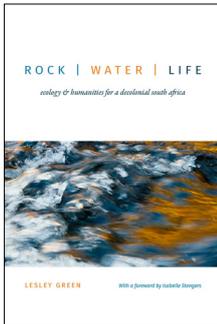




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Rock Water Life: Ecology and humanities for a decolonial South Africa

Context matters. It is not only material – culturally, socially and naturally – it engenders materiality: the organics composing and continually recomposing our bodies. And ‘bodies’ is not a discreet, individuating term here. We live in and across many different bodies – communal, corporate, political, civic and environmental. Context is, then, complex: to be examined critically. But without tackling that complexity there may be modification but there can be no transformation. It is then something of a breakthrough when an ecological study wishing to leap beyond currents of critique to spawn new possibilities, heads straight into this complexity. And this is what Lesley Green’s book does with stylistic verve, sharp-edged eloquence and gusto in volumes. That is what strikes first: the sheer quality of the writing, its energy and its penetration; its desire to do something new with words so they can connect to the situation we are in. And say something to all of us.

Locating global concerns in the study of complex particularities, the book offers six rich investigations into different fields of environmental management, each with its fractured pasts and militarised futures. These are: water and Table Mountain, fracking in the Karoo, the authority of science in university teaching and research, urban baboons and ocean fishing. The case studies are rooted in decolonial South Africa, but what emerges from them is internationally relevant.

The problems of poverty, systemic injustice, racism, the old empires and the new empires of corporate capitalism emerging from these investigations and inseparably bound to issues of climate crisis and ecological caring, are as much problems in the Western Cape as the Western Hebrides, and in Cape Town as in Quebec. There is a major difference, of course, between Western imperialism, its colonial practices, and neo-colonial corporate mentalities, and decolonising countries in the southern hemisphere: the histories of who was oppressed and who was the oppressor. Racism in the UK or the USA is different from that in South Africa, most starkly, whiteness is read differently and with different (but just as damaging) consequences. We are all inheritors of social, cultural and ecological legacies, and we are all trying to find ways of dealing with history, land, its ownership and its use. It is how we are all dealing with these legacies that foregrounds methodology in teaching, research and writing. And this is where, to my mind, Green’s book makes a breakthrough: it stays with the complexity.

Methodology cannot be imposed; it has to emerge. There is some appeal to social theory (Fanon, Latour and Mbembe, for example) and philosophers of science like Stengers and Haraway, but these references do not structure any method of examination. Rather, they extend the transdisciplinary nature of the project, opening an invitation for other voices across the academy and way beyond it to be heard. What emerges as method finds its voice *through* the complexity of the connections between science, economics, history, empirical sociological study, politics and poetry (with Aimé Césaire striking decolonial notes). There is some reflection on this approach, and it is rooted in the language of the text itself: ‘the need to remake language’ (p. 79) in the wake of colonial mentalities and the ‘web of apartheid-style language practices’ that remain ‘the dominant means of characterising the ‘other’ (p. 167). The polyphonic nature of situations requires polyphonic composition that reaches beyond the specific to the structures sustaining its warped and dominating perspectives – like the tintinnabulations of a large bell struck boldly. What this approach delivers is a way of capturing the complexity, not resolving it. The issues with access to clean water, the ecological and sociological dangers of fracking in the Karoo, the problem of urban baboons to middle-class property owners, and the rights to fish for traditional subsistence living are not resolved. But they are ‘democratised’. And by that, I mean opened for the inclusions of other voices and other perspectives. The studies become ‘conversation-openers’ (p. 202). So, the analysis ‘declines the rhetoric of *authorial* authority, offering instead a dilemma tale. In such a tale, the art of authorship is not, as in the essay form, to persuade your listeners that you are right, but to stage a discussion of what is ethical’ (p. 176). This decline of academy authority and adoption of an epistemic humility (before the labour of unweaving the complexity), does not entail a collapse into the befuddlements of relativism. People, communities and their well-being are at stake here; the ethical has to be fully outed. Green’s book does not duck punches. Its expositions of corruption and cronyism among elites (including the compromises and collusions of science in university departments and research units), will make this uncomfortable reading for some. The writing style, analyses, research and conclusions all have teeth here.

In a final coda, Green brings the case studies and the methodology into sharp focus with five recommendations for a better and more democratic flourishing in a time of the Anthropocene: (1) allow a critical repositioning of scientific authority; (2) move beyond the nature/society dualism towards more holistic social and ecological systems that will not privilege human beings (particularly *some* human beings) above non-human species; (3) depose the neoliberal gods of reason which control the knowledge economy; (4) restore a decolonial presence to the world that recognises relationality (and complexity) over white essentialism; and, finally, these changes will foster an understanding of living as flow and movement. The poet, Denise Levertov, has the last word: ‘Vision sets out / journeying somewhere / walking the dreamwaters.’

Like Levertov, Green sets out a vision and a journeying through her six studies of water, land, ocean, soil, desert, plant life, and species habitats (among them human). The transformation called for is radical, but she knows that. Her book makes utterly clear the crises we face (and already experience), if we do not undertake to step out of the mental prisons and all too real *gulags* bequeathed to us by modernity and colonialism. It is a compelling read, but the compulsion is not simply rhetorical just as the location is not simply South Africa – it is profoundly ethical wherever we are settled.

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