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Steeped in Heritage: The Racial Politics of South African Rooibos Tea

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BOOK REVIEWS

Steeped in Heritage: The Racial Politics of South African Rooibos Tea

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REVIEWED BY SARAH BRADLEY

Have you ever tried to read tealeaves? A simple pinch of loose tea, drained of water, offers a myriad of complex meanings ready to be interpreted. In her ethnography *Steeped in Heritage: The Racial Politics of South African Rooibos Tea*, Sarah Ives does the work for us. She takes us from rooibos plants (*Aspalathus linearis*) in hot, South African soil all the way to the teapot, covering hundreds of years of racial politics on the way. Rooibos has made it to Western markets, but not without being strained through a veil of exoticism and semantic politics. It is marketed as a pure and indigenous product, stripped of the layers of contextualization and historical meaning. Ives returns our attention to how such a product does not exist in isolation but is actually emblematic of thousands of years of plant-human interactions, with associated consequences for its cultivators.

The leaves of the rooibos plant are used to make an herbal tea known best for its red hue and earthy, hibiscus-like flavor. Before harvesting, the bushy plant is composed of green needle-like leaves that resemble rosemary. As Ives describes, the physicality of the rooibos plant itself is characteristic of the importance of place to this singular bush. Its narrow leaves are carefully adapted to the hot, dry

weather. It grows so easily in South Africa that it is indistinguishable from surrounding weeds to the untrained eye and thrives when left to its own devices. Ives describes how rooibos blends seamlessly into the surrounding landscape, a landscape that it has been a part of since it was first cultivated by a tribe of South African Bushmen called the Khoisans, and then “rediscovered” by white Afrikkans farmers centuries later.

As Ives discusses, the very indigeneity of the rooibos plant is the reason for the complex racial politics surrounding it. The plant is primarily cultivated by two groups that cannot easily fit into discussions of South African indigeneity: “white Afrikaans,” descended from the European colonizers, and “coloured” South Africans with mixed heritage that may include European, Khoisan, or black slave ancestors. Ives describes these racial groups as “trapped in a liminal state – neither unequivocally African nor European” and yet still resolutely tied to the deeply native rooibos plant upon which they depend (4).

The multiple roles embodied by farmers and consumers of rooibos are the topic of Chapter One, where Ives begins by describing the stakeholders involved in rooibos farming and how they grapple with competing concepts of authenticity. For example, she explains that coloured farmers are often hesitant to claim an indigenous identity (despite its historical ties to rooibos farming as a Khoisan commodity), because of the danger of embodying a native identity in South Africa. The enduring legacy of Apartheid politics are still woven into concepts of self-hood for many South Africans. Coloured farmers find themselves caught between claiming an indigenous connection to rooibos, while simultaneously resisting enduring narratives about race and worth in South African society.

Chapter Two brings the reader into the dry, hot summers of South Africa. Using a material approach articulated by Meskell (2004) and Miller (2008), Ives centers the object, rooibos, as a subject in

conversation with human subjects. “Rooibos started from the wild,” Ives emphasizes, but its cultivation is what places the plant at the center of an intersectional racial and political history (65). Using the concept of symbiopolitics, adopted from Stefan Helmreich (2009), Ives draws parallels between the management of rooibos plants and the management of racialized bodies. Readers of biopolitics will appreciate the discussion of who has the right to be human, who belongs to the landscape, and who is entitled to manage both human and non-human bodies in South Africa (Burchell 2008).

Who defines authenticity, and how can a person be both indigenous and alien? Chapters Three extends Ives’ discussion of South African identity politics by finding similarities between the idea of invasive plant species and alien peoples, in this case, black Africans. Beinart and Middleton’s (2004) concept of “plant imperialism” is central to Ives’ argument. The ecosystem becomes a placeholder for the nation state, with both described as regions with borders and histories that must be protected from invaders and infestations. This chapter gives more attention to physical space as a player in both racial and ecological histories. Great anxiety is felt by informants who see both their cultural and ecological landscapes being influenced by non-native “others.” While effectively discussed, Ives misses an opportunity here to explicitly engage with recent multispecies ethnography literature that could trace the subjectivity of all humans and plants involved (see Kirksey and Helmreich 2010).

Building on the arguments introduced in Chapter Three, South Africa’s colonial history plays a key role in Chapter Four. History itself becomes difficult to define: whose history is central to a nationalist identity? How far back does national history extend? Those with an understanding of imperial history will find familiar questions in this chapter of how heritage is defined and by who, framed again in the context of the rooibos commodity chain. This chapter extends popular anthropological arguments about the impact of neoliberal economic

politics on notions of belonging (see Escobar 2011). However, important attention is given to the concept that, like plants, historical narratives are living, dynamic, and growing (Malkki 1995). A cultivated history will grow stronger than one that is neglected.

Chapter Five of this book brings us out of the fields and into the market with a consideration of rooibos as a commodity, a commodity that is both deeply related to heritage, but with the same Marxian potential to produce an industry that alienates the producers from the outcomes of their labor (Marx 1972). Ives argues that this sense of alienation can be traced back to the apartheid era and the sense of national uncertainty that followed. Ives explains that the very commodification of rooibos’ indigenous identity exemplifies deeper anxieties about cultural and social belonging. This chapter revisits many of the themes introduced in earlier parts of the book, but on the distribution and market level of the rooibos industry. No product is free from the entrapment of commodity fetishism, especially one with cultural value. Ives effectively introduces the contestations that can occur when a product marketed by white Afrikaans farmers is produced by the labor of black and brown bodies, with both populations claiming historical ties to the rooibos plant itself.

If there is one ingredient missing from Ives’ work, it is a thorough engagement with a commodity chain approach in her discussion of rooibos cultivation. Ives does give credit to Mintz’s use of the approach in his discussion of sugar production (Mintz 1986). Ives claims to be re-centering and extending this approach to focus on the relationality between plant and human. However, much could have been gained from also giving appropriate time to the “process and the movement of the thing,” as she puts it (9). Doing so would have more powerfully centered rooibos production within the international and global neoliberal framework.

Ives’ book is best enjoyed with a freshly brewed pot of rooibos: the simple outcome of a complex history

of plant-human interactions and entangled with political, economic, and environmental struggles over land. This book itself is an easy read, diffusing a long history into an easily digestible conversation without losing intricacy, making this a suitable read for both academic and popular audiences. Academicians may find the arguments repetitive, but this reviewer finds that revisiting the same issues makes involved arguments more accessible to a broader audience. The ethnographic details make the rooibos farms tangible and will lead the reader to reconsider how their patterns of consumption are part of a long history. Ives' book is likely to be of interest to any scholar interested in anthro-ecological interactions, racial politics, questions of self-hood and belonging, or simply interested in finding meaning in the tealeaves left at the bottom of their cup.

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