

Meredith McKittrick, *Green Lands for White Men: Desert Dystopias and the Environmental Origins of Apartheid*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2024, 321 p.

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Mise en ligne : janvier 2026

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.51185/journals/rhca.2026.cr06>

Green Lands for White Men: Desert Dystopias and the Environmental Origins of Apartheid by Meredith McKittrick delves into a subtle yet pervasive form of fear¹. This fear does not manifest through dramatic events or crises but rather through the persistent anxiety that arises when the land fails to meet expectations, rain becomes unpredictable, and political stability feels uncertain. By exploring the early 20th-century white settler concerns about environmental degradation, McKittrick provides a fresh perspective on the prehistory of apartheid.

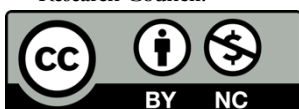
Environmental anxiety as political language

It is through environmental fear that McKittrick reconstructs the early foundations of settler authority. The book intentionally diverges from the typical subjects of South African historiography. It avoids courtrooms, factory floors, and bureaucratic blueprints of apartheid policy. Instead, McKittrick starts on the farm, amidst drought, and within the persistent settler belief that South Africa was "drying out." This belief was widespread among white farmers, agricultural experts, and state officials, influencing how environmental change was perceived and how political demands were articulated. Environmental decline became a language through which white settlers expressed grievances, defended their entitlements, and justified state intervention.

Central to the book is the Kalahari Thirstland Redemption Scheme, first introduced in 1920 by geologist Ernest Schwarz. Rather than examining the unrealised physical transformation of the Kalahari, McKittrick concentrates on the ways that imagined environmental possibilities influenced political claims, prompted state involvement, and shaped racial policies. The scheme proposed rerouting rivers that flowed to the ocean so they would run back inland, with the goal of boosting rainfall and turning the Kalahari Desert into productive farmland for concentrated white settlement. These ambitions were driven more by settler anxieties about drought and unpredictable weather patterns than by issues of land shortage. Although the idea was repeatedly scrutinised and criticised by scientific authorities and government reviews, it was eventually dismissed and never put into practice. Yet McKittrick's key argument is that the scheme's failure is precisely what gives it historical significance, helping to explain its lasting impact.

The scheme was significant not because it was practical, but because it fulfilled an emotional and political

¹ This work was supported by the European Union through the European Research Council, AFREXTRACT, project number 101039920. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council.



need within white farming communities. White farmers revisited Schwarz's proposal over the years, discussing it in agricultural journals, sharing it through farming networks, and treating it as a serious solution to drought. McKittrick shows that these discussions were neither odd nor marginal. They reveal a settler society struggling with a crisis of legitimacy. Drought threatened more than just agricultural productivity; it endangered the moral narrative that justified white settlement.

White rural identity in South Africa was built on the principles of endurance, mastery, and improvement. Settlers saw themselves as individuals who transformed harsh land into productive areas through discipline and effort. Periodic drought and short-term agricultural stress were real, but claims of long-term environmental deterioration were largely a matter of perception and remained contested. However, when the land seemed to resist these efforts, with crops failing and grazing areas thinning, the authority of this narrative began to weaken. Environmental decline started to act as an accusation. If the land was deteriorating, settlers might be to blame in the eyes of state and scientific experts. This possibility was intolerable.

One of the book's most notable insights is its argument that environmental crises were political issues before they were seen as technical ones. White farmers did not just view drought as a weather event; they saw it as a threat to their legitimacy. Over time, scientific experts began to blame land degradation on overstocking, erosion, and poor farming practices. These explanations suggested accountability and required changes in behaviour. Schwarz's scheme provided a different perspective. Schwarz, who was trained as a geologist rather than an agricultural scientist, worked mostly outside the formal structures of the state, positioning himself as an independent authority prepared to dispute the conclusions of officialdom. It framed environmental decline as a geological or climatological issue, driven by forces beyond human control. In this view, settlers were not the culprits but the victims.

McKittrick excels at reconstructing the intellectual environments where these ideas circulated. Agricultural journals emerge as vital intellectual spaces where white farmers discussed rainfall, hydrology, and environmental change. These discussions blur the lines between expert science and popular belief. Farmers developed their own theories, challenged state expertise, and used local forms of evidence, as when they published rainfall histories and observations of dry riverbeds in agricultural journals to challenge government scientists who dismissed claims of long-term desiccation (pg. 169-170). Authority was contested rather than assumed. Science is portrayed not as a unified voice of truth, but as a fragmented and politicised field shaped by anxiety as much as by evidence.

While the book acknowledges the diversity of knowledge systems, it does not idealise this plurality. The debates McKittrick reconstructs were racially exclusive. African individuals are present in the archives as sources of observation and labour, but rarely in ways that allow their knowledge to serve as independent political or epistemic authority. African accounts of past rainfall or landscape changes were selectively cited, stripped of context, and used to support white claims. Africans were included in environmental and political discourse as demographic facts and objects of fear rather than as claim-makers with political standing. McKittrick further demonstrates how such exclusion was perpetuated through routine practices and forward-looking visions that kept the Black majority largely invisible, except in their capacity as a workforce (p. 107- 108, p. 134).

McKittrick does not view the limited visibility of African perspectives as a mere absence to be corrected. Instead, she treats it as historical evidence. The colonial administration did not simply ignore African viewpoints; it actively shaped the conditions under which African knowledge could appear, circulate, and be authorised. As McKittrick notes, "the Black majority was once again invisible," as environmental debates authorised white men alone as both agents of degradation and agents of repair (p. 142). The archive is not just incomplete; it is structured by power.

One of the book's quieter strengths is its methodological restraint. Instead of speculating about African subjectivity beyond what the archive can support, McKittrick reveals the mechanisms that made such absence seem normal. Silence serves a purpose. It allows fear to spread without accountability. It enables white settlers to see themselves as environmental victims rather than beneficiaries of conquest. Environmental explanations become a moral technology.

From environmental concerns to racial governance

As environmental concerns solidified, it began to operate not only as explanation, but as governance. Throughout the book, whiteness is portrayed not as a position of confidence but as a fragile project that requires constant reinforcement. The recurring themes of redemption schemes, conservation fantasies, and back-to-the-land movements reflect insecurity rather than control. Hydroengineering and social engineering are shown as intertwined aspirations. The idea is that by repairing the land, the social order will stabilise. McKittrick demonstrates how this rationale served to present segregation as a sensible response to environmental strain—casting racial separation as a necessary step for land conservation, water protection, and the safeguarding of white rural livelihoods, rather than as an overtly ideological policy.

This intervention is particularly important when viewed within the broader context of apartheid historiography. Much of the existing literature has focused on the legal codification of racial differences, urban labour control, or the political economy of segregation. In these narratives, the countryside often appears as a backdrop rather than a driving force, and environmental conditions are seen as context rather than causation. McKittrick challenges this distinction. By treating environmental anxiety as a significant political force, she demonstrates how apartheid emerged not only from planning and coercion but also from a fear that learned to articulate itself through the language of the land. McKittrick illustrates this process through the rhetoric employed by agricultural and governmental authorities, citing, for example, the chair of the Drought Commission's stark warning that unchecked soil erosion would spell "national suicide"—a term specifically referring to the white population—and highlighting how agricultural leaders consistently linked water conservation, tree planting, and initiatives like the Kalahari Scheme to the very preservation of white society (p. 103).

McKittrick's contribution becomes even more evident when considered alongside related South African scholarship that she does not directly address. While McKittrick does not engage with this scholarship directly, placing her work in conversation with it brings to light common concerns about how expertise, authority, and the routines of daily life entrench inequality. Lesley Green's critique of environmental expertise highlights how scientific authority in South Africa often marginalises alternative ways of knowing while presenting itself as neutral and technical². McKittrick's findings resonate with this concern, showing how settler environmental claims acted as an early epistemic filter, determining which forms of knowledge could carry political weight.

Similarly, the relationship McKittrick explores between anxiety and authority aligns with Bill Freund's work on technocratic governance and the rise of expertise as a mode of political legitimacy.³ In McKittrick's analysis, technical solutions to environmental decline often emerge not from empirical certainty but from settler insecurity. Expertise becomes a response to fear rather than its antidote.

When read alongside Achille Mbembe's reflections on the ordinary and administrative nature of domination, the book underscores how power frequently operates through routine practices that make inequality seem reasonable, necessary, and difficult to contest.⁴ Environmental management, in this sense, functions less as a set of policies and more as a way of ordering the world.

The book's transnational perspective further bolsters this argument. South African discussions about desiccation and irrigation are placed within broader settler colonial networks that included the American West, Australia, and parts of Latin America. In these regions, environmental engineering consistently served as a tool to maintain hierarchy while delaying redistribution. This comparative approach prevents South Africa from being seen as an exception and highlights a common settler language of environmental fear.

In contemporary South Africa, the patterns identified by McKittrick remain analytically instructive precisely because they are reactivated by talks around land redistribution. As the state pursues legally grounded efforts to address historical dispossession, white landholders – mostly farmers and their advocates increasingly frame these initiatives as environmental and economic threats⁵. Claims that agricultural collapse will follow land reform,

² Green Lesley (2020), *Rock | Water | Life. Ecology and Humanities for a Decolonial South Africa*, Durham, Duke University Press.

³ Freund Bill (2007), *The African City: A History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Mbembe Achille (2001), *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

⁵ See Acharya, B., & Winning, A.. "South Africa's Ramaphosa to engage Trump over aid suspension", Reuters, 3rd February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-africas-ramaphosa-engage-trump-over-aid-suspension-2025-02-03/>. Imray, G., "The South

that food security depends on white stewardship, or that Zimbabwe offers a cautionary precedent do not emerge spontaneously⁶. They arise in direct response to redistribution. In this framing, fear becomes expertise, and anxiety is presented as foresight. Environmental concern is mobilised to contest redistribution without naming its historical cause, recasting structural redress as collective risk. Invocations of Zimbabwe function less as historical analysis than as rhetorical devices through which white insecurity is projected outward and socialised as a national concern. The point is not to draw crude comparisons, but to highlight structural continuity. As in McKittrick's account, environmental crisis once again becomes a means of rendering inequality prudent, reasonable, and necessary rather than contested and political.

McKittrick's final chapters make it clear that apartheid did not create this logic; it inherited and formalised it. Long before segregation became law, environmental crises had already made inequality understandable and defensible. Drought was seen as evidence of moral failure, conservation became a tool for discipline, and water distribution followed power rather than need. Environmental management justified racial order while presenting itself as politically neutral.

Green Lands for White Men is not without its limitations. Readers seeking extensive African perspectives may find the archive challenging, as McKittrick herself acknowledges. Others might desire a deeper exploration of African environmental practices beyond their depiction in settler discourse. These are valid expectations, yet they also highlight how thoroughly colonial knowledge systems influenced what could be documented, preserved, and recognised as history. The book's limitations are not due to a lack of imagination but are a reflection of historical realities.

What ultimately sets this book apart is its analytical rigor. McKittrick follows a single concept, environmental decline, and traces how it circulates, evolves, and persists even after its scientific foundations have been discredited. McKittrick does not deny the reality of drought or agricultural stress but shows how episodic environmental difficulty was transformed into claims of long-term and irreversible decline. The Kalahari Scheme fails as an engineering project but succeeds as a governing principle. Its legacy can be seen in conservation policies, irrigation planning, and apartheid-era water infrastructure. This is not a history of ecological misjudgement; it is a history of how the claims to the environment made coercion seem justifiable.

This is not a comforting book. It offers no solutions and no clear villains. It demonstrates how fear learned to speak through land and climate, and how that language organised power in South Africa. For scholars of environmental history, settler colonialism, and South African politics, *Green Lands for White Men* provides not only a reinterpretation of apartheid's origins but also a warning about the enduring political life of environmental crises.

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⁶ Chironda, M., "South Africa: Land Expropriation Bill sparks heated debate, misinformation online », *AllAfrica*, 19th February 2025, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202502190369.html>

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