

Ives, Sarah. 2017. *Steeped in heritage: the racial politics of South African rooibos tea*. Durham: Duke University Press, ISBN 978-0-8223-6993-6; US\$25.95

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In *Steeped in heritage*, anthropologist Sarah Ives examines the complex racial, ecological, and territorial politics animating the production of South African rooibos tea. By exploring "how rooibos farming is entangled with political, economic, and environmental struggles over land, labor, an ideas of native belonging" (p.2), Ives pushes us to reconsider how we think about indigeneity and the diverse ways the concept is mobilized. Through rich ethnographic detail and careful reading of the ways colonial legacies of racialized logics of oppression come to bear on contemporary movements to bring local products to global audiences in surprising ways, this book makes important interventions in the political ecology literature. Examining the cultural and racial politics surrounding the production of rooibos— a semi-domesticated plant, *Aspalathus Linearis*, endemic to South Africa's *fynbos* ecosystem that has been consumed as tea for centuries and is recently in demand across the globe – in the incredibly intricate setting of post-apartheid South Africa, Ives' nuanced and theoretically engaged analysis provides novel conceptual insights, and makes the compelling case that narratives about commodities can create their own forms of alienation.

Chapter 1, "Cultivating indigeneity", lays out the intricate racial politics animating rooibos production, and the ways South Africa's colonial history makes claims to indigeneity particularly complicated. While the rooibos plant is revered for its nativity and endemism, rooibos production is dominated by two groups who do not clearly fit into discussions of indigeneity: "white Africans" and "coloured" South Africans. With native Khoisan peoples considered extinct and mixed-race coloured peoples working to distance themselves from any links to the Khoisan and the connotations of backwardness that entails, white Afrikaans claim indigenous status and also own most of the land in the rooibos-growing region, leaving coloured peoples in a liminal category without strong legal or ethnic claims to place. Instead of framing their sense of belonging through a standard one-to-one mapping of people and place, these groups invoke a form of belonging based in rooibos's indigeneity. While this alternative idea of indigeneity diverges from the highly critiqued ideas of fixity of people and place, Ives shows how this discourse of a pure, ecologically indigenous rooibos worked alongside pathologized, deterritorialized concepts of colored and Afrikaans identities.

Chapter 2, "Farming the bush", shifts the discussion to the intimate relationships between the rooibos plant and the people cultivating it, while staying attuned to the ways the region's racial politics animate these inter-species relations. White Afrikaans assert that their "blood mingles with the soil" and see themselves as stewards fulfilling a duty to God by protecting the *fynbos* landscape, while at the same time trivializing the skill that goes into the cultivating rooibos (work carried out by coloured and black workers) (p.90). Ives demonstrates how the celebratory invocations of rooibos's "ecological exceptionalism" and the corresponding "symbiosis" between farmer, soil, plant, and indigenous insects actively erases the labor of coloured and black workers (p.66). Engaging scholarship on human-plant relationships with discussions of how ideas of race and nature in South Africa have long been tied to notions of sub-human others we see how claims about "the Bush" and "Bushmen" locate dark-skinned peoples as part of the landscape, effectively denying their humanity. She develops the concept of symbiopolitics to underscore the ways the management of populations undergirds the human-nonhuman interface.

Chapter 3, "Endemic plants and invasive people", explores how people in the region imagined the risks posed to indigeneity by the invasion of "alien" plants and people. Examining parallel discussions of "foreign" plants and people, she shows how people and plants deemed outsiders were problematic not so much for their being from somewhere else but instead for their resistance to efforts to control them. It was when plants and peoples were considered to be overstepping their "place" that they became threats. For instance, white farmers did not see black workers as invasive initially. It was only when they began organizing with coloured workers and voting that they began to be perceived as alien and problematic. This discussion of "aliens" links up with

a history of apartheid-era oppression, as black people's presence in the rooibos-growing region was seen as unnatural, because it was (under apartheid) illegal.

Chapter 4, "Rumor, conspiracy, and the politics of narration", uses rumors and gossip surrounding the rooibos industry as an entry point to explore how residents make sense of and negotiate rapidly changing agrarian landscapes. By examining the diverse tales people tell about where rooibos comes from, Ives uncovers the work origin stories and narrativized histories do in constituting and intervening in peoples' understandings of current political, and economic struggles over land, labor, and belonging. We see how global agricultural trends such as deregulation, mechanization, and consolidation were understood and described personally and the ways anxieties over these major shifts manifest in daily conversations about personal and religious feuds and disloyalties to agreements that ultimately reflect a perceived break down of social and economic contracts.

Chapter 5, "Precarious landscapes", starts by demonstrating that life for all residents of the rooibos region is characterized by social, political, economic, and ecological precarity, and examines then how feelings of precarity are being channeled into a "localization" strategy that seeks to differentiate the region's rooibos. Resident's anxieties about the future of their livelihoods differ based on their position in the industry, but they generally agree that pursuing a geographic indication for rooibos – a move that would prevent other producers of the product from calling their product rooibos – could protect their the industry. Ives sees this move as indicative of their complex relationship with commodification itself. Residents simultaneously refused to call rooibos a commodity and claimed its unique qualities prevented it from commodification, and yet did not block it from commodity exchange. While many are hopeful about this strategy in the rooibos context, fears are already surfacing about its efficacy as the ecosystem itself moves with climate change. This point – that food localization projects assume static environments and climate change is already "moving" landscapes in space – is critical and throws into question the viability of geographic indications and other protections for place-based products in a world where ecological change happens at dizzying rates.

Steeped in heritage offers a novel contribution to a long tradition of deeply ethnographic political ecology scholarship, leveraging what this in-depth, place-based research does best – providing rich and nuanced analysis of the complex ways political economy plays out on the ground and articulates with local dynamics of race, identity, and belonging. The simultaneously unique and representative case she examines offers important insights about how race and colonialism intervene in efforts to territorialize commodities, while challenging readers to think through the incredibly complex entanglements of agricultural change, global markets, and notions of belonging that characterize efforts to link commodities to place. This book will interest scholars working on a vast range of issues including indigeneity, environmental change, climate change, agricultural labor, identity politics, multispecies relationships, place-based products, and African studies. It is written in relatively accessible language appropriate for upper-division courses in critical food and agriculture studies.

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