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**Fragments from the history of loss: the nature industry and the postcolony, by Louise Green, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020, x + 193 pp., US\$99.95, £79.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-271-08701-6**

### **Review by Jasmin Kirkbride**

Via a series of historical fragments in constellations, Louise Green's *Fragments from the History of Loss* argues that the Anthropocene discourse currently redirects attention away from the real problem of ecological crisis, which is not humanity's relation with nature, but people's relations with each other, and the consumption that entails.

Louise Green's previous publications have a strong focus on cultural and communal relationships to the natural environment and built landscape in Africa, particularly South Africa and Cape Town where she lives and works. This is a theme she revisits in *Fragments from the History of Loss*, some chapters from which have previously appeared in *Critical African Studies* (2016) and *Social Dynamics* (2010).

In *Fragments*, Green challenges the prevailing message in the Anthropocene discourse that, to avoid imminent disaster, history should be forgotten in favour of focusing on the present moment. Green repositions the theoretical framing of nature, investigating what the term might mean from the perspective of postcolonial Africa.

The book argues that within contemporary discourse on the environmental crisis, 'nature' has come to represent the 'perfect elsewhere', despite and because of the scrutiny it is subject to (6). Green argues this view neglects how the environmental crisis is embedded within the broader crisis of modernity. In order to illuminate this overwhelming entanglement, Green juxtaposes different orders of knowledge and experience to uncover 'in the most insignificant features of everyday life exemplary fragments of the whole' (7). By adapting the 'constellation' methodology first proposed by Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin and developed in the Frankfurt school, she lays personal anecdotes alongside rigorous theoretical discussions in order to purposefully unsettle the reader's existing viewpoints and approach the details of ecological crisis in a new way.

Green uses the setting of the postcolony, specifically in the African continent, in parataxis to the nature industry, in order to explore their configuration on equal terms. Shying away from the daunting and perhaps impossible prospect of building a 'theory of everything' (13), she instead adopts a subjunctive tone – not to undermine the claims of climate change scientists, but to draw attention to the uncertainty of the future. This uncertainty, she argues, is most pressing and visible in the postcolony, where the fabric of everyday life is increasingly directly affected by ecological crisis yet simultaneously collides with the narrative of development, which in large part promotes consumerist modernity.

The opening chapters explore the concept that consumption is not driven by a need to sustain life, but 'by the network of social practices that define a certain mode of living as valuable' (15). Within this mode, a curious psychic loss of nature is taking place, a 'nostalgia for what is still present but that appears as a shadow of itself' (27).

Green begins by bringing together two natural installations from the American Museum of Natural History in New York and the Eden Project in Cornwall. Using these synecdochic instances of nature in the environmental crisis, she tracks the problems with formulating advice in the face of radical uncertainty and global inequality: scientific language, in verbalising 'the real' in the present moment, fails to 'articulate nature as a complex object, irrevocably entangled in advance with human judgements', both historical and contemporary. This creates a disconnect between the conceptualisation of nature in postcolonial Africa and its complex reality, ultimately making it a symbol of 'exotic, aesthetic fantasy and loss' (51).

From this foundation, Green explores what it means to live in the subjective mood, which defines the temporality of nature in the era of climate change. She cites ‘Anthropocene’ as a term which generates a ‘powerful but vague causal explanation’, an ‘act of naming that at once challenges and paralyses’, a ‘universalising gesture’ (55, 73). This is exemplified within postcolonial Africa, which occupies a peculiar position within the ecological crisis, the details of which are obscured by the broad brushstrokes of geological and global dialogue. To remedy this, Green places the term ‘Anthropocene’ into a historical rather than geological context, focussing on constellations of detail to disrupt the seeming stability of the concept. By doing this, she promotes an acceptance of the condition of living in the subjunctive as an invitation to radically reconsider the technique of life within capitalist modernity, using McKibben’s preoccupation with ‘The End of Nature’ to explore the anxieties therein. She thereby inserts the postcolony into a dialogue from which it is otherwise ejected.

The book’s midsection uses a variety of detailed constellations to illustrate theoretical points. For example, photographs of diamonds are used as ‘testimonies to the everyday fictions that arrange Africa in relation to its natural resources’ (76). Here, Green dislodges diamonds from their position as ornaments, turning them into evidence that anchor the social transactions which constitute their journey. This historical analysis of diamonds before and within the postcolony illustrates the inequalities and complex issues that arise from individuals and groups attempting to take ownership of natural objects. As a social construct and honorific activity mining diamonds is not dissimilar to hunting – both of which illustrate the ‘complex dynamic of scarcity and abundance’ (100). Similarly, Green goes on to analyse the position of the wolf in South African history, using the species as a lens through which to examine nature as a product of history. Through all this, Green demonstrates that the historical concept of ‘an abundance of unaccountably neglected [natural] wealth’ and animal wildness ‘evoked as the source of power and predatory violence in the field of combat’, both still exert pressure on the present, in which ‘the painful scarcity of wild animals signifies wild nature’s imminent disappearance’ (104–105). The nature industry in postcolonial South Africa creates places which act as sites of nature and as repositories for history. Like the Eden Project and the American Museum of Natural History in previous chapters, they embody Foucault’s heterotopia: these places both refer to the past and defend against a future loss.

The final chapters explore the mutant variations of big game breeds for use as hunting trophies. Like the previous heterotopia, these breeds represent wild nature administered and shaped by consumer desire – yet both are also repositories for the preservation of nature. The design category of ‘new safari’ contains and contrasts the contradictory but enmeshed concepts of conserving nature and simultaneously altering it for capitalist gain. By dismantling details of the ‘new safari’, Green shows that here and elsewhere, the nostalgia for nature that imbues this moment in the history of loss is ‘uncomfortably close’ to a nostalgia for ‘capitalist life as we know it’ (149).

In conclusion, Green brings together the inherently disparate fragments of each chapter’s constellation to point to the concerning repetitions of humanity’s approach to nature: it is people’s relationship with each other – the mode of consuming for social approval – that is at fault, not humanity’s relationship with nature. Green argues that consumption has become second nature, and in that consumption is a debt incurred to those who produce the goods, which disproportionately takes place in the postcolony. Conservation in the postcolony is therefore becoming an alleviation of guilt, using nature as an alibi to obfuscate a lack of meaningful change. ‘In the era of mass extinctions, selectively preserving wild nature through making it once again the privilege of the elite changes nothing. It merely repeats the long history of exploit and exploitation’ (149).

Yet Green also identifies a space in the Anthropocene discourse between the individual to be addressed and the human species which should be held responsible – a gap in which society exists, and which is charged with promise.

This book is an extraordinary curation of the relationship between the global nature industry and the postcolony. It embroiders seemingly unrelated moments and places them into a compelling whole, from the extinction of the mammoth and the ironies of a shopping bag promoting the plight of Africa's wild dogs, to personal observations of queuing for water at Cape Town's public fountain and the history of the Land Rover in South Africa. Though the book, as Green admits, by its nature as a series of constellations struggles to conclude, the post-narrative space it opens up unsettles the concepts of nature and naturalness, both within the postcolony and more broadly. In this way it successfully challenges both the social constructs of the current era and the discourse of the Anthropocene.

## References

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