

BOOK REVIEW

Lesley Green, Frank Matose, Anselmo Matusse, and Nikiwe Solomon, eds. *Reclaiming African Environmentalism: Ecological Struggles for Wellbeing and Habitability*. HSRC Press, 2025. 294 pp. \$45.00. Paperback. ISBN: 9780796926906.

Reclaiming African Environmentalism: Ecological Struggles for Wellbeing and Habitability is a collection of fourteen essays from a decade's worth of graduate research at the University of Cape Town's Environmental Humanities South (EHS) program. The introduction describes the collection as a "contribution to articulating contemporary African environmentalism" without claiming "authorial authority, but to present situations as the struggles they are, in all their incompleteness and uncertainty" (5). This framing conveys the historical, geographic, social, political, and narratological dynamics shaping the environmental issues explored throughout the book and affirms a decolonial methodology which centers an "African ecopolitical thought of self-determination based on local partnerships with Earth processes" (274).

Part One, "Property and Commons," contains five essays interrogating the failures of private property in addressing environmental change and local needs. They argue for stronger state interventions to protect nonfinancialized ways of life. Exploring issues ranging from long-standing land conflicts between pastoralists and conservation authorities to more recent sequestrations of land for carbon-offset schemes in the DRC, these chapters convey the tensions experienced by local communities navigating the pressures of global economics. The direct quotations and original expressions from interviews contribute to the book's claims to situatedness and lived experience. In the book's first chapter, interviews with Maasai pastoralists illustrate the reality of longer climate-driven dry seasons, forcing pastoralists onto lands now privatized for conservation. Munene Mutuma Mugambi's essay examines Kajiado County in Kenya where the convergence of private property and climate change has "severed social relations from ecological relations," denying Maasai pastoralists access to water and grazing lands in times of climate emergency (34). Mugambi argues that the state must formally recognize "common access rights" in order to protect against "water distribution injustice" (33).

The four essays of Part Two, "Extraction and Waste," examine extractivism across the continent. Pierre L. du Plessis's essay on resource prospecting in Botswana explores how even when fracking fails to present an extractive plan, the prospecting itself has "long-term social and environmental consequences" (158). In Tafadzwa Mushonga's standout essay, the Sikumi Forest Reserve in Zimbabwe is the site of extractivist policies that move beyond the "land and resource" privatizations of conservation to include a critical appraisal of how "non-consumptive resource extraction is entangled with capitalist ambitions"

(112). The alliance of developmentalism with conservation has created the conditions in which poaching continues to rise as impoverished communities collide with commercial conservation's securitization. The financialization of conservation has created a greenwashing cottage industry where nongovernmental organizations both describe environmental crises and proffer their services as the solution. As Mushonga says, there "is a need to unlearn that benefits from nature can only be derived when they are privatized, price-tagged, and managed" by experts (116).

The erosion of indigenous knowledges is explicitly addressed in Part Three, "Grieving, Reclaiming and Defending Earthly Relations." These five essays are centrally concerned with how "ecological and cultural interconnectedness" are ignored in favor of an intrusive commodification of the environment (191). These essays address the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, the possibilities of narrative fiction for reimagining environmentalism, the slow violence of chemical composting on the soils in South Africa, and the cultural importance of Land to the AmaMpondo people. The cohesion of this section lies in the exploration of relationalities between people and nonhuman life. Nteboheng Phakisi-Portas's contribution is exemplary for its centering of local narratives from farmers who lament the loss of seed-sharing practices as both a practical impediment to their farming and the death knell to a cultural practice that unites the community in shared relation to the lands they work (210–12). Phakisi-Portas's use of direct quotes from interview participants in dialog is another example of the book's methodological rebuttal to top-down environmentalist policies seeking to ban seed sharing. While several essays in Part One advocate for state intervention, this final section illustrates how communities of relationality are better equipped to respond to the environment.

The essays share a sustained critique of neoliberalism's imagined *win-win-win* doctrine, which claims that profits, social development, and environmental protections are all one and the same. The research collected here demonstrates how, across Africa, profit is repeatedly prioritized over well-being and habitability. This critique of neoliberal financialization is both a major strength of the volume and a potential limitation. While the chapters convincingly show that the values of the global marketplace have little to offer struggles for well-being and habitability, they also risk totalizing those same forces and transforming them into an unbreachable horizon. Although the chapters excel at foregrounding the words of their interview participants, the overarching framework of global neoliberal critique occasionally reduces these grounded relations to data points within a broader indictment of hegemonic capital. However, this stresses the exigency of further work in environmental critique, and the collection offers a compelling diagnosis of the failures of market logics in environmental projects in Africa.

This book is an excellent overview of environmental justice and postcolonial environmentalism. The editors must be congratulated on what is clearly a highly successful and exciting research initiative dethroning the North from environmentalist literatures.

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