

# Disarranging Narrative

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*Review of:*

Louise Green, *Fragments from the History of Loss: The Nature Industry and the Postcolony*. AnthroScene: The SLSA Book Series. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020. x + 193 pp. 7 b&w illus. \$29.95 (pb), \$112.95 (hb).

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In this important contribution to critical scholarship on anthropogenic climate change and the pervasive reach and effects of late capitalism, Louise Green draws centrally on the work of Frankfurt School critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno. Famously, Adorno's conceptualization of the culture industry drew culture into the ambit of capitalism, theorizing culture's diminishing capacity to offer critique and autonomy in the late modern world. In this scenario, Green points out, nature retained a residue of utopian promise. Although Adorno put pressure on nature's absolute difference with his conception of natural history, Green pushes this further, naming the consumption of nature in the Capitalocene the nature industry.

Seeking to undo the abstract and universalizing dimensions of the notion of the Anthropocene, Green insists on the specificities of the postcolony—a term she draws from Achille Mbembe's writing to obstruct the Anthropocene's imperializing claims. She points to Mbembe's insistence on complex temporalities which disavow the forward or linear movement of colonialism and its "posts", and to his focus on power and violence which produce "fragments of common experience" (19) among African subjects. Green centres histories of economic extraction and environmental damage to which the African continent has been subjected. Aware as she is of the complex issue of speaking of the continent at large—hence her attraction to fragments of commonality—it remains a tension that much of her book focuses on constellations (another Adornian motif) taken from South Africa.

Green argues that we must approach the Anthropocene historically in the first instance rather than geologically. This is an important call, and one she unfolds in striking ways across the book, placing the nature industry and the postcolony in analytical constellation. She points to the difficulties of building an analysis that is attuned to the specificities and localities of historical and environmental harm in a time of planetary scale climate crisis. Crucial as a historicist methodology is, a latent incommensurability remains, as Chakrabarty and others have pointed out, in the face of worlds that are not only

nonhuman but indifferent to human-centred concerns. Green follows the work of Eric Swyngedouw in arguing that it is less the loss of nature than the loss of capitalist life as we know it that seems to be a subtext of many discourses on the Anthropocene (55, 59). This leads Green to argue that the Anthropocene should be viewed less an epoch and more as a historical period. Here Africa's ongoing association with nature rather than history carries deep paradoxes and complexities that Green is adept at laying open for analysis.

One result of the above, Green argues, is that it is still possible "to talk about the whole world and not to talk about Africa" (73). On the one hand this is, of course, correct: the degree to which Euro-America reproduces willful ignorance in relation to the complexity and capacity for deep thought and theoretical imagination on the continent, is astounding. On the other, I would have liked to see more African and Africa-based scholarship in Green's bibliography, precisely as the work of undoing the ongoing hegemonies of Northern imaginations of Africa. I thought the book needed a broader engagement with South and Southern African scholarship in cultural studies and critical theoretical analysis (some of which Green gestures at but does not independently reference) and which of course is richly analytically and politically complex.

This points to a question about what is gained and what is lost, perhaps, by the deep focus on Adorno's work as a methodology, vantage point, politics and even tone and mood. While Adorno's use of constellation as method is important for this book and put to excellent use by Green, I often thought that the copious chapter epigraphs and long stretches of extrapolation of other aspects of Adorno's work detracted from Green's arguments which are either capable of standing on their own terms or could have drawn on wider contemporary sources.

Across the chapters, Green draws together historical incidents, artistic projects, consumer choices and cultural phenomena as constellations into which imperial narratives continue to surface. Chapter Two analyses two exhibits in North American and UK museums: a piece of rainforest from the Central African Republic and an artificially

created biome. Close readings of these living exhibits reveal how climate crisis is emerging in global imaginations, specifically as an object of nostalgia — and how processes of extraction of African materials and environments are concealed via abstract discourses of its natural worlds. This is followed by a largely conceptual chapter on cultures of consumption and the ways in which commodities manufacture both value and distinction: consumer objects are bracingly read as “charged particles” (69) transmitting status in the circuits of global inequality — and causing planetary environmental unsustainability.

Chapters Four and Five offer the strongest interventions in the book. In the first, Green puts together a constellation which deliberately “disarranges” (75) historical narratives about diamond mining in South Africa. Against the smoothness of the finished and polished consumer products that diamonds become, Green reclaims the “abrasive” (75) roughness of diamonds as extracted raw materials in order to rub against colonizing histories which appropriate nature as wealth in the colony. Using photographic fragments, she analyses the compound system on diamond mining sites which were used to police who could accumulate and own diamonds as natural resources. The site of diamond extraction, she argues, had to be carefully managed so that black diggers were alienated from the natural resource whose abundance had to be concealed, lest it be seen to hold out more egalitarian distribution across race. Nature, Green shows, is violently contested despite the diamond’s mythification as a rarefied and precious commodity, one from which the point of extraction has to be excised.

If a disarranged reading of diamonds points to their predatory extraction by a colonial elite, Green’s next focus, equally disarranging, is on predatory animals, specifically wolves. In this constellation, which draws on the Tsitsikamma wolf sanctuary in South Africa’s Eastern Cape, Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings on chemical and biological warfare programmes during apartheid, border war memoirs and a reflection of the Nazi cult of the wolf, Green reads for the production of nature, specifically wild animals, as an

ally in war. She explores how the wolves were bred as hybrids with domestic dogs and weaponized as a source of predatory violence against black insurgents in apartheid's border war. The wolves, she considers, are an anomaly in dominant discourses of environmentalism — neither an appropriation of nature in the postcolony nor disappearing species in the age of extinction. What they point to, rather, is an insistent historical reading — specifically, to fragments of a history of loss with which this book is centrally concerned. The history of weaponization in war they carry with them powerfully haunts the rehabilitation that the sanctuary wishes to provide. Attendant on that history, too, is their agential animal capacities: Green's reading of the memoirs by ex-soldiers included in the chapter, draws out the ways in which the wolves remained a law unto themselves, despite human attempts to control and use them.

These chapters are where this book is at its best. I found that the turn in the final chapter to private game reserves in South Africa as sites of the nature industry and vectors of white masculinity was less of an original and compelling intervention. Drawing on Adorno's valuable insight that such places of apparent preservation of nature indicate its loss rather than its recovery, Green shows that while private reserves attempt to pit wild Africa against modern consumerism, they are full of things: 4x4s, the over-designed lodge, the trophy hunt in which different animals carry different value.

Green's analysis across the book at large is sharp, her prose cool and composed, her reach convincingly historical, and this is an important addition to work in the environmental humanities that is situated, analytically nuanced, and compellingly argued.