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Environmental apartheid: Eco-health and rural marginalization in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

South Africa's infamous apartheid policies were not based on social, political, and economic injustice alone. They were also instituted environmentally with consequences that continue to scar the land and its people today. We offer the term *environmental apartheid* to refer to the use of the rural environment to deliberately marginalize racially defined groups, as well as the subsequent consequences of that marginalization. In the case of South Africa, the paradigmatic example of apartheid, environmental apartheid was largely instituted through *rural marginalization*, the use of rural space as an environmental means of marginalization. Although legal apartheid is over, environmental apartheid and its consequences continue to oppress Black South Africans, with devastating implications for their health, livelihoods, and ecological integrity. We illustrate these rural injustices through a case study of KuManzimdaka, a community of smallholder farmers on communal land in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province.

1. Introduction

Resilient. That's the first word that comes to mind when meeting Mildred Ncapayi, known in her community as MamBhele. She will shake your hand with a firm squeeze and a calloused palm. While her colorful red skirt and bright eyes might suggest an easier life, tilling the earth and working with her hands is the glue that holds together her meager possessions and extended but tight-knit family. Near MamBhele's *kraal* – the corral for her small herd of sheep and cattle – chickens scurry to and fro as someone sprinkles maize. Behind the house, potatoes and cabbages emerge like jewels from the crusty red soil. Here, MamBhele plants vegetables, along with other women from the small cooperative she organized.

MamBhele lives in a section of KuManzimdaka, a village of about 300 people in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province. Positioned atop high bluffs at the base of the Drakensberg Mountains, KuManzimdaka rests among vast rolling pastures. Warm summer breezes brush miles of lush grassland, dotted with traditional amaQwathi huts and cattle grazing under the seemingly endless South African sky. Women collect water and firewood. Young boys herd cattle along ridges, and you can just make out the sound of a hoe striking the ground in someone's home garden. The pandemonium of modern South Africa seems far removed from this intoxicating calm.

Such a quick snapshot, however, obscures stark realities. Hundreds of *dongas* – the local word for erosion gullies – wound KuManzimdaka's green pasturelands, chiseling red gashes deep into the soil. The sward on the pastures is short, patchy, and increasingly overtaken by water-sucking invasive species, especially black wattle. A hard pan crusts the land's surface, baked beneath the over-grazed and often dry grass. Rainfall runs off the thirsty ground, and streams are brown with soil that used to be on the hills. Local springs and wells yield little or not at all. And the people are poor, terribly poor. Unemployment is rampant, as is malnutrition. Some 12 percent of the province suffers from HIV/AIDS, including nearly 20 percent of adults (Shisana et al., 2014). Household vegetable gardens sit neglected and abandoned. Crop ground lies fallow or sprouts only patchy rows of stunted maize.

It's not a pretty picture. And it didn't come about accidentally. South Africa's legacy of apartheid is well known, if still not well

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understood. In this paper, we contribute to a better understanding by examining the intertwined ecological, social, and health implications of what we term *environmental apartheid* and by showing the instrumental role of rural space in the implementation of South Africa's inequalities. These inequalities are not only social, political, and economic; they are also environmental. Social injustice and environmental injustice feed on each other in a continuing cycle of immiseration of people and land.

By environmental apartheid we mean *the deliberate use of the environment to marginalize racially defined groups*, as well as the subsequent consequences of that marginalization. We present South Africa as the paradigmatic example of environmental apartheid, investigating the use of the environment in the apartheid government's efforts to marginalize the majority of the population. Our focus will be on the use of rural space as an environmental means for marginalizing groups, what we term *rural marginalization*. As we will show, the apartheid government of South Africa wielded rural space as a means to deny most South Africans their political rights, relegate them to the least healthy and least productive ecological contexts, and leave them economically dependent upon distant White-owned capital. This forced many South Africans into slave-like employment in faraway mines and factories, as well as in services for whites.

Environmental apartheid is a manifestation of the more general phenomenon of environmental racism, which we define as Bullard (2001) did: "any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color." Environmental racism, then, is a critical term that highlights environmental framings which disproportionally negatively affect people of color (Dickinson, 2012) and advantage whites (Bullard, 2001).

The conventional use of the term environmental racism points out the environmental abuse of a racially-defined marginalized group. Environmental apartheid is the reverse logic of power. It commits environmental abuse *in order to* marginalize a racially defined group. As stated above, environmental apartheid is not accidental. Moreover, in practice the two logics – environmental abuse of the racially marginalized and environmental abuse in order to racially marginalize – often work in consort to varying degrees. In this sense, environmental apartheid is both cause and consequence.

Many aspects of the environment might potentially be made use of in environmental apartheid. In the case of South Africa, marginalizing forces mobilized a variety of facets of the environment to implement apartheid, keeping Black South Africans apart from the resources of livelihood, well-being, and political power. Our focus here, though, is on the use of the rural to marginalize racially defined peoples. We trace the nesting of three levels of rural marginalization, what we term *first order*, *second order*, and *third order* rural marginalization. By first order rural marginalization, we mean the forcible location of Black South Africans in rural spaces distant from the economic and cultural advantages controlled by Whites. By second order rural marginalization, we mean how Black South Africans were generally relegated to the worst lands within these distant rural spaces. Lastly, by third order rural marginalization we mean the continued isolation and neglect of Black South Africans within first and second order rural marginalization. These three orders of rural marginalization have had major eco-health implications, continuing consequences that cannot be separated from an understanding of the social, political, and economic repercussions of apartheid policies.

This paper explores environmental apartheid through a case study of KuManzimdaka where we have been working since 2011 on a participatory approach to agroecological development. First, we frame our argument in the historical roots of apartheid in South Africa, exemplified by colonial enforcement of the three orders of rural marginalization. Second, we explore how this foundation of rural marginalization led to the official policy of apartheid and its deepening shadow. Third, we step back to consider what the evidence for rural marginalization suggests for a theoretical understanding of the relationship between apartheid and the environment. Fourth, we explore the interrelationship between the material and symbolic powers of rural marginalization, and how that interrelationship often results in "blaming the victims" of environmental apartheid. Next, we present the methods and context for our case study and dive into the specifics of KuManzimdaka. We include an introduction to several important people living in the area and the eco-health consequences of environmental apartheid. We then also include an assessment of the rural and urban consequences of environmental apartheid. Ultimately, we contend that recognizing the enduring power of the rural (M. M. Bell et al., 2010), for both good and ill, helps us understand why the inequalities of environmental apartheid often seem to last and last, and what we might do about them.

2. The roots of apartheid and the three orders of rural marginalization

Although sometimes seen as a mid-twentieth century offense, apartheid has old roots. Ever since colonization, South Africa has faced severe racial tension. In 1652, the Dutch East India Company established the Cape Colony at the site of what is now Cape Town as a kind of refueling station for its ships in need of food and water to make it all the way to the East Indies and back. Six years later, the first boatload of slaves arrived with captives from Benin and Angola. The Dutch settlers did not enslave the local Khoikhoi and San peoples much, recognizing that locally-derived slaves can easily escape back to their home communities. But the Dutch treated them brutally just the same, considering them a sub-caste, while steadily expanding White farms and grazing north into the lands of the native peoples. By the mid-eighteenth century, the Dutch had taken control of nearly all the agriculturally productive lands of the Khoikhoi and San. Further north, the Bantu-speaking peoples resided, including the two largest groups: the more warlike amaZulu and the amaXhosa. In the late eighteenth century, the Dutch advance into those lands began as well (Thompson, 2014).

Then in 1795, the surging British Empire swept into the Cape Colony and forced the Dutch to capitulate. In the decades to follow, the British also swept north, especially along the east coast, forcing back the Bantu speaking people onto ever higher and ever less desirable ground, through a series of bloody wars. Dutch "voortrekkers," however, disgruntled with British rule, preceded the British in vanquishing the local people in the dryer lands in the interior. The British were initially content to let the Dutch – who were coming to be known as the Afrikaners – have the interior. But between 1866 and 1886, a series of discoveries made plain the region's wealth of diamonds and gold, attracting British interest. The ensuing British-Afrikaner conflict culminated in Britain's victory in the South African War of 1899–1902, and the founding of the modern South African state – albeit as a unit of the British Empire, subject to legal override by the British parliament (Thompson, 2014).

After the war, white farmers returned to the business of developing and expanding their properties. They received a mighty boost with the passage of the Natives Land Act of 1913 which banned "any person, male or female, who is a member of an aboriginal race or tribe of Africa" from owning or renting land in 93 percent of South Africa (Thompson, 2014; Wotshela, 2004). The Natives Land Act