



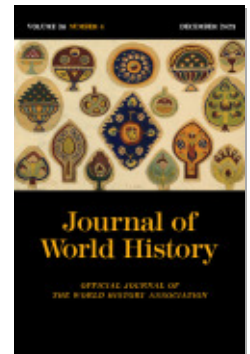
PROJECT MUSE®

Green Lands for White Men: Desert Dystopias and the Environmental Origins of Apartheid by Meredith McKittrick
(review)

Jeff Schauer

Journal of World History, Volume 36, Number 4, December 2025, pp. 655-658 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2025.a984544>



➔ For additional information about this article
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/984544>

Book Reviews

Green Lands for White Men: Desert Dystopias and the Environmental Origins of Apartheid. By MEREDITH MCKITTRICK.
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024. 321 pp. \$32.50.
ISBN 978-0-226-83469-6 (paperback).

In *Green Lands for White Men*, Meredith McKittrick explores a much-debated but unrealized scheme in early-twentieth-century South Africa for the reclamation of the Kalahari Desert. This deceptively straightforward endeavor ultimately interweaves accounts of popular and scientific environmental and climate knowledge, ideas about race and space, and their implications for utopian thinking about futures—local, national, regional, and global alike.

In early-twentieth-century South Africa, White farmers began to claim that the aridity that imposed limits on their ambitions was not an inevitable feature of the environment but the product of climate change. Ernest Schwarz gave them the Kalahari Thirstland Redemption Scheme, which proposed to remake the hydrological landscape of southern Africa, crossing borders and disciplinary boundaries alike to bring the Kalahari to life. The diversion of rivers, the manufacture of rain, and the potential to populate the landscape with settlers were not only answers to farmers' cries for help but also to the desire for "close settlement" by a South African state that found itself up against different demographic challenges than in many other settler colonies.

Two historiographical premises underpin McKittrick's approach to investigating this proposed project. First, that failed futures and unbuilt

projects are worthy—perhaps essential—objects of study because of what they reveal that a more teleological focus on successful or realized projects effaces. And second, that studies of settler colonialism should pay more heed to vernacular knowledge. A focus on white elites papers over the messiness of projects of identity formation and state-building; it misses the constitution of knowledge that, as in southern Africa, was central to the narratives and materiality required for domination and governance. The Kalahari was important because the “disequilibrium ecology” it represented left an opening for vernacular claims about land and climate, undercutting the stability required for so much expert scientific opinion about climate (p. 9).

Schwarz’ scheme is embedded in a much longer history, and McKittrick reveals early settler thinking about the region, precursor projects, and decades-long debates about the scheme itself. Partly chronological, the resulting structure also means that the earlier chapters analyze South African and global settler readings of land, geology, and climate, while subsequent chapters cohere around similar readings of *people* in these landscapes.

South Africans undertook this thinking with an immense range of global reference points in mind—including Central Asia, Argentina, North Africa, California, and Mexico—and with a significant number of global interlocutors. Aridity was, after all, a problem that bedeviled many settler colonial states. So too did the question of what to do with indigenous communities that refused to die. This meant then that South Africans were not just thinking globally in relation to geological and ecological knowledge around climate and hydrology but also about projects of settler agriculture and incessant racist demographic anxiety, albeit as concerned with the spatial distribution of settlers as with their overall numbers.

There is a version of this story that would seek to demonstrate that South Africa’s debates were driven by a maelstrom of global writing and thinking about aridity, climate, and white supremacy. McKittrick’s account, though attentive to the interactions between local and global discussions and politics, avoids this trap through a granular reading of sources, which include South African scientific output, a wide range of government commissions, studies, and debate transcripts, and—most strikingly for McKittrick’s conceptual interventions—both conventional newspapers and agricultural journals and papers.

It is from these latter that arise the discourses of “folk hydrology,” the presence of which would have been impossible in a globally driven account, which would portray South Africans’ thinking about climate, race, and security as purely derivative. The disaggregation of settler

knowledge reveals what farmers thought about the landscapes they claimed and about Schwarz' proposals for that land. This thinking comprised farmers' own records, their decontextualized appropriation of indigenous knowledge, and the power derived from the momentum that narratives gathered as they targeted culpability for the drying out of the region.

Some of this thinking was entirely fanciful, but it nonetheless created the very real possibility of imagining a drastic reengineering of land and waterscapes in a way that prefigured the dystopic social engineering of apartheid. This imagining informed South African political designs on the region, which at various points envisioned the annexation of neighboring British colonies, crossing the borders of Portuguese colonies, and did entail the seizure of what became Namibia as a spoil of the First World War.

McKittrick painstakingly follows debates over and attempts to discredit Schwarz' work, as well as its afterlives. The final chapter traces its influence into diverse apartheid-era projects: large-scale irrigation schemes aimed at Cape farmers, water diversion projects in Ovamboland, and a cross-border intervention—South Africa's involvement in the securitized Cahora Bassa dam project.

McKittrick's focus on the Kalahari scheme lends conceptual and narrative focus to what could otherwise have been a too-sprawling history of climate and environment. I wonder a bit about the representativeness of the texts that serve as the basis for the narrative—but not in relation to their underpinning of McKittrick's trenchant conclusions about the Kalahari scheme and what it tells us. The book's subtitle—"the environmental origins of apartheid"—makes a larger claim for the Kalahari project and the thinking around it. This is certainly *an* origin story of apartheid, but how does it fit into the other environmental thinking and work occurring at the same time in relation to different spaces, other schemes, and other branches of natural and physical science, and the growing body of scholarship on these?

But this is a small quibble. McKittrick concludes with some meditations on the contemporary geopolitics of geoengineering, timely reference to the rise of narratives of "white genocide," and the uneven overlap between lay and scientific knowledge and belief in climate change—then and now. McKittrick's closes with a call to "pay attention to the imaginaries that underlie people's political commitments, and explore connections between seemingly unrelated beliefs to see what forms of popular knowledge and visions of the future reveal themselves" (p. 249).

In *Green Lands for White Men*, McKittrick not only offers a sophisticated reading of social and environmental knowledge systems and their implications for climate (in)action and racial (in)justice, but also a conceptual model and methodological tools for undertaking this complex task in a way that acknowledges global entanglements and convergences while remaining true to the local constructions of worldviews and policymaking. *Green Lands for White Men* marks a compelling intervention in environmental histories of different scales but also feels eerily yet usefully urgent in our contemporary political moment.

JEFF SCHAUER

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

The Petro-state Masquerade: Oil, Sovereignty, and Power in Trinidad and Tobago. By RYAN CECIL JOBSON. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024. 240 pp. \$27.50 (paper). ISBN 9780226837277.

In *The Petro-state Masquerade*, anthropologist Ryan Cecil Jobson explores how claims of sovereignty in Trinidad and Tobago have long been tied to the fantasy of inexhaustible fossil fuel resources. This claim props up a masquerade of state power—a performance that projects permanence even as its energetic foundations erode. Blending archival and ethnographic research, Jobson chronicles moments when the “masquerade of permanence is threatened by external market shocks and grassroots insurgencies” (p. 26) from the labor rebellions of the 1930s to contemporary protests against highway construction.

In a theoretically rich and lyrical text, Jobson attends to Caribbean repertoires of critique to theorize sovereignty from the perspective of those “made redundant by the decline of oil as a pathway to mobility beyond the plantation” (p. 174). The “masquerade” is foremost among these concepts. Dating back to 1834, when enslaved Africans donned military and naval garb in the first Carnival, the people’s keen mockery of state power serves as the central register for apprehending its illusory qualities (pp. 21–22). Jobson’s meditation on sovereignty as performance—shaped not through institutional coherence but spectacle, improvisation, and projection—offers a vital corrective to universalist theories of state formation and development. This makes the book especially compelling for globally minded historians, who will find in Trinidad and Tobago not a marginal case but a generative site for