

Claiming indigeneity in precarious landscapes: Race, economic globalization and climate change in Rooibos land

**SARAH IVES** *Steeped in Heritage: The Racial Politics of South African Rooibos Tea*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. pp 272 ISBN 978-0-8223-6986-8

**Keywords** Indigeneity, race, South Africa, multispecies belonging, whiteness.

*Steeped in Heritage* explores the fraught claims of indigeneity of white and colored farmers in the rooibos-region of Cederberg in contemporary South Africa. Specifically, Ives sets out to answer the following questions: “How do residents grapple with their ‘precarious identities,’ and how do they articulate their own concepts of what it means to be indigenous when their uncertain claims to belonging in place merge with the uncertainty of the rootedness of place itself?” (3). To this end, she conducted ethnographic fieldwork between 2009 and 2013, as well as archival and primary-source research through 2015, to highlight how people drew on their connection to rooibos and its ecological indigeneity to assert their natural belonging to a landscape and an ecosystem (4). Ives locates quests for indigeneity in the rooibos-region in a context of political, racial, economic and ecological precarity, noting that rooibos narratives of belonging were meant to mitigate fears of a post-apartheid ‘black-controlled’ state (104), the heavy weight of poverty, unemployment and alienation (17), the threat of global market-based economy controlling the rooibos valuation systems and the uncertainty of the “rootedness of place itself” in light of climate change moving the rooibos ecosystem southward (175).

The book is structured along five chapters. Thematically, chapters one, two and five explicitly address the specificities of the plant-place-person configurations of belonging, while chapters three and four provide detailed accounts of the political, economic and racial contexts. Chapter One explores how people’s subjectivities were linked to rooibos as the latter shifted between commodity, native plant, and moral subject. Ives shows how ecologies of belonging for white and colored farmers attend to climatic, economic and political

vulnerabilities differently: whereas white landowners articulate rooibos as heritage based on a connection to traditional past, materially dispossessed colored farmers marked rooibos as heritage oriented towards the future, since farming the tea ‘more naturally’ made them more connected to the land (53). Chapter Two delves deeper into the “region’s fraught history of cultural indigeneity” (67), using the framework of symbiopolitics to note that both colored and white farmers linked their subjectivities, nature and religion “in ways that were not just metaphorical but also informed by a deification of nature and by a need for economic livelihoods” (94). Despite the marked racialization of kinship relations with both the wild and cultivated indigenous plant, both white and colored farmers “saw themselves as simply harnessing, controlling, caring for, and living with that which was God’s gift to the region” (93).

Chapter Three places layered and shifting notions of ‘foreignness’ at the core of the analysis, noting how markers of endemism was cast both onto the landscape and its residents in order to buffer the harmful effects of post-apartheid ‘alien invasions.’ The anxiety caused by black migrants and nonindigenous plant species feature “postapartheid negotiations and renegotiations of spatial rule, exclusion, and mobility” as uncontrollable; the narrative of postapartheid Rainbow Nation, which commodifies rooibos as a symbol of a unified nation, threatens colored and white farmers’ claims of indigeneity to the fynbos ecosystem (103). Chapter Four documents the interplays between rooibos’s commodity history with the “language of globalization, nostalgia, and class with highly emotive ideas of ecological belonging and changing but persistent structures of inequality” (137). Taking oral histories and circulating gossip as “concrete, academic histories” (141), Ives points out how both colored and white farmers struggle to make sense of the changing agrarian landscape, while being confused “about the role of the government, neoliberal economic policies, and postapartheid politics” (165). Finally, Chapter Five highlights the structures of anxiety related to climate change which further complicate uncertainty of the postapartheid landscape (178). Ives notices that, despite white farmers’ attempts to map their genealogy onto the rooibos landscape and turn invisible colored residents’ labor, climate change threatens the “rootedness of place itself,” as the entire fynbos ecosystem might move southward (175, 189).

One of the key theoretical accomplishments of Ives’s book is her successful destabilization of the study of indigeneity as anthropology’s savage lot. Critically, her ethnographic accounts of the fraught, competing and interconnected claims of belonging to the rooibos-region of both white and colored farmers underpin a nuanced analysis of

indigeneity, wherein she rethinks the concept as a situated and contingent process of world making. Rather than the “rooted, essentialized framings of indigeneity that had violently incarcerated ‘natives’ under apartheid,” Ives notes how the different articulations of indigeneity based on the plant-place-person triad “allow for a different politics of indigeneity that was potentially more flexible, encompassing and emancipatory” (8). Through her skillful interlayering of numerous vectors of analysis, such as settler colonial history, apartheid politics, post-apartheid reform, racial hierarchies, economic globalization and climate change, Ives emphasizes that often opposing, though markedly interdependent, claims of belonging in a landscape of profound anxiety and uncertainty make indigeneity as an affectively, racially, politically, temporally and ecologically charged notion.

Reflecting on the possibilities of ties to land of post-Columbian settler populations in the Caribbean, Edouard Glissant (1977, 147) argues that, rather than territory and rooted absoluteness, land becomes rhizome land; the connection to the land emerges through the complicity of relation. *Steeped in Heritage* provides a fine analysis of the complicity of such relations, as Ives teases out the complex affective, ecological, political and racial negotiations of belonging that (em-)place settler white and colored populations in the indigenous rooibos landscapes. Throughout her ethnography, Ives emphasizes power hierarchies and long-lasting economic inequalities between white and colored farmers, closely documenting what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012, 3) refer to as “settler moves to innocence”—i.e. the material and ideological practices that “problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity.” Many Afrikaners, Ives notes, foster an ethnic notion of their culture through “ritual, festivals and origin myths” (56) to see themselves “as natives, not settlers” (57); they imagine their ancestors as “the first occupants of an empty land,” (57), while also erasing both the “contemporary existence of the Khoisan” and negating “colored connection to land or rooibos” (60). Importantly, Ives’s analysis also captures attempts to rearticulate such privilege in the face of political, economic and geographical precarity.

The book also benefits from Ives’s adroit assessment of rooibos’s “dance of wild indigeneity and cultivation” (72), making it a compelling multispecies ethnography. Just as Anna Tsing (2015, 4) tracks the matsutake mushroom’s ecology and commerce in order to emphasize “open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life, with each further opening into a mosaic of temporal rhythms and spatial arcs,” Ives notes how material, spiritual and affective relations of belonging and kinship between white and colored farmers and both wild and cultivated rooibos are necessarily multifaceted. She highlights that the presence of both wild and cultivated rooibos represents both a quality and a tension, engendering problematic

“conflations between race and botany” and marking incongruous liminal spaces (71). In this sense, while “rooibos’s wild/cultivated identity was celebrated,” “colored people’s white/nonwhite identity was pathologized as unnatural” (71). However, while belonging in the rooibos-region was unequivocally predicated upon the plant, contingent perception of endemism and foreignness in the rooibos landscape meant that “even rooibos, the very symbol of indigeneity, could move in and out of these moral certainties: Rooibos is good because it is endemic; cultivated rooibos is bad because it leads to plowing in the fragile ecosystem. The cultivation of an indigenous plant for the marketplace could reconfigure it into a globalized commodity that commits violence against the landscape” (101).

The book certainly delivers on its promises, offering an engaging analysis of multispecies becomings that enable indigeneity in a landscape of precarity. *Steeped in Heritage* makes an outstanding contribution to cultural anthropology. Ives destabilizes the discipline’s stubbornness to engage with indigeneity as a sui generis category, instead emphasizing how notions of belonging are inherently contingent and constantly evolving. The ethnography is also contributing to the burgeoning literature on whiteness and settler colonialism, complementing the scholarship of Janet McIntosh (2016) on white Kenyans, of Darryl Leroux (2019) on French descendants in Canada and the United States, and of T. J. Tallie (2019) on Europeans in colonial Natal. Finally, given the centrality of rooibos to Ives’s analysis, her book is a valuable addition to multispecies ethnography. Along with scholarship such as Tsing (2015) and Eben Kirksey’s (2012), Ives brilliantly teases out how relationships between humans and plants are not unilateral, but rather deep entanglements that profoundly affect each other.

## References

- Edouard Glissant. 1977. *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, [translated by Betsy Wing].
- Eben Kirksey, 2012, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds: West Papua and the Architecture of Global Power*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Darryl Leroux. 2019. *Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.
- Janet McIntosh. 2016. *Unsettled: Denial and Belonging among White Kenyans*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- T. J. Tallie. 2019. *Queering Colonial Natal: Indigeneity and the Violence of Belonging in*

*Southern Africa*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Anna Tsing. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang. 2012. "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*. 1(1): 1-40.

**Aida Arosoaie** is a PhD student in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research sits at the intersection of anthropology of religion, environmental humanities and Black feminist geography.



© 2020 Aida Arosoaie