy and justice for the poor and vulnerable African communities. The first part of the book scrutinizes environmental justice and the democratic transition dividend in the post-apartheid South African state. It critiques the compromised dreams of democracy and social justice under the new black political leadership. Mary Gavin draws attention to the specter of poor service delivery that continues to haunt low-income rural and urban households who are denied water and sanitation justice. Her chapter explores how subaltern residents frantically engage local power structures in a terrain riddled with state capture, corruption, coercion, violence, and patronage politics. Addressing the racialized historical inequalities in land ownership looms large in political discourses of restitutive justice in post-apartheid South Africa. Cheryl Walker revisits this emotive subject and interrogates the spatial and social implications of land acquisition for a radio telescope project in the Northern Cape Province within the contextual history of land dispossession and contemporary land reform narratives in South Africa. Sarah Ives offers an alternative revisionist and anthropocenic gaze into bifurcated (native is good, exotic is bad) narratives that inform invasive species eradication programs in post-apartheid South Africa. She situates the ecological context of invasiveness within South Africa’s colonial history and current politics and explains the complex natural and human processes that impinge on rigid ontologies of “invasion” and “nativity.” Food
security is a critical pillar for social justice and poverty alleviation in Africa, yet agricultural biotechnologies used to enhance productivity can pose threats to local ecologies and sustainable indigenous communities. Matthew Schnurr engages with this contentious subject and examines the evolution of anti-genetically modified organisms (GMOs) activism in South Africa from elitist emphasis on consumer health and safety to much broader concerns for biodiversity, food sovereignty, and participatory food production systems.

The second part of the book contains essays that frame environmental justice within decoloniality. Admire Mseba decenters existing scholarship on Zimbabwean environmental histories that fixate on colonial conservation constructs that inadvertently privilege white power and agency in the construction of environmental knowledge. Mseba’s dense archival research propounds that local African communities possessed an independent body of environmental knowledge rooted in religious cosmologies that framed ecological balance in human social justice terms and the environment as a political space. Colonial technical interventions in African agricultural systems through land centralization, soil conservation projects, and export-driven commercial agriculture were disruptive to indigenous livelihoods and food security. Christopher Conz engages with that and profiles an African agroecology activist farmer in colonial Lesotho named James Machobane who mobilized a sustainable agricultural movement to fight hunger and malnutrition among the poor and vulnerable communities through innovative and local farming methods and abandoning the ineffective colonial modernistic models. Muchapara Musemwa deviates from dominant land-based discourses of environmental justice in Zimbabwe and accentuates the significance of water justice in the country’s colonial and contemporary history. He outlines the racially segregative politics of water and sanitation supply in urban areas and the parochial elitist articulation of water injustices by black middle-class activists during the colonial period. Marc Epprecht’s study of institutionalized poverty and fragility in a black urban community connects contemporary forms of dislocation from urban spaces to historical systematic and racialized forms of exclusion and exposure. His ethnographic project seeks a reclaiming of what he calls "the right to the city" and belonging through conscripting local knowledge and memories about city landscapes. The book concludes with an instructive afterword by Wynn that unpacks the eponymous concepts (environment, power, and justice) within broader discussions of colonial African historiography and the politics of knowledge construction.

The eight chapters in the book offer variegated and expansive perspectives on environmental justice. However, despite the broader regional focus suggested in the title, most of the chapters are South African case studies, except three (two on Zimbabwe and one on Lesotho). Also, sometimes there is a latent inclination to arbitrarily conflate all social grievances with environmental justice. This is perhaps a general challenge confronting this emerging field in African research and there could be need to address the parameters so that the conceptual identity of environmental justice is not lost. Overall, the book is a critical text on postcolonial environmental humanities scholarship and presents environmental justice as a “travelling” multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary concept and is useful for scholars in many fields, such as environmental historians, political scientists, sociologists, policy planners, activists, and environmental scientists (p. 1).

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