

Of Crocodiles, Chameleons, and the Burden of History

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IN SEPTEMBER 2019, the *Kalahari Review* carried a poignant story “about the African Dream and what happens when you are rejected by a country you fought for.”¹ Written by Yvette Lisa Ndlovu, it centers on a still-feisty woman wounded in the liberation struggle, but captures the despair, dashed hopes, shattered dreams, profound immiseration, and melancholy resignation of countless Zimbabweans facing the tyranny of petty bureaucratic power and the injustices of life through yet another currency crisis. Hundreds queue for hours to withdraw their meager savings from the bank, knowing that only a few will be permitted to do so. The protagonist of the tale, an orphan whose parents died in the war, sells bananas and corn snacks to those in line, while her grandmother, the injured veteran, sings war songs to the indifferent crowd. One of the waiting throng taunts the old woman with the proverb “Matakadya kare hanyaradzi mwana” (Talking about the successes of yesteryear won’t console the losses of today). Continuing his harangue, this swaggering youth observes, contemptuously, that “some people just won’t stop living in the past,” and then brags of his plan to cross the Limpopo River for a better future in South Africa. But the protagonist and her grandmother are not swayed. “Everyone is haunted by the past,” says the former; “you will be eaten by crocodiles,” says the grandmother. Their messages are clear. History cannot be so effortlessly dismissed. Nature can be threatening. Redemption is not easily secured. The past hangs over the present and shapes the future.

These lessons are also particularly pertinent to this book's historical framing of questions about environmental justice in southern Africa. Stirred by concern over the conjoined effects of economic, social, and political inequalities, as well as environmental circumstances, for land and people across the southern reaches of the continent, contributors to these pages are moved to understand them contextually—as the product of ongoing processes and changing situations. So they reflect upon ideas and actions manifest at various scales across time and space. Even as they engage vernacular discourses about the relations between peoples and environments in precolonial times; explore ways in which individuals understood and grappled with environmental injustices during the colonial era; interrogate specific sites of sometimes violent protest in recent years; and ask how it might be possible to move forward in the Anthropocene, these essays come together to offer new and distinct perspectives on questions of environment, power, and justice in postapartheid South Africa and on the potential inherent in new “decolonial” interpretations of circumstances in southern Africa. Together, they remind us that though shadows mark the course of history (or the river that we have traveled from past to present), and that there are obstacles and perils ahead as we navigate the stream of time, we—sentient, engaged humans—have the capacity to shape (albeit rarely fully or perfectly) a future that is more just, equitable, and sustainable than that which most people now know. And with that knowledge comes the responsibility to act.

Environment, power, and justice. These words are so familiar as to be taken for granted. Few people, seeing them together on the cover of this book, are likely to puzzle over their meaning. Yet each is revealed—by experience, reflection, and the preceding essays—to be a chameleon, taking on different hues in different contexts for purposes of camouflage or social signaling; each may signify sundry meanings in response to particular circumstances. Each is subject to diverse, even at times incongruent, interpretations and, like chameleons in some settings, can be a source of suspicion or threat. Yet the varying discursive deployment of and connotations attached to these three words, our metaphorical chameleons, have made them important instruments in the shaping of southern Africa.

To change the metaphor, each of these words is a balloon into which readers will blow their own meanings, in much the same way as other people have done in other times and places. All of these denotations

add to, and perhaps expand upon, those injected into these pages by our contributors—and ultimately complicate the challenges of both understanding and acting. It is well, then, to reflect broadly upon the shape and circumference of these ideas—for “environment,” “power,” and “justice” are more than simple words. The various shades of meaning attached to our chameleon-like concepts have given shape to political, scientific, and moral discourses in the continent south of the Sahara and beyond—and will continue to do so. Working the ground between text and referent, symbol and substance, implication and inference, I seek, in this afterword, to reflect on these concepts and the case studies detailed in the preceding pages, and to think, broadly and provisionally, about some of the ways in which they bear upon large and persistent challenges confronting southern Africa and the contemporary world.

Environment

The first line of a recent book by a trio of environmental historians asks: “Where did . . . [the environment] come from?”² Cosmologists might answer by pointing to the Big Bang; geologists to millions of years of global history; paleontologists to the long, slow evolution of life on earth; philosophers committed to transcendental idealism to the human mind. For the authors who posed this question, the answer is both less sweeping and more complicated. In their view the idea of “the Environment” surfaced from “the ferment of reconstruction and recrimination” that followed World War II.³ At least one politician, a Canadian raconteur, gave some humorous substance to this sense of emergence when he observed in the 1980s: “Ten years ago we didn’t know about the environment—but now it is all around us.”⁴

In this view, rising public awareness of environmental concerns marked a sea-change in public attitudes toward nature and offered, for the first time, “a way of imagining the web of interconnection and consequence of which the natural world is made.”⁵ Those who make this claim acknowledge that Linnaeus, the Comte de Buffon, von Humboldt, G. P. Marsh, and others recognized the “interconnectedness of the phenomena they studied” well before 1948. But there is utility, for our purposes, in focusing less upon what the environment is and how it functions (the stuff of scientific inquiries from physics and chemistry

to evolution and ecology) and more upon how humans have thought about it, why they have acted upon it as they have, and what they “have wanted to make of it.”⁶ The environment, as Admire Mseba’s essay in this collection demonstrates full well, is at once a biogeophysical entity, a cosmological space, and a historical place. Recognizing it as such opens the way to reflection on complex moral questions. Acknowledging this trinity invites us to think about the allocation and exercise of environmental and social agency, about the consequences associated with the intersection of power and the environment, and about the delicate and difficult challenge of justly reconciling the needs and rights of humans and the earth—all of which are broached, in different ways and contexts, in preceding pages.

This is not, of course, to say that our contributors ignore science or the physical qualities of the environment. Cheryl Walker’s words and maps mark the differences between the Succulent Karoo and the Nama Karoo; Muchapara Musemwa charts the aridity of Zimbabwe; and Christopher Conz conveys something of the diversity and beauty of Lesotho’s mountainous landscape. Vegetation dynamics underpin Sarah Ives’s discussion of eucalypts and Australian acacias as invasive species in South Africa. The intricacies of one of the fundamental accomplishments of modern science, the development of genetically modified organisms, form the canvas upon which Matthew Schnurr unfolds his story about the introduction of genetically modified maize to Africa.

Nor are the diverse physical environments with which our contributors engage regarded simply as inert stages upon which human dramas are enacted. Climates change, ecologies evolve, and winds, rains, and droughts work their effects on landscapes without human interference. Equally, it is clear that these environments are not blank slates awaiting the inscription of introduced ideas and influences. Several chapters begin, chronologically, with societies and peoples who occupied territory before the arrival of those of European-descent: the |Xam of the Karoo (Walker); the Shona and Ndebele of Zimbabwe (Mseba); the Basotho of the landlocked mountain kingdom (Conz). Others point to the fluidity and dynamism of African societies and peoples before Europeans came among them, and in the decades thereafter. Although the Sesotho-language novels of James Machobane (mentioned by Conz) spoke to readers confronting accelerating change, their basic message—that “the culture of a people must be dynamic while at the same time retaining the

best features of tradition”—was forged from experience and resonated beyond the hills of Lesotho.

The focused, local studies in this book point time and again to the ways in which both Africans and newcomers invested “the environment” with meaning, endowed it with significance, and invoked “tradition” to make sense of the bush, the forest, or the savanna, as they sought to shape, claim, or defend it. In these discussions, the seemingly straightforward idea of the environment bifurcates and braids into complex streams of thought.⁷ Here it is “Mother Earth,” the place that nurtured the people, the “land” replete with memories, rich in associations, reflecting the words and deeds (and holding the remains both physical and spiritual) of ancestors. There, it is opportunity, offering the chance to improve one’s material circumstances, find security, set down roots. Elsewhere, “the environment” is abstracted or sundered for whatever purpose into its constituent elements; in this sense it becomes “territory” or water, or invasive species, or a GMO.

Such distillations can sharpen focus and debate, but they often do so at some cost, forsaking the fundamental environmental truth that everything is connected to everything else, and incorporating unspoken convictions into the discourse. Astronomy Advantage Areas prohibit “interference” with radio telescopes over vast tracts of the Northern Cape, but for those who established them these areas are spaces rather than places, conjecturally demarcated and defined rather than materially and intimately understood. Those who created these scientific spaces sought to ensure the best possible conditions for radio astronomers. Those who established reserves for Africans in Rhodesia and South Africa proceeded with similar cartographic freedom, drawing lines on maps to forward the cause of racial segregation. Location trumped other considerations. Much as aridity, poor soils, and so on blighted the prospects of those consigned to live in these spaces, they were of little concern to those who demarcated them.

Struggles over water loom large in the history of southern Africa and are central to chapters by Musemwa and Mary Galvin above. Exaggerated as characterizations of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe as “the Sahel of the South” may seem, there is no escaping the harsh reality of aridity or semiaridity across vast parts of the region, where water is both life and rarely sufficient (without significant technological intervention) for those residing there. Complicated as Ives shows the discourse over invasive species

to be, opposition to eucalypts and Australian acacia in the Cape Floral Kingdom draws sustenance from the voracious appetites of these species for water. There, and in urban and rural settings where access to water has been, and remains, starkly differentiated, debate about the proper use of this vital environmental element has been deeply inflected by questions of race and class. Moreover, the injustice of massively uneven water distribution (and associated patterns of differentiation in water quality and sanitation provision) has only been exacerbated as a discourse of “rights” has superseded earlier perceptions of desires unmet. Indeed, as Galvin’s chapter demonstrates, homilies about rights have helped to transmute water from an environmental element into a rhetorical foil for the exercise of power pointed to personal and political gain.

The need to increase crop yields to feed burgeoning populations is worldwide but is especially acute in climatically marginal areas where production levels are particularly susceptible to variable weather. Hence the appeal of insect-resistant and herbicide-tolerant GM maize, and the allure of drought-tolerant varieties. Yet debate about the introduction of GMOs has also been heavily polarized, as Schnurr recounts in revealing detail. Corporate, government and philanthropic agendas, ideological convictions, humanitarian concerns, and diverse, more or less formalized local interests found expression in a fray that mixed concerns about climate change and the loss of biodiversity with a range of other issues. These then spun out into critiques of capitalism and support for smallholder peasant farmers.

In some larger, varied, and disaggregated sense, then, “environment” is indeed “all around us.” Invested with various meanings, it figures in discussions ostensibly about other things—class, race, nationalism, belonging, and so on. Accessed unevenly, it shapes life chances and the quotidian details of existence. Given a central place in the discourse of social resistance movements, it has become an important component of discussions about power and the justness, integrity, and even legitimacy of entire societies.

Power

Power, like environment, has many hues. It can be explicit and unambiguous, its use assured; it can also be nebulous, uncodified, and erratic in

application. Some see it as hard or soft. Others compare its exercise on individuals or societies to the use of a carrot or a stick on a recalcitrant donkey—as a means of enticing or driving the subject in the desired direction. Power is everywhere. In one form or another it pervades every society and impinges—not always uniformly—on the lives of everyone within them. It has also been the subject of much scholarly interest, much of it inspired by the works of Michel Foucault and James C. Scott.

Particularly pertinent among Foucault's contributions to this discussion are his identification of a "microphysics of power"—the idea that power is dispersed and exercised in multiple locales beyond those of recognized societal leaders and the institutions with which they are associated, in "families, workplaces, everyday practices and marginal institutions."⁸ Conjoined with this, Foucault insists that power is a set of relations, and that people are not "simply constructed by power." In this view (one that has particular salience to thinking about the apartheid regime in South Africa, perhaps) power is ultimately an unstable and uneven "network of practices," and it characteristically spawns resistance.

Beyond this, Foucault argued that the nature of power has changed. In his reading, authority was made evident, in premodern times, by the sporadic exercise—usually as a form of spectacle—of violent, sovereign power (think of public executions). From the seventeenth century, this approach ceded ground to the exercise of "biopower," an approach to government that sought to govern populations by subjecting them to "precise controls and comprehensive regulation" and that Foucault termed "governmentality," a specific set of techniques designed to orchestrate "the conduct of men." This form of disciplinary power rested upon detailed knowledge of the citizenry and established precise and comprehensive behavioral norms to which people were expected to conform. Rather than threatening death, modern power dictates lives. Indeed, as Foucault recognized as early as 1979, there was no better example of this than the way in which neoliberal governmentality produced economic subjects "structured by specific tendencies, preferences and motivations" by creating "social conditions that not only encourage and necessitate competitiveness and self-interest, but also produce them."⁹

Understandings of resistance to the exercise of power, and of the potential consequences of efforts to make society and environment legible, have been further enhanced by James C. Scott. His work reveals

the ways peasant societies have resisted the power of those who would control, exploit, or subjugate them, and argues, in *Seeing Like a State*, that modernist hubris undermined several schemes intended to improve the human condition.¹⁰ Insisting that subaltern peoples employ various forms of resistance against those who (would) dominate them, Scott points to the importance of “hidden transcripts”—constituted by off-stage, subsurface, oblique, disingenuous, and ambiguous words and behaviors—as correctives to, or amplifications of, the open “public transcripts” of interactions between sub- and superordinate groups.¹¹ Peasants, Scott shows, deploy the weapons of the weak—evasion, silence, naivete, calculated conformity—in the constant, circumspect, material, and ideological struggle they wage against the weapons of their oppressors, be they violent and sometimes arbitrary displays of sovereign power or the more insidious forms of authority deployed by central governments bent on bringing their subjects and territories into intelligible order, but trampling roughshod, in the process, over local knowledge and traditional social arrangements.¹²

Neither Foucault nor Scott loom large in the chapters of this book, although the fundamental insights of their contributions are now so well embedded in scholarly understanding that they loiter between the lines on these pages. So we see, in Marc Epprecht’s chapter, the ascribed and imported power of practical science (figured as public health, erosion control, and resource conservation) being deployed to justify cattle culling, slum clearance, and land dispossession policies, all of which had significant social and economic impacts upon the African inhabitants of Msunduzi (and other places). So Mseba adopts Scott’s insights to show the Native inhabitants of early colonial Zimbabwe deploying one of the many weapons of the weak, by critiquing the colonial administration and the deleterious effects of its policies in stories intelligible for what they were to their own people but misunderstood and dismissed as superstition by colonial officials. So Epprecht echoes Foucault’s concern about the power of neoliberal governmentality. And so, as we are forcefully reminded by Ives, the power to name and categorize and promulgate a particular vision of history has had far-reaching and often pernicious effects on people and environments.

Conversely, it is no surprise that in polities and societies as complex as those of southern Africa, the exercise of power, and its discontents, spill beyond the tidy formulations of particular conceptualizations. Influential

as Foucault's "critical" view of power has been, it by no means encompasses all the ways in which power is exercised, its intents, or its effects. Valuable as Scott's emphasis on the importance of covert resistance has been to understanding peasant and subaltern circumstances, it should neither cloud the realities of overt insurgency, nor obscure the ease and frequency (suggested by Galvin's chapter) with which local unrest can become organized insurrection bent on structural change. At the same time, as has been noted elsewhere in the world, where corruption is rife "everyday defiance of the law . . . [can enhance] the regime's stability."¹³ Ultimately, as Sidney Mintz observed decades ago and Galvin brings us to realize in the here and now, "it is important to understand how populations come to the recognition that their felt oppression is not merely a matter of poor times, but of evil times—when, in short, they question the legitimacy of an existing allocation of power, rather than the terms of that allocation."¹⁴

All of our contributors mark the links between knowledge and power. The spirit mediums who occupy center stage in Mseba's discussion of vernacular discourse claimed the former and exercised the latter. Conz's James Machobane combined knowledge of local ecologies and understanding of Basotho society to develop strong arguments for a sustainable farming system. Knowledge confers authority and, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, readers need no reminders of the ways in which political choices can be rationalized, justified, and defended by reference to "Science." Sometimes, as Walker shows for the Karoo, decisions are ostensibly taken for the benefit of a particular form of science—leaving other interests marginalized by claims about the advancement of knowledge. Science, as Ives reminds us too, can also be "translated" by government officials and the popular press for political purposes, leading nonscientists conditioned by the contexts of their daily lives to draw emotionally loaded inferences from inherently neutral data.

Nor do our contributors ignore the efficacy of deep structural power. Machobane's messianic advocacy of Mantša Tlala, Conz notes, was unable to stay the force of nationalist rhetoric bolstered by "expert" opinion in favor of capitalist, industrial agriculture. The African Centre for Biodiversity, Schnurr tells us, found it necessary to push back against "the powerful interests that undergird the global food system." And Epprecht is scathing in his assessment of "multinational corporations

and technologies hitched to an ideology of endless . . . consumption” tied to neoliberal economic doctrines that favor the development of “far-flung, low-density housing, polluting industry, car dependency, and retail-chain shopping malls,” all of which are ill-suited to the delivery of social and environmental justice. Further, as Galvin demonstrates, the gap between formal constitutional procedures and the local exercise of power by traditional leaders and “strongmen” is often large. Power may not necessarily corrupt, but it does entice some to break the (democratic) trust placed in them in favor of base impulses.

One consequence is that power was and is not always exercised fairly, or with the interests of the majority to the fore. Protests, outbursts of violence, and soulful expressions of resignation mark this fact through the pages of this volume. As one disaffected resident interviewed by Galvin in Ngqushwa had it, those who sought to “speak the truth about what is happening on the ground” found themselves ignored, dismissed, or, worse, assaulted and abused by those who had gained influence in the corridors of government or their communities. Local study after local study recounted in these pages reveals the difficulties encountered by those who were disadvantaged as they attempted to speak truth to power. For many, the promise of democracy (“power to the people”: “Power—it is ours,” or *Amandla—Ngawethu*, in the isiZulu chant of African National Congress rallies) seemed false, especially as long-standing patronage practices opened doors to cronyism and corruption. But there is no escaping the fact that power in its various forms was a pervasive influence on and in the lives of southern Africans.

Justice

The concept of justice is as old and as variegated as the hills. Retributive or reciprocal justice (“an eye for an eye”) dates back, at least, to the Mesopotamian Code of Hammurabi (1754 BC). Today, many philosophers and ethicists find the core characteristics of justice in ancient Roman Law: “the constant and perpetual will to render to each his due.”¹⁵ In this view, justice is focused on the treatment of individuals (or groups framed as individuals); it is due to everyone (it can be claimed and rightful claims create enforceable obligations); it is impartial and consistent; and it requires an agent who acts to bring something about.

But justice means different things—addresses different issues and takes different forms—in different contexts. Is justice served when people’s legitimate expectations—framed by existing laws, past practices, and social conventions—are met? Or is it measured against what might exist under some specified ideal, be that equality of opportunity or equality of condition? Should justice work to bolster existing assumptions by ensuring, as the American philosopher John Rawls had it, that “entitlements are earned and honored as the public system of rules declares”?¹⁶ Or might conceptions of justice force change by embracing principles other than those that currently prevail?

Second, we must ask whether justice is distributive or corrective. If the former, justice is about the “fair” allocation of particular distributable goods among those members of a population who have a recognized claim to them. In environmental terms we might say that this form of justice is concerned with the fair distribution of environmental “benefits and bads” among all humans. In this view “no people, rich or poor, urban or suburban, black or white, should be forced to shoulder an unequal burden.”¹⁷ Corrective justice, by contrast, follows a remedial principle, typically espousing an intent to right the wrong done by one person’s illegitimate interference with the rights or property of another. Distributive justice requires criteria to guide distribution of the goods (or “bads”) to be apportioned, especially if these are limited in quantity or spread. Corrective justice serves as a caution on the actions of those who would fail to respect the property and legitimate interests of others.

Discussions of justice also divide on the “relative weight they attach to procedures and substantive outcomes” and on the question of whether determinations are comparative or not. Those who favor a procedural approach ask whether people are treated fairly through procedures that produce the outcome; the common shorthand here is, Did they receive a fair trial? Other conceptualizations—such as, Did everyone, especially minorities, participate on an equal footing in the framing of environmental policies that affect them?—are less often considered, possibly because they are more complicated. Should votes be weighted to share risks to health and well-being “proportionally to the pollution and contamination one produces or . . . to the amount of resources one consumes”?¹⁸ Those who focus on outcomes rather than procedures ask whether they conform to some overarching principle or pattern by tallying with some desirable criterion: Do outcomes improve equality?

Do awards match entitlements or needs? The notion that justice inheres in the equal distribution of some kind of benefit is clearly comparative; the size of the pie and the number of claimants determine the size of the allocation. To adopt the principle that everyone should have enough, that needs will be met, or that a sufficient living will be ensured—the implicit promise of “rights”—is, by contrast, noncomparative.

None of the issues raised by these binaries are straightforward, but they are further complicated by questions about the scope of justice. Are the principles of distributive justice applicable only to those who join together, in Rawls’s phrasing, as participants in a “cooperative venture for mutual advantage”? Does this specification include, as Thomas Nagel has argued, only “those who by virtue of being citizens of the same state are required both to comply with, and accept responsibility for, the coercive laws that govern their lives”?¹⁹ Is there, then, scope for concern about global distributive justice? Are significant wealth disparities inherently unjust, or are they properly so characterized only if they result from the actions of some individual or collective third-party agent, and cannot be justifiably defended? Deciding whether “principles of social justice should apply to market transactions” turns on how markets are conceived. If they are defined as neutral arenas for the pursuit of individual self-interest (as neoliberal economists insist), the answer is no. If markets are regarded, on the other hand, as human constructs shaped by rules that can be changed, collectively, by those who participate in them, then it is both legitimate and pertinent to ask whether the outcomes they produce “meet relevant standards of distributive justice, whatever we take these to be.” Can, should, principles of justice be extended to (all) nonhuman animals? to trees? to birds and fish? to the environment, or the planet?²⁰

Much theoretical writing on justice follows a liberal individualist framework. But this is contested by the quest for environmental justice, which is generally best understood as a social movement, focused on broad group, community, and even postmaterial concerns rather than individual entitlements. In his effort to define the field, the American political theorist David Schlosberg, currently professor of environmental politics in the University of Sydney, insisted that environmental justice attends to social groups and ecological systems as well as individuals. Indeed, he suggested that “most academic conceptions of ecological justice based in distribution . . . are incomplete and inadequate in their

definitions and prescriptions,” precisely because traditional liberals exclude nature from their concerns and thus overlook issues of justice to the nonhuman part of the natural world.²¹ Schlosberg’s approach is pluralistic. By taking “into account a range of interrelated dimensions and conceptions of justice that can be variously applied to humans and nonhumans, individuals and groups,” this approach avoids the “mistake of exclusion so common to universalism and paternalism.” It seeks to incorporate multiple claims and notions of justice that can apply to various issues, cases, and contexts to promote “engagement across differences.”

Translating such intellectual constructs, expressed in the precise but purifying prose of legal scholars, ethicists, and philosophers, into the complex, conflicted, and real-world messy sites and circumstances of the case studies in this book (and the region in which they are located) is no simple task. On the ground, taking the communities and circumstances examined in these pages together, justice seems an ephemeral, elusive, and inexact concept. Time and again, it appears, like beauty, to lie in the eye of the beholder. What rules define it? On what assumptions are entitlements based? How can ringing commitments to high-minded theories of justice help those struggling daily to survive in societies without either the fiscal means to alleviate their situations or the wherewithal to distribute effectively such assistance as may be possible?

In South Africa, official policy at the national level after 1994 included progressive or social democratic commitments to distributive justice in promises to provide all citizens with specific (although parsimonious) quantities of water and certain free social services. Yet as Galvin shows with unflinching gaze on the actual delivery of water and sanitation services in three quite disparate communities, there has been many a slip between cup and lip. Even in relatively small settlements, communities divided, corruption ran rampant, and some families received better service than others. Such patterns of what Ives calls “differential inclusion” raise questions about the nature of the polity. They also provoke reflection on the need for corrective justice after the apartheid years or, indeed, what Epprecht calls “a long century of injustice.” Years earlier, and during that long century, Bradfield Mnyanda argued, in Rhodesia to the north, that elite Africans, and only elite Africans, were entitled to better water provision—although his claim may well, as Musemwa intriguingly suggests, have carried a broader remedial intent, attributable to the particular nature of water.

These are important matters. How and at what scale is justice to be measured in some of the most economically unequal societies in the world? Does it matter, in thinking about this question, that these societies have only recently emerged from decades of entrenched racial segregation, institutionalized repression, massively divergent investment in infrastructure, and state-sanctioned violence? Can individual and group interests be reconciled, and met, across populations so diverse, so different in language, tradition, experience, and aspiration, in countries and communities bearing the burden of difficult pasts, and caught up in the great contemporary swirl of global ideological, economic, and political interests? What role might the growing strength of “rights” discourse (the right to water, the right to the city, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) play in shaping the balance of power among competing interests? How will these crosscurrents play out? Can they be brought to bear to ensure respect for the environment of southern Africa, and greater economic and social justice for the people of this markedly disparate area? The challenges are legion—but the issues signaled by the foregoing series of question marks cannot be dismissed or ignored. Nor can they be addressed in the abstract. Context envelops all these observations about environment, power, and justice. Any attempt to unpack and understand the implications of these ideas is bound to be “haunted by the past”; none can escape the burden of history.

Between Nostalgia and Presentism: Representation, Responsibility, and the Burden of History

Just as Gogo, the grandmother in Ndlovu’s story, found her experience and perspective marginalized by those caught up in contemporary circumstances, many now deny that deep and accurate knowledge of the past is important for dealing with challenges ahead. Countless reasons are adduced for this: the insistent presentness of social media; the sense that the world has changed quickly and dramatically (“your war songs are not going to feed us”); the too literal, and too credulous, interpretation of Francis Fukuyama’s aphorism about “the end of history”; the welcome rise of subaltern voices that challenge established interpretations of past and present circumstances; the disparagement of “expert” opinion; disdain for “the Enlightenment”; acceptance of the existence

of multiple truths; the rise of populism and the entrenchment of identity politics; the conflation of history and memory; and the pressing, overwhelming urgency of many contemporary crises, from the climate emergency through the COVID-19 pandemic to the massive challenges, across southern Africa and elsewhere, of economic, social, political, and environmental reconstruction.²² None of these is trivial, and none should be gainsaid.

But problems in grappling with the past are not new. Although many contemporary scholars would insist that revolutionary developments in digital communication technologies have recast the ways in which we recollect the past, perceive the present, and imagine the future, we need to weigh these claims and their implications with care, because the challenges are by no means a product of our “Hyper-Mobile Digital Age.”²³ Sociologist Todd Gitlin was writing forty years ago about “a new velocity of experience, a new vertigo” produced by quickening change, and long before that historians were wrestling with the impact of “modernity” and the idea of progress on their practice.²⁴

Many historians have quoted the English novelist L. P. Hartley to the effect that “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”²⁵ The implication here is that the past is a place to be explored, interpreted, and understood on its own terms, which differ from those prevailing in the historian’s present. But Hartley oversimplified. There is more than one foreign country, the borders between them are not always clear, and the people who lived in them thought about themselves and their circumstances in different, often contradictory, ways. Their disagreements surfaced in various forms: in conflicts over land, in disputes over authority and influence, over how people and groups defined themselves, and how they fared.²⁶ Or, more succinctly, in disputes over environment, power, and justice.

It is also difficult to comprehend the past without reference to the present. Historical questions are prompted and shaped by current societal concerns. This is entirely to be expected, benign, and inescapable. Each generation writes its own histories, and so long as historians stay true to their craft and the evidence, acceptable scholarship should result. But perils lurk in these waters. Although Gogo’s reference to crocodiles seems literal enough, the title of Ndlovu’s story—“Swimming with Crocodiles”—attaches a deeper, historical, and symbolic meaning to her warning. Some African traditions compare the perils of sundering

political-cultural relationships, the consequences of paying insufficient attention to inherited obligations, and the wisdom of experience, with swimming in crocodile-infested waters.²⁷ Whether literal or metaphorical, encounters between people and crocodiles are rarely good for the human protagonists.²⁸ Nor, generally, are histories that forsake careful engagement with the past and veer toward nostalgia or presentism.

Nostalgia is a multifaceted concept, perhaps most usefully thought of here as a romantic affection for a vanished or vanishing past.²⁹ Generally, nostalgic histories offer warm, positive views of earlier periods. They typically make selective use of evidence to contrast an idealized past with a less satisfactory present, or describe a historical “golden age” against which decline is calibrated.³⁰ By framing the past as better than the present, “nostalgia” often serves, in the pithy words of geographer David Lowenthal, to tell “it Like it Wasn’t.”³¹

Presentism is defined as an “uncritical adherence to present-day attitudes, especially the tendency to interpret past events in terms of modern values and concepts.”³² Most historians, conscious of contingency, insist that the past is not simply prologue to the present. They bemoan the hubris involved in condemning those who lived in very different societies and circumstances for failing to live up to our current standards, and deplore the assumption, thus entailed, of our own moral and temporal superiority.

Even as they appreciate the importance of identifying the dynamics and implications of power in colonial settings, many historical scholars are concerned that current postcolonial interpretations of settler societies oversimplify the issues at hand. Aware of previous pitfalls on the road to understanding the past, they worry that the presentism of such work tends to reinscribe colonial categories in binary terms. By reducing current events, the recent past, and the history of empire to exploitation and appropriation by one set of actors, and resistance by another, these interpretive strategies can unduly simplify the story, leaving little room for consideration of blurry lines and boundary crossings in alliances or in actions.

Attending to those lines and crossings is vital work. We are all shaped by the times, places, and circumstances of our existences, but these are rarely static for long. As individuals and groups, we hold dear our own mythologies, conjure and repeat our own stories, and sing our own praise songs. We also live in fractious times. Heightened by the

shrieking partisanship of politics in many jurisdictions, the evidence is all around us. Fierce, dismissive arguments over contending “truths”; a Babel of convictions; a reluctance to see any merit in opposing positions; unshakable belief in the rightness of one’s particular beliefs; and so on. But we are—or should be—open to change.

Even as we wrestle with the immediate challenges of environmental despoliation, the inappropriate use of power, and the injustices that flow therefrom, we need to think long and deep about our responsibilities as scholars. This requires consideration of our relationship with the past, of the inescapable challenges of confronting it, as we must do, from the present, and of the nature and purpose of our engagement with history.

Here a brief consideration of earlier forays into African history can help to provide perspective, clarify the issues, and illuminate ways forward. Embarking on his doctoral research in the early 1960s, A. G. Hopkins began his engagement with Africa in heady and propitious times: the professional study of African history was blossoming; decolonization, nation building, and economic development were in the air; a new generation of Africanist scholars broadly sympathetic to liberation movements readily believed they were “participating in an unprecedented historiographical revolution.”³³ Hopkins stood a little apart. His interest in the history of capitalism was not widely shared—but his distinct perspective drew him to groundbreaking work in the history of Africa and of what was increasingly being conceived of as underdevelopment. Taking issue with the common perception that Africans lived in archetypal traditional societies, he limned two “deliberately overstated” sketches to sharpen, by way of contrast, his discussion of markets, institutions, and the environment in domestic economies in precolonial times.

One archetype, which Hopkins labeled “Primitive Africa,” pictured inhabitants of the continent living “under the dominion of custom and impulse” as members of stereotypical “static, self-sufficient, changeless societies.” The other, termed “Merrie Africa,” saw the precolonial period as “a Golden Age of harmony and affluence”; in this view “generations of Africans enjoyed congenial lives in well-integrated, smoothly functioning” communities that were disrupted by European rule. As the winds of change coursed through Africa in the 1960s, commentators inclined “to put Africans on a pedestal to compensate for the image of inferiority they had long suffered.” The Merrie Africa narrative fit the preferred view of a harmonious precolonial order being restored by

emerging states and their rulers, and it had to be endorsed, observed the wry Hopkins, if history was “to fulfil its contemporary function of legitimizing the present.”³⁴

Neither Hopkins’s caricatures of the “Primitive” and “Merrie” myths, nor his own impressive efforts to see beyond them, banished such views. They reappeared, after a decade or so, in scholarship on East Africa. In a book published in 1977, Helge Kjekshus sought to emphasize African economic and environmental agency in establishing prosperous, stable agricultural communities in Tanzania before the disruptions associated with colonial rule brought rinderpest, tsetse fly, and sand flea outbreaks, and the breakdown of traditional ecological systems in the 1890s—only to be accused, by John Iliffe, of endorsing the “Myth of Merrie Africa.”³⁵ More pointedly, Iliffe found three failings in Kjekshus’s work: his inclination to “contrast the most favourable descriptions of precolonial Tanganyika with the most horrifying accounts of colonial times”; his tendency to ignore evidence; and his propensity to speculate. Then a third scholar, Juhani Koponen, indicted Iliffe—whose own book emphasizing the harshness of the environment and life in precolonial Tanzania appeared shortly after Kjekshus’s—for an interpretation that was “much closer to Primitive Africa, if not actually going that far.”³⁶

If scholars debated how best to characterize precolonial African societies, colonial officials worried about the social and ecological crises that seemed to afflict colony after African colony in the years after 1935. Looking askance at the conditions of rural life, in many parts of the continent, interpreting the widespread “drift” of people from the countryside to towns and cities, and confronted by evidence of increasingly fragmented landholdings coupled with peasant indebtedness, European-trained administrators and experts consistently misread the African landscape to conclude that environmental “issues” such as soil erosion, overgrazing, and deforestation stemmed from a surfeit of people unable or unwilling to grapple with the challenges they faced.³⁷

As early as 1940, the Colonial Development and Welfare Act committed the British Parliament to a program of integrated scientific planning intended to improve resource use and food production for local consumption.³⁸ “Colonial poverty and disorder” were to be addressed as technical problems. By making peasant agriculture more efficient and “scientific,” officials hoped to keep people on the land, arrest what they, often mistakenly, identified as social breakdown in rural communities,

and prevent “detrribalization.” As this project spluttered in the 1950s, some development theorists argued for an agricultural revolution that would move people away from subsistence farming. Fertilizers, machines, cash crops, and farm consolidation were to mark the new order. With incentives and good fortune, some Africans prospered. But many more were left behind. Reacting against the continuation of what they took to be “irrational” and “wasteful” African land-use practices, scientists and policy makers railed against the deleterious environmental impacts that they believed such practices produced. Environmental degradation became part of the orthodox discourse, part of a powerful new narrative of environmental crisis that rendered countless African families as both perpetrators and victims of their unfortunate fates.

In the 1990s, a new cohort of scholars, more attentive to local voices and local practices, challenged this doctrine.³⁹ Armed with new scientific understanding of the natural world—especially the emergence of a new, nonequilibrium model of ecology different from earlier notions of climatic climax vegetation based on the work of Frederic Clements—they recognized change as a constant of biogeographical systems and revealed the vested interests that sustained claims of environmental degradation.⁴⁰ In sum, they argued that although “the received wisdom was based on scientific authority, . . . it lacked scientific rigor.”⁴¹ Far from being ignorant, irrational wastrels and environmental vandals, African farmers and pastoralists were now recognized as knowledgeable and effective stewards of local ecological systems.

Continuing debate over portrayals of “Merrie” and “Primitive” or reprising shifting views of African agency is ultimately less valuable than accepting these shifting interpretations as reminders of the always complex, small-scale, and constantly changing nature of ecological relationships and the fact that the quest for power over human and environmental resources is ongoing. All societies—precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial—are dynamic entities shaped by conflict and molded by the interplay of culture, ideology, institutions, exchange, technology, and environmental circumstances. To further understand the complex interface of environment, power, and justice, we need to develop, in the words of historians James Griblin and Gregory Maddox, “a truly historical perspective on environment and ecology” that remains open to “both the possibilities of progress and stability and the likelihood of reversals and crises.”⁴²

On his first visit to West Africa, A. G. Hopkins found himself “pondering the difference between what we want to see in the past, and what we find there, and how to manage the disparity when the two appeared to be misaligned.”⁴³ This is a dilemma that haunts us yet, as scholars and citizens. “There’s a way,” says American short-story writer Danielle Evans, “in which what we choose to believe about history is a kind of performance, one that gestures toward what kind of people we are, what kind of country we are, what stories we tell about our families, what we believe without evidence versus what we ignore when we have evidence.”⁴⁴ We are engaged, she insists (in words that have particular pertinence to our current decolonial moment), in “a constant negotiation between what’s real and how we want to be seen.”⁴⁵

Others, both before us and in societies different from our own, have negotiated their self-narratives and their circumstances in the quest for understanding—and have presented particular faces to a world that they perceived and explained in their own distinctive ways. This they do, and have done, to account for and explain their actions in the settings (more or less different from those we find familiar) in which they exist. Some are (and have been) forthright about their convictions and intent. Others claimed, perhaps justly, to have been carried, at times and with scant prospect of effective resistance, on powerful streams of societal tendency. Yet others refused to acknowledge the effects that their actions, willing or otherwise, produce. We twenty-first-century critics, thinkers, and citizens are in no wise different. We, too, shape and revise our stories as we go along. We all have our own versions of things. These may be our own truths—but they are not everyone’s. We should be cautious of dismissing complex, multifaceted past lives and personalities for actions that offend currently strong convictions unfamiliar to them.

As the three most deeply historical essays in this volume, by Mseba, Conz, and Musemwa, demonstrate, our first responsibility as historical scholars is to understand the past as those who lived and acted did, not to judge it and them by the standards of the present. The past *is* a foreign country in the sense that things were different then and there. The more we appreciate this, the better we will realize why people spoke and acted as they did; the more we do this the better we will recognize the failings and foibles, alongside the achievements and strengths, of those who shaped the world in which we live.

The past is also a place with “a past”; no serious scholarship should assume a past without blemish or perpetuate the epic golden days, the mythologies of memory. We must acknowledge the failings of people in the past and resist the assumption that we would have acted better under the circumstances they faced. We should reject the passive, and to some comforting, assumption that evil was accidental and that things just happened. As the young man who admonished Gogo in the short story that opens these reflections recognized, simply talking about the past will not resolve the problems of today. To learn from, and improve upon, prior circumstances, we must hold both context and agency—structural, collective, and individual—to account, and we must recognize, and transcend, the blinkers and limitations of one-dimensional, dogmatic, universalist ways of thinking about the world.⁴⁶

This means moving beyond critiques of colonialism to find new ways of making sense of the worlds with which we are engaged. Decades ago, traditional scientific approaches to knowledge production were criticized, especially by feminist scholars, for “playing the God trick”—applying a limited suite of ideas and approaches to interpreting the world.⁴⁷ The essential message of this critique was that no one can take in all there is to see, that no single standpoint is sufficient to fully encompass and understand the diversity of being. One of its corollary insights was that the growing dominance of the European imperium elevated Western (“Northern”) ways of knowing the world, their ontologies and epistemologies, to global ascendancy. As Dipesh Chakrabarty and others (including Conz, Schnurr, Ives, and Epprecht in this volume) have pointed out, Western science conquered the world by marginalizing other ways of understanding nature and society: “Colonialism imposed a format to which local thinking had to . . . conform,” and Northern science dismissed “Southern” ways of knowing as superstition and folklore.⁴⁸ Useful as the quest for nomothetic knowledge has been, we need to reaffirm the awareness, implicit in much humanities scholarship, that “all knowledge is bound by the place, time, and positionality of the knowledge producer and hence ideographic.”⁴⁹ It is time to move beyond Eurocentrism, to recognize different views, to acknowledge what Jean Comaroff, John Comaroff, and others refer to as theory from the South, and to calibrate our understanding to incorporate its perspectives and insights.⁵⁰

This is no easy task. Sloughing the blinkers of universalist language and logic—the work of colonialism’s critics—is hard enough; moving

beyond critique to develop new means of understanding is a daunting challenge. Remember that our everyday lives and the stories we tell ourselves about them (in the here and now and in times past) are larded with uncertainties and contradictions. When justice transmutes from broad abstract principle to something whose very form is contingent and contextual, when power is ever-shifting, in form and effect, and where the environment is subject and agent, symbol and substance, an enveloping reality and a will-o-the-wisp of meanings, perspective and firm intellectual ground can be hard to find. And the problems are only exacerbated when we widen the orbit of our concern to include others, in other times and other places.

Seeking a way forward, searching for ways of thinking about feminist theory that move beyond hegemonic certainty and a colonial frame of mind to recognize and respect rather than dismiss and subsume difference, the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell identifies three conceptual models of global knowledge production.⁵¹ In the prevailing, pyramidal model “theory is universal; . . . mostly generated at the apex of the global system,” although it may use data from elsewhere. Theory is assumed, in this schema, to trickle down from North to South. As an alternative, Connell posits a “mosaic epistemology” in which “separate knowledge systems sit beside each other like tiles in a mosaic, each based on a specific culture or historical experience, and each having its own claims to validity.” Here, the precedence afforded a single way of seeing the world is replaced by respectful relations among many knowledge systems. But this model is also flawed. Unlike tiles, cultures and societies are dynamic, they interact, they change one another, and they promote mutual learning and critique. This leads Connell to describe a third, solidarity-based, epistemology marked by the ongoing “unpredictable interweaving of ideas and experience.” This, she indicates, could produce a “global democracy of knowledge” in which “theory is produced and recognized” at many connected sites, where visions of justice overlap and there is strong commitment to braiding together different types of understanding.⁵²

The American feminist and postcolonial scholar Sandra Harding uses the shorthand “one planet, many sciences” to imagine a future in which researchers acknowledge the impossibility of seeing, knowing, and understanding everything in the same way, and embrace the multiple perspectives of the many other effective knowledge traditions

that predate and still exist alongside modern Western sciences.⁵³ Here her intent parallels that of Connell's third way of proceeding in its insistence on cultivating the intersection of multiple knowledge systems. We need, Harding insists, "realistic reassessments of both Western and non-Western knowledge systems," remembering all the while that "if we are to take seriously the achievements of another culture, we have to talk about it in our terms, rather than theirs."⁵⁴ In such engagements, these and other scholars find a way forward, a means of moving beyond the rigidities and limitations of thinking and theorizing imposed by colonialism and universalism; they seek, as the title of a recent collection of essay on this theme has it, to develop a new geopolitics of knowledge by constructing a pluriverse—"a global tapestry of alternatives"—that promises a more "ecologically wise and socially just world."⁵⁵

Accepting the fallibility of absolute conviction, acknowledging that power is manifest in various ways, and recognizing that coming together for common purpose is better than staying guardedly apart can help us to realize a more just, less perilous future for earth and its inhabitants. Context and understanding built—as are all the chapters in this book—from serious reflection on the past, from close engagement with the gritty details of lives lived on the ground, and from perspectives that reach across borders and countries to encompass such broad and yet-still-contestable concepts as justice, rights, and equity founded in such notions as a shared planet and common humanity are vital if we are to find the wisdom, tolerance, and common ground—as well as the will to action—that we need going forward.

In the end, and in my view, the lessons that history has to teach are more potent for the humility they instill than for the conviction they reinforce. By prompting us to understand people—to wonder why they act as, or hold the beliefs, they do—history, and the essays in this book, open space for humane, positive, and inclusive engagement with contemporary challenges. In bringing these reflections to a close, I would recall two affirmations found in the preceding pages: the first concerns the power of the imagination to shape the world, and the second the need for balance between tradition and change. Considering the difficulties of weaving new narratives in empowering ways, Epprecht embraces Serge Latouche's argument that social reality is the implementation of "imaginary significations," or "representations that mobilize feelings," to urge the value of learning from "older ways

of being in the world to construct . . . a sustainable and just future.”⁵⁶ That, in a nutshell, was the aspiration of Conz’s Mosotho farmer, James Machobane, who recognized, many decades ago, that “the culture of a people must be dynamic while at the same time retaining the best features of tradition.”⁵⁷ We should never cease our efforts to improve the well-being of people on earth, or to ensure the ecological health of our earthly home. Yet as we pursue those dreams, we should recognize how words and deeds that diminish the soul of humankind erode “the variety and richness of the human condition,” and seek to engage (as inclusively, accurately, and respectfully as we are able) the past in all its plural manifestations. For it is only by acknowledging and understanding the varied (and sometimes contradictory) aspirations and achievements, foibles and failures, indignities and injustices of those who came before us that we will find firm foundations upon which to build our better worlds.⁵⁸

Notes

- 1 Yvette Lisa Ndlovu, “Swimming with Crocodiles,” *Kalahari Review*, 25 September 2019, <https://kalaharireview.com/swimming-with-crocodiles-bo1854c91021>.
- 2 Paul Warde, Libby Robin, and Sverker Sörlin, *The Environment: A History of the Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), prologue.
- 3 Warde, Robin, and Sörlin, prologue.
- 4 John Crosbie, quoted in J. Stan Rowe, “Wilderness as Home Place,” in *Home Place: Essays in Ecology* (Edmonton: NeWest Publishers, 1990), 29.
- 5 Warde, Robin, and Sörlin, *Environment*, prologue.
- 6 Warde, Robin, and Sörlin, 4.
- 7 *Naga* (“bush” in Setswana) is discussed in these terms in Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power: Spirit of Resistance; The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 54–60; on the forest, see Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, *Transient Workspaces: Technologies of Everyday Innovation in Zimbabwe* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 23–33.

- 8 Foucault's oeuvre is large and the commentary on it even more extensive; for an introduction, see Gary Gutting and Johanna Oksala, "Michel Foucault," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2019 edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/foucault/>.
- 9 Gutting and Oksala.
- 10 James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).
- 11 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).
- 12 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).
- 13 Susan Eckstein, "Power and Popular Protest in Latin America," in *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements*, ed. Susan Eckstein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 42.
- 14 Sidney Mintz, "The Rural Proletariat and the Problem of Rural Proletarian Class Consciousness," in *Peasants and Proletarians*, ed. Robin Cohen, Peter C., W. Gutkind, and Phyllis Brazier (New York: Monthly Review, 1979), 191; Matthew C. Gutmann, "Rituals of Resistance: A Critique of the Theory of Everyday Forms of Resistance," *Latin American Perspectives* 20, no. 2 (1993): 74–92, usefully reviews these issues.
- 15 This point is taken from David Miller, "Justice," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2017 edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/justice/>. The discussion in the four paragraphs following this note reference also draws heavily from this source.
- 16 The reference is to John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).
- 17 Workineh Kelbessa, "Environmental Justice in Africa," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 9, no. 1 (June 2012): 101.
- 18 These issues are raised in James Sterba, *Justice for Here and Now* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and touched on by Kelbessa, "Environmental Justice in Africa," 100.
- 19 The reference is to Thomas Nagel, "The Problem of Global Justice," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 33, no. 2 (2005): 113–47.

- 20 Christopher D. Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects* (Los Altos, CA: W. Kaufmann, 1974); David R. Boyd, *The Rights of Nature: A Legal Revolution That Could Save the World* (Toronto: ECW, 2017).
- 21 David Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), viii, 35, 39, 167–85, discussed in Kelbessa, “Environmental Justice in Africa,” 100–106.
- 22 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1993).
- 23 “CFP—the Sense of Time in a Hyper-Mobile Digital Age: Nostalgia, Presentism and Hope” (call for papers, 18–20 May 2018, Doshisha University, Kyoto), <https://networks.h-net.org/node/22055/discussions/185522/cfp-sense-time-hyper-mobile-digital-age-nostalgia-presentism-and>.
- 24 Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 233.
- 25 L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: H. Hamilton, 1953), 3; Lynn Hunt, “Against Presentism,” *Perspectives on History* 40, no. 5 (1 May 2002).
- 26 J. Edward Chamberlin, *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories? Finding Common Ground* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2003), 239.
- 27 Jill E. Kelly, *To Swim with Crocodiles: Land, Violence and Belonging in South Africa, 1800–1996* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press; East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019).
- 28 Mwelma C. Musambachime, “The Fate of the Nile Crocodile in African Waterways,” *African Affairs* 86, no. 343 (April, 1987): 197–207.
- 29 Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley, “The Modalities of Nostalgia,” *Current Sociology* 54, no. 6 (November 2006): 919–41.
- 30 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 281.
- 31 David Lowenthal, “Nostalgia Tells It Like It Wasn’t,” in *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*, ed. C. Shaw and M. Chase (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 18–32. See also David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country—Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), and David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade*

- and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 32 *Oxford English and Spanish Dictionary, Synonyms, and Spanish to English Translator*, s.v. “Presentism,” <https://www.lexico.com/definition/presentism>; Howard Schonberger, “Purposes and Ends in History: Presentism and the New Left,” *History Teacher* 7, no. 3 (May 1974): 448–58.
- 33 A. G. Hopkins, “Introduction to the Second Edition,” *An Economic History of West Africa* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 3.
- 34 This greatly abbreviates Hopkins’s elaboration; see Hopkins, introduction and chapter 2, quotes from 8, 9, 53, 54.
- 35 Helge Kjekshus, *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann, 1977; Athens: Ohio University Press, 1996); John Iliffe, “Farm and Fly in Tanganyika,” review of *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History*, by Helge Kjekshus, *Journal of African History* 19 no. 1 (1978): 139–41.
- 36 John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Juhani Koponen, *People and Production in Late Precolonial Tanzania: History and Structures* (Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society, 1988), 22.
- 37 Joseph M. Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007); “misread the African landscape” is a deliberate allusion to James Fairhead and Melissa Leach, *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savanna Mosaic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 38 Joseph M. Hodge, “Colonial Experts, Developmental and Environmental Doctrines, and the Legacies of Late British Colonialism,” in *Cultivating the Colonies: Colonial States and Their Environmental Legacies*, ed. Christina Folke Ax, Niels Brimnes, Niklas Thode Jensen, and Karen Oslund (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), 300–326; E. R. Wicker, “Colonial Development and Welfare, 1929–1957: The Evolution of a Policy,” *Social and Economic Studies* 7, no. 4 (December 1958): 170–92; Helen Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

- 39 Fairhead and Leach, *Misreading the African Landscape*, is a widely noticed exemplar of this approach.
- 40 The most useful compendium of this work is Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns, eds., *The Lie of the Land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), especially the editors' introductory essay, "Environmental Change and Policy: Challenging Received Wisdom in Africa," 1–33; see also Joanne MacGregor, "Environmental Knowledge under Scrutiny," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 20, no. 2 (1994): 319–26. See also Kate B. Showers, *Imperial Gullies: Soil Erosion and Conservation in Lesotho* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), and Kate B. Showers, "A History of African Soil: Perceptions, Use and Abuse," in *Soils and Societies: Perspectives from Environmental History*, ed. John R. McNeill and Verena Winiwarter (Isle of Harris, UK: White Horse, 2006), 118–76. For an introduction to changing scientific perspectives, see Daniel B. Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); M. T. Hoffman and R. M. Cowling, "Vegetation Change in the Semi-arid Eastern Karoo over the Last 200 Years: An Expanding Karoo—Fact or Fiction?," *South African Journal of Science* 86 (July–October 1990): 286–94. See also Jane Carruthers, *National Park Science: A Century of Research in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 41 Nancy Jacobs, "Review of Melissa Leach, Robin Mearns, eds., *The Lie of the Land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment*." H-Africa, H-Net Reviews, January 1999, <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2675>.
- 42 James Giblin and Gregory Maddox, "Introduction, Custodians of the Land: Ecology and Culture in the History of Tanzania," in *Custodians of the Land: Ecology and Culture in the History of Tanzania*, ed. James Giblin, Gregory Maddox, and Isaria N. Kimambo (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1996), 1–14.
- 43 Hopkins, "Introduction to the Second Edition," 4.
- 44 Danielle Evans, *The Office of Historical Corrections: A Novella and Stories* (New York: Penguin Random House / Riverhead Books, 2020).
- 45 Adrienne Westenfeldt, "Danielle Evans on the Necessity—and the Consequences—of Telling the Truth about History," *Esquire*, 10 November 2020.

- 46 Points made also in Evans, *Office of Historical Corrections*.
- 47 Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99.
- 48 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Bernd Reiter, "Introduction," in *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge*, ed. Bernd Reiter (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 10, quoting Sujata Patel "Afterword: Doing Global Sociology: Issues, Problems, and Challenges," *Current Sociology Monograph* 62, no. 4 (2014): 603–13. Also see William San Martin, "Unequal Knowledge: Justice, Colonialism, and Expertise in Global Environmental Research," *Global Environment* 14, no. 2 (2021): 423–30.
- 49 Jìmí Adésínà, "Sociology and Yorùbá Studies: Epistemic Intervention or Doing Sociology in the 'Vernacular,?'" *African Sociological Review* 6, no. 1 (2002): 91–114, discussed by Reiter, *Constructing the Pluriverse*, 5.
- 50 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving toward Africa* (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2012); Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).
- 51 Raewyn Connell, "Meeting at the Edge of Fear: Theory on a World Scale," in Reiter, *Constructing the Pluriverse*, 19–38.
- 52 As, for example, in the compelling overlay of different systems of thought in Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).
- 53 Sandra Harding, "One Planet, Many Sciences," in Reiter, *Constructing the Pluriverse*, 39–62.
- 54 Sandra Harding, *Sciences from Below* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 6, 16.
- 55 Reitner, *Constructing the Pluriverse*; Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta, eds., *Pluriverse: A Post-development Dictionary* (New Delhi: Columbia University Press, 2019). The "tapestry of alternatives" phrase comes from the postscript to Kothari et al.
- 56 Epprecht, this volume p. 295 at note 42.
- 57 Conz, this volume p. 227 at note 24.

- 58 The “variety and richness” idea comes from Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, quoted in Chamberlin, *If This Is Your Land*, 102. An obituary quotes Galeano as saying: “I’m a writer obsessed with remembering, with remembering the past of America above all, and above all that of Latin America, intimate land condemned to forgetfulness.” Richard Gott, “Eduardo Galeano Obituary,” *The Guardian*, 15 April 2015. See also Mark Engler, “The Pan American: The World of Eduardo Galeano,” *The Nation*, 10–17 September 2018.