

Conserved spaces, ancestral places: conservation, history and identity among farm labourers in the Sundays River Valley, South Africa, by Teresa Connor, Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2014, 232 pp., ZAR 275 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-86914-285-8.

Teresa Connor provides an ethnographic examination of farm labourers living in the Sunday Rivers Valley in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa and considers the history of forced removals and dislocations of particular categories of people in the construction of the Addo Elephant National Park (AENP). A key theme that threads through the book is the way in which “local inhabitants appear to experience not only social and environmental changes due to loss of land and access to livelihoods, but also a symbolic obliteration from the history, memory, and representation of conserved landscapes” (xiii). In giving an account of the people who live around the AENP and the narratives of dislocation and marginalisation that attend those experiences, Connor addresses a number of interesting themes that touch on enduring debates in the anthropology of Africa and of conservation, for example, the centrality of the imaginary of “land” that is at the heart of South African politics. Connor describes the shifts in claims to identity that indicate the reworking of a split between “conservative,” “rural,” “traditional” and “Red,” on the one hand, and “school,” “urban” and “educated,” on the other. The ethnographic archive on the Eastern Cape, including the former apartheid homelands—such as by Monica Hunter Wilson, Philip and Iona Mayer, and Leslie Bank—is usefully drawn on and will be a welcome complement to that wealth of description. The central thrust of the analytic and descriptive effort is on the identities that are formed by what Connor calls “labourers,” in particular their conservative, rural qualities forged through a history of “symbolic violence.”

The book contains a useful history of the Sundays River Valley and the AENP, and along the way makes an argument that is germane to debates in anthropology on the question of experience, memory and violence, as well as broader debates in South and Southern Africa on the relationship between land, livelihoods and conservation. A key question here pertains to how land reform has been constructed as a legal and policy framework in South Africa, and raises to view the entangled histories of dislocation, claims to redress, and ideas about who or what could or should be supported as an object of state remedial action. The critique that this book focusses

on is the racialised history of spatial dislocation in the making of an agricultural region and the rise of conservation as a particular logic of land use in one location.

Chapters include histories of the AENP and the introduction of conservation; of the conquest of the Zuurveld and the fluid frontier zone in which relations were forged during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the development of farming and farm labour economies; and the emergent social practices through which farm labourers derive a sense of place and locatedness.

What stands out as an analytical question is the particular history of the categories so central to the book: of race, labourer, land and identity, amongst others. The broader contexts of the making of race over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in particular a racialised labour force during the twentieth century, will be familiar to scholars of Southern Africa. In the specific context of the Sundays River Valley, how were those particular relations brought together, and in what ways were they constructed? In many ways, the material Connor provides is richly suggestive, but we are left wondering if the trans-historical category of “labourer”, for example, is more the author’s analytic or emerges empirically from the histories at stake. Were “labourers” equally objects of concern for the apartheid state, and if so, in what ways, and when? What concept of land is at stake for the people described as labourers, and is it the same for the farmers, the state, conservators, or the author? Do the relations at stake in this space conform neatly to the broader dynamics of race and capital in the region, or are they more unpredictable, lumpy or variegated, particular to this locale?

The reader is left with the impression that these (analytical) categories match (empirical) reality, and thus wondering whether the people, processes and debates have shifted over the course of the history at stake, in what ways, and whether they will always be so. The reliance on terms such as work/labour, identity and race, amongst others, to carry the conceptual load suggests that they could have been more closely interrogated, both as a conceptual issue for how anthropologies of land, livelihoods and conservation might proceed, but also because the political stakes are high.

What an ethnography such as this offers is the possibility of reading these popular terms against the grain of the local and the idiosyncratic in order to understand

why lives are composed in this way rather than that. Descriptively, this book is rich with detail and an excellent contribution to literatures on the Eastern Cape, conservation and rural livelihoods. Analytically, I would have appreciated an interrogation of the categories, say, of rural and urban, as both imaginative and pragmatic resources; or of the concept of “ritual” as it pertains to that of “place” — these terms would benefit from careful theoretic re-consideration given the temporal distance of this ethnography from some of the early material that underpins the availability of these categories to anthropologists of South Africa. The danger that over-reliance on ideas such as identity, ritual and place produces is that the interpretive possibilities for reading the primary material (such as original quotes and rich description) are narrowed, where the ethnography is clearly very rich and worthwhile.

Connor's book is a well-written and richly described ethnography that will be appreciated by scholars of livelihoods and conservation. The book is written in an accessible style and is beautifully produced by UKZN Press.

Thomas Cousins

*School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford, Oxford,
United Kingdom*

Email: thomas.cousins@anthro.ox.ac.uk

© 2018, Thomas Cousins

ORCID

Thomas Cousins <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8869-1886>