

REVIEW

Lesley Green, *Rock | Water | Life: Ecology and Humanities for a Decolonial South Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 320pp., ISBN: 9781478003991

I think the best scientists... are those who know science as a space of permanent doubt, permanent questioning and self-questioning, and who are open to rethinking their own situatedness and ontologies ... [W]hen a scientist or a profession starts to believe that their way of knowing something is the only existence that that thing has, that scientist is at risk of missing what might matter very much to others, or the relations that are really important to that thing.¹

Leslie Green's *Rock | Water | Life* argues for an ecopolitics that is attuned to the demands of life (human and more-than-human) in a time characterised by rampant extractivism, exploitation and, following Aimé Césaire (as Green does), 'thingification'.² It does so against the backdrop of what the author calls modes of 'green whiteness',³ our failed negotiations with 'planetary systems and local ecologies',⁴ a 'Scientism' that actively evades its own histories of difference and institutional racism, and Green's desire for 'another way of thinking; another way of working together; another way of living with the earth'.⁵ As such, *Rock | Water | Life* can be understood as being in conversation with a transdisciplinary field of study that, along with scholars like Ian Baucom, Donna Haraway, and Cajetan Iheka, seeks to foster an imbricated and pluralistic approach to issues pertaining to the so-called Anthropocene, or what Green otherwise names the Capitalocene.⁶

Rock | Water | Life is comprised of an introduction, six chapters which are divided between three sections or temporalities (Pasts Present, Present Futures, and

1 L. Green, *Rock | Water | Life: Ecology and Humanities for a Decolonial South Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 15–16.

2 A. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).

3 L. Green, *Rock | Water | Life*, 112.

4 Ibid., 5.

5 Ibid., 5–6.

6 See I. Baucom, *History 4° Celsius: Search for a Method in the Age of the Anthropocene* (Duke University Press, 2020); D. J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016); C. Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Futures Imperfect), and a Coda. The six chapters traverse a wide array of histories, geographies and geologies in South Africa; from hydro-political histories of Cape Town and Table Mountain which stretch back to the city's first colonial settlement (chapter one), to current struggles against extractive mining practices in Xoboleni and Lutzville (chapter four). Although thematically diverse, much of this book is underpinned by an attempt to undo what Green calls 'Scientism', that is a narrow conception of science that 'proceeds with the certainty of its authority' and claims to be 'above power ... [and] outside society'.⁷ Echoing debates about the fate of human remains at the Prestwich Street Cemetery in Cape Town,⁸ Green provocatively demonstrates how multinationals, government organisations, nature conservationists, and some scientists have employed this narrow conception in order to delimit what can and can't be said about the climate crisis, our oceans and the land, as well as black environmental movements that are not recognised as such because they 'may not directly address the extinctions risks that concern white conservationists'.⁹

For Green, undoing Scientism involves deposing the 'myths and rhetorics'¹⁰ produced by and through a philosophical and scientific dualism (typified by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles Darwin, and René Descartes) that has divided the world between mind and body, black and white, human and nature, modernity and the indigenous other. To do so, Green turns to another understanding of science 'as a space of permanent doubt, permanent questioning and self-questioning',¹¹ but also importantly, to other ontologies and histories of thought, specifically those pertaining to the Negritude and Black Consciousness movements, and contemporary struggles for land justice in post-apartheid South Africa. In doing so the author places previously sequestered disciplines and questions into conversation, offering concepts of the human that unravel the authorising gaze of Scientism while – echoing what Michel Foucault called the blackmail of the Enlightenment¹² – avoiding the desire to exit or escape 'the West'. This is most evident in the book's third chapter which focuses on tensions that emerged during the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall Movements. Rather than mocking one student's call to remove 'Western Science' from South African curricula, Green takes seriously #ScienceMustFall's challenge by offering ways to 'think about different forms of knowledge without reducing one to the opposite of the other',¹³ but also how calls to jettison 'the West' may in fact return us to the same dualism upon which colonialism and apartheid were justified and maintained.

Ultimately what emerges over the course of the book is an attempt to acknowledge historical injustices, to incubate a plural understanding of knowledge production, and to foster future collaborations through which to imagine and work toward

7 L. Green, *Rock | Water | Life: Ecology and Humanities for a Decolonial South Africa*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 49–50.

8 See for example N. Shepherd 'Archaeology Dreaming: Post-Apartheid Urban Imaginaries and the Bones of the Prestwich Street Dead', *Journal of Social Archaeology* 7, 1, 2007, 3–28.

9 L. Green, *Rock | Water | Life*, 206.

10 *Ibid.*, 214.

11 *Ibid.*, 15–16.

12 M. Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', in Sylvère Lotringer (ed) *The Politics of Truth* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997).

13 L. Green, *Rock | Water | Life*, 94.

more just futures. In this sense, Green's final proposal (found in the Coda), 'Flow and Movement: Rethinking Space and Time', is perhaps the most provocative, one that reminds me of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's rhizomatic roots that have 'no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo'.¹⁴ As the author argues:

Rather than studying nature and society, or subjects and objects, or space and time as discrete if interlinked entities, scholarship that attends to flows and movement offers the beginnings of a route to a knowledge of nature that is free of the friction that nature is composed of singular objects that many be described in science against a blank background of space a time.¹⁵

Understanding scientific authority and knowledge production in terms of flow and movement rather than as static and decided in advance, abides by a multiple and layered understanding of time and space. It therefore might enable an understanding of the times (and disciplines) as cumulative, overlapping, and durational, but also open to other relationships with the world that are not predetermined by the market and our supposed mastery over nature. This, Green suggests, might open new ways to engage with our present conjuncture that move us beyond what she calls 'an impossible romanticism ... where nature is paradise; or a modernist idyll in which Nature is where Natives come from'.¹⁶ It is this crucial, ontological step that, Green suggests, might help us to 'unmake the Anthropocene'.¹⁷

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14 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism And Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone Press, 1988), 25.

15 L. Green, *Rock | Water | Life*, 225.

16 *Ibid.*, 6.

17 *Ibid.*, 229.