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 CHAPTER 18

Behind Johannesburg: Plants and Possible Futures in an Industrialized Hinterland

Ruth Sacks

CULTIVATION

This chapter explores two ubiquitous edible plants of Johannesburg's hinterland: maize (a staple crop) and blackjack (an invasive species). I address how crop and weed grow and are cultivated across both hinterland and city. Thinking with Johannesburg's hinterland, I address the pressing issue of food shortages in the face of the looming ecological crisis, aided and abetted by large-scale industry. The narratives of maize and blackjack that I follow speak to a hinterland entangled with a city still traumatized by searing inequality set in motion by apartheid and colonial legacies. I propose that lingering stereotypes relating to colonial attitudes to these plants and ways of planting need to be dismantled to be able to imagine better food futures.

Common misconceptions and associations around blackjack and maize are bound up in colonial industrialization systems that also devastated local ecologies. The root of stigmas attached to categories of plants

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understood as weeds and small-scale ways of growing today may be found in racialized attitudes toward the plants and farming associated with oppressed peoples. I argue that more equitable food systems may be realized if close attention is paid to planting and plant histories woven through hinterland and city.

Since ancient times, a city's hinterland has been the locus of its agriculture. The term is derived from German, meaning "land in the back of." As cities do not have a front or a back, "hinterland" being "behind" can be understood as having a supportive role (over and above problematic notions of slow, unfashionable backwaters). The hinterland first came into existence to grow food to support city-dwellers. Approximately 11,000 years ago, the development of plant (and animal) husbandry furthured human evolution by allowing cities and more sedentary ways of life to emerge (Weisman 2007). I proceed by exploring how Johannesburg's hinterland backs up the quality of life of its people via grown food. In investigating edible plant life, I consider how preindustrial African growing and harvesting processes were vilified with colonial conquest. Reading the hinterland through its earliest lens as a place of agriculture allows for a reckoning with the dangerous assumption that large-scale farming techniques and crops are superior.

Johannesburg's hinterland is the most industrialized area in Africa. It contains major mining hubs, interspersed with areas of heavy manufacturing, processing, and packaging facilities. Large-scale crop farms, most prominently producing maize, are located beyond the city's outer belt of factories and industry, particularly in southern and eastern areas. The south-eastern industrial-residential area of City Deep is a vital artery of the city's hinterland as the main supplier of fresh produce. It is home to a massive grown food market (arguably, the biggest in the world) supplied by imports as much as South African agri-industrial initiatives. Urban outskirts, as in the rest of the country, also hold the major residential areas of the townships. Enforced segregation during apartheid saw the black working class moved to the peri-urban townships to serve as a labor force. The townships contain large portions of the city's populace and few supermarkets, most of which are expensive (Kroll 2016, 6). This means that its residents rely on informal street trade, supplied largely by City Deep, for their food needs (Kroll 2016, 6). Many residents practice piecemeal growing in available plots as a way of supplementing deficient diets.

A way of judging the effectiveness of the systems of farms, factories, and food arteries of the hinterland in feeding Johannesburg is to note the

presence of small-scale growing. From the hinterland to the ambiguous urbanity of the former townships and into the heart of the inner city, piecemeal farming is a common phenomenon, evident in backyards and communal spaces. I compare informal subsistence growing across urban, semi-urban, and rural regions to the industrial food production and processing of the hinterland by way of blackjack and maize to reflect on the ancient relationship of grown food, hinterland, and city.

I will first introduce some of the literature concerning the African city and agriculture, as well as the community farm where much of my research was based. Comparisons between the different treatments and attitudes toward blackjack and maize follow. Looking first at the leafy weed and then at the un-indigenous grain, I outline human-plant histories and farming techniques as a way of drawing out key features of Johannesburg's hinterland. These are defined by stigmas attached to plants and people based on ideas of foreignness and indigeneity. I conclude by reflecting on how the lens of hinterland allows for the particularities of Johannesburg's natural heritage and food futures to be more productively understood. Within the realm of the hinterland, it is the blurring of city boundaries through piecemeal farming activities that aids a better conception of the grown food system.

GLOBAL HINTERLAND

Academic literature tends to focus on Johannesburg's intensifying structural inequality and geographies of difference (Nuttall and Mbenbe 2004, 347). Malcolm Murray (2011), for instance, unpacks how Johannesburg's status as a global city was achieved through a situated spatial dynamic of social oppression. In tracing the city's extremes of very rich and poor, most investigations lead to a northern-centric capitalist agenda beneath its globalism (Myambo 2019, 1). Proceeding with an awareness of how Johannesburg's hinterland supports the city's imbalances, I am concerned with what a plant-orientated reading brings to understandings of Johannesburg's excessive, rising wealth gap and how this perspective contributes to an idea of a global hinterland. Globalization sees hinterland milie crops exported en masse internationally while the urban poor forage and grow their own. This system highlights the rural within the urban, blurring the boundaries between hinterland and city and connecting Johannesburg to its less industrialized African counterparts on the rest of the continent.

Although African cities are defined by an “urban metabolism” with a rigorous “city to rural circulation” (McCann 2007, 214), this does not mean that the traditional notion of hinterland as source of supplies is fulfilled. In relation to Kinshasa, for instance, Filip De Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart (2004, 228) discuss how piecemeal farming across the city speaks to its economy of scarcity, showing not only that rural elements are found across urban spaces but also that hinterlands themselves are being modernized. In late twentieth-century Zambia, too, village residents followed city fashions and rural customs were present in city homes (Ferguson 1999, 86). This muddying of rural and urban continues to complicate the binary colonial construction of city/countryside (ibid) as well as ideas of the rural hinterland as backward compared to the modern city attached to a colonial modernist notion of progress.

Imperial modernization saw black cultures posed as primitive and Euro-American modernization as the only way forward. How the post-independence hinterland retains such pejorative attitudes is a key issue when considering possible futures. I investigate how the blurring of hinterland and city can be a fruitful concept within escalating climate change.

My argument rests on the ecological implications of different types of farming and on how issues of climate justice are combined with getting food on the table in Johannesburg. My primary source of research is a community garden in central Johannesburg with which I have engaged in my capacity as a visual artist during a two-year collaboration. The Greenhouse Project is an example of micro-scale farming that combines traditions of herbalism with affordable and sustainable practices. Its gardeners are part of a network of small growing initiatives found across backyards and on the margins of hinterland industry.

The Greenhouse Project is unique due to its location in the city center and as the site of a former Victorian greenhouse. The remaining structure from 1906, which once displayed exotic tropical plants for the white elite, now houses informal vegetable patches serving individual household needs. Each grower tends to their patch of land around and beneath the remains of the former hothouse. They share tools and soil as per need to pursue their own planting projects. The custodians allow anyone to plant in abandoned beds, provided they do not use chemical fertilizers and weed killers. It is a space of sustainable money-saving techniques with long histories, that have been developed out of necessity.

This urban farm is a poignant symbol of the eventual outcomes of the imposition of colonial categories of nature, which saw local herbalism and

cultivation methods vilified as backward. I link the epistemological violences that play out in Johannesburg’s hinterlands to colonial ruination and the “ongoing nature of imperial process” with the Greenhouse Project as a starting point (Stoler 2013, ix). As a colonial spectacle turned subsistence garden for city dwellers, the site encapsulates the situation of a hinterland unable to fully cater to its city. In what follows, I introduce blackjack and maize in terms of how they are treated first in the Greenhouse Project as an example of small-scale farming.

INVASIVE SPECIES: BLACKJACK

Any visit to the Greenhouse Project results in having to remove a layer of prickles from shoes and clothing. Blackjack springs up in fertile beds as well as from the disturbed, shallow soil of cracked pavements. This hardy daisy family member has sharp burrs that spread seed at the rate of 30,000 per plant. Pedestrians walking on any overgrown paths will always find themselves unwilling participants in their propagation. Blackjacks take root in the Greenhouse Project as well as in the poorly maintained streets outside, growing up to 60 centimeters high (Fig. 18.1).



Fig. 18.1 Illustration of a blackjack plant. © Shaifali Bramdey, 2022

Considered a harmful invasive species that springs up indiscriminately across almost any site, blackjacks are not only edible but also hold medicinal properties. Like maize, blackjack originated in tropical America and is now embedded in local cultures. Blackjacks are rich in micronutrients like calcium, iron, and vitamins A and C, with a slightly bitter taste. Most recipes recommend sautéing with garlic, but they can also be dried, powdered, and stored. In addition, flower and leaf are boiled as a healthy tea filled with antioxidants. The whole plant is believed to have anti-inflammatory and antiseptic qualities and is used to treat hypertension (Gavhi 2019, xii). However, blackjacks are largely only used as such by the impoverished, especially in the rainy season when other pot vegetables can be scarce (Gavhi 2019, xii).

Just as they move across landscaped gardens, tilled fields, and the Atlantic, blackjacks transcend boundaries to act as both cheap food and prickly irritant. While trampled in the street, blackjack leaves are also sold on the informal markets that line inner city pavements as “morogo.” This commonly used Sotho/Pedi term refers to various leafy vegetables that are foraged in the wild or salvaged from farmed foods such as beetroot. Morogo is a cheaper alternative to its commercially farmed equivalents (like spinach) on offer at the street market stalls. The small piles of loose morogo leaves do not go through processes of industrial manufacturing. Unlike the nutrient-depleted fruit and vegetables that come from City Deep, they have not traveled thousands of kilometers and been refrigerated. Blackjacks on the informal market thus present a healthier form of food that moves more directly from plant to table through foraging in the nearby hinterland.

As blackjacks are pioneer plants, they colonize the ground for more of their kind to follow. All pioneer plant species are the first to populate even the most impoverished soils. As such, they are not encouraged in small-scale farms. However, their label of weed ensures that farmers seek to eradicate them. In the Greenhouse Project, most growers do not utilize blackjacks for food as they have access to less stigmatized and better tasting leaves like spinach. Blackjacks and other invasives are removed by hand. The plants are then composted to nourish the soil. As in other small food-producing gardens across hinterland and cityscape, cycles of waste to food and the distribution of fresh produce stay within the small parameters of the urban farm. How the Greenhouse plants are cultivated and distributed is at odds with their pavement stall counterparts.

Unlike invasives such as amaranth and dandelion, blackjack has not shed its association with impoverished rural areas. A niche market of wealthy wellness devotees will gladly pay an exorbitant price for carefully packed, largely imported health remedies containing the same plants eradicated from their private gardens. However, potentially useful species like blackjack are still considered lesser than due to colonial hierarchies. In Johannesburg, ideas about what plants are better than others came with the establishment of spaces like Joubert Park, erected for the purposes of botanical instruction.

In twentieth-century South Africa, blackjacks have acquired disparaging English names like “Spanish needle” or “beggar ticks” and the ironically named “knapsekereis” (skillful boys) are notorious as a “mielie-plaag” (maize pest). The epistemological violence that came with colonial botany quickly turned to ecological injustice. Herbicides developed for the purpose of eliminating blackjacks and other unwanted plants for industrial farming are highly toxic. Ingredients such as chloroacetamide are dangerous to the touch, according to the warning signs on government-sanctioned solutions. Once such poisonous chemicals are sunk into the ground, they seep into subsoils and water sources, killing all healthy vegetal and animal matter, “the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ ... though the intended target may only have been a few weeds” (Carson 2002, 6). In water-poor Gauteng, the war against weeds is one against the ecosystem. Agrochemicals require huge amounts of water to be diluted into acceptable water quality levels (Quinn et al. 2011, 50). Further damage is then done by the application of chemical fertilizers to coerce productivity from depleted beds. The suppliers and producers of the country’s chemical killers (Nulandis, Rolfe’s Agri, Omnia Fertilizer, Nutrico, Agri Challenge, and more) are situated in Johannesburg’s hinterland. The carbon footprint of these companies (including those who process and package “green” products) renders the hinterland a primary source of the pollution. Gauteng is resultingly one of the country’s primary polluters.

Johannesburg’s industrialized hinterland is at odds with—and a threat to—the city’s wellbeing. The very process of grown food production and distribution (processing, packaging, and transporting raw materials, as well as the manufacturing of agriproducts and machinery) is a major contributing factor to ecological degradation via fuel emissions. Plants that are near extinction in the ecoregion include endemic orchids, cycads, and sweet grasses. The former diversity of a grassland ecotone has long been replaced by an Anthropocene landscape whose plants map routes of

dispossession and forced migration of peoples. A devolution in the ancient relationship of the hinterland to support its city is visible in the landscape and pioneer plants like blackjack are markers of this broken system.

Blackjacks overtake the disturbed land between the industrial concrete and the synthetic farmlands beyond. While they make way for other invasives that battle for the former Highveld grasslands (eucalyptus, wattle, acacias, camel thornbush, Spanish reed, Mexican poppies, and hundreds more), it is the blackjack that can best cater to escalating human food needs. If industrialized hinterland landscapes reflect private corporations prioritizing maximum profits, the stage where blackjacks establish themselves also presents opportunities to gather nutritious food efficiently. Yet, in food cultures developed in tandem to colonial and apartheid systems, this is only taken up by those in extreme need.

It is the repurposing of blackjack as compost (or emergency food and medicine) in the small-scale farm that presents an important way of dealing with the harsh realities of daily life. Eschewing the use of the chemical pesticides and fertilizers produced in the hinterland and using weeds to nourish the earth has long-term benefits for future growing. The larger situation of food scarcity is exacerbated by extractivist agricultural practices driven by high yields amassed as quickly as possible. The flagrant exploitation of captured soils in Johannesburg's increasingly desiccated hinterland, which began with extractivist colonial industry, is to have dire consequences in the years to come. If the pioneering blackjack is both a sign of ecological upheaval and a potential salve to uneven food distribution, the uses and abuses of its supposed victim—maize—has long encapsulated nature put to work as an enabler of oppressive systems on the African continent.

PIONEER'S PLANTS: MAIZE

Maize is grown in the Greenhouse Project in short, neat rows that do not extend beyond three square meters. The land is hoed by hand and single seeds are planted with adequate space in between to allow for spreading roots. As pursued by African farmers for several hundred years, intercropping (allowing for other useful plants to grow in between) and rotation are employed (Warman 2003, 89; McCann 2007, 26). Greenhouse gardeners often sew heritage seed that has been saved, exchanged, and recycled, whose plants bear orange, purple, and brown kernels. The multicolored Greenhouse maize comes from seeds whose various strains were bred

according to long-standing African practices (McCann 2007, 200–203). Maize seeds rapidly bear plants that may be harvested in a few months. This small-scale growing is for consumption by the cultivator and indicates a meagre income. Similar tall-tale rows of maize are found across the continent where families need to bypass expensive food imports.

From seed to cob, the maize from piecemeal growing contrasts with its mass-produced counterparts. The latter are mostly the large, white variety sold roasted at street stalls for a snack and en masse for flour (miele meal). The smaller, yellow type is also available in supermarkets (tinned and on the cob) as sweetcorn. Homogeneity of color signals the results of developing a staple crop that can be grown rapidly (compared to indigenous crops of millet and sorghum) to feed a labor force. Such methods require the toxic agricultural processes discussed above (Fig. 18.2).

Farming practices that are kinder to soils are at odds with the mechanized monocropping of Johannesburg's Maize Triangle. This area extends

Fig. 18.2 Illustration of a maize plant. © Shafiqi Bramdev, 2022



across the Orange Free State, Mpumalanga, and the North-West provinces, intersecting with Johannesburg's southern hinterland to provide the raw materials for factory processing and packaging. Gauteng companies such as RandAgri, Pride Milling, Maizemaster, and Keystone Milling convert kernels into mielie meal. Considering Johannesburg's hinterland as a place of manufacturing alongside mass growing emphasizes the escalated depletion of the landlocked area's ecological richness. While highly effective as a quick-growing crop, maize can only be dry farmed in areas of regular rainfall. In Johannesburg's hinterland, this can no longer be relied on.

It is the maize plant's food efficiency that has allowed for European domination of Southern regions since the sixteenth century. First developed by the Incas and Mayans, fast-growing maize was the ideal crop for early European colonists. It further served to fuel the Atlantic slave trade system because it is resistant to cold weather, makes the most of sunlight and can be grown in various terrains. In contemporary times, maize is Africa's most important crop. It has a higher yield and requires less labor than wheat. Dried kernels are easily stored and were used to feed captured Africans of the Atlantic slave trade (Warman 2003, 61–63; McCann, 2007, 24–29). As an effective and cheap food for workers, maize also enabled African plantations of coffee, cacao, and tobacco. In speaking of colonial agriculture, Frantz Fanon states “European opulence ... has been nourished with the blood of slaves and it comes directly from the soil and ... subsoil of that underdeveloped world” (1963, 96). He implicates maize farming as much as mining. Histories of extraction from African soils feed directly into the looming predicament of Johannesburg's hinterland.

Maize most likely spread rapidly across the tropics and came to Gauteng through the southward movement of Bantu-speaking groups in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Miracle 1963, 33). Zulu military expansion further served to spread Bantu food cultures as arable lands were acquired during the displacement of peoples on the Highveld (McCann 2007, 102). It was, however, the activities of white settlers that have left the most enduring mark on Johannesburg's hinterlands as they introduced extractivist modes and profit-oriented motivations for maize farming.

From 1835 onwards, Afrikaner Boers settled in what was then the Transvaal and proceeded to pursue maize farming (as opposed to the British-controlled mines). Peter Delius and Stanley Trapido make a case for this period setting the terms of white property owner and black laborer

relations that would progress into apartheid legislation (1982, 214), and it could be seen as one of the sources of the stigma of growing one's own food. Importantly, the Boers brought ploughs and monocropping techniques which, by the end of the nineteenth century, had become mechanized farming and industrial milling (McCann 2007, 111–118). At the same time as solidifying the role of black men as laborers, this activity resulted in the loss of genetic diversity in plant life. The separation of the country into “homelands” further aggravated ideas about certain farming methods and food cultures as backward. Accordingly, the homelands presented a form of hinterland beyond the hinterland.

Before the official apartheid government came into power in 1948, the 1913 Land Act ensured that black people could not own the land on which they worked. Mielie pap (porridge) formed the primary rations for the migrant male workforce of laborers and miners. The homelands were established as “independent” ethnic states in the 1970s, in resource poor areas with substandard public transport. While men commuted long distances, elderly women and children practiced artisanal maize farming where mielies were commonly eaten green and raw (Butler et al. 1978, 8). These standard practices of a subsistence economy were perceived as backwards traditional farming practice, even though the dispossessed had no other options (Butler et al. 1978, 8).

In the 1960s, the rest of Africa shifted from colonial rule into independence, becoming reliant on cereal imports to feed the labor for their cash crop exports (Warman 2003, 87). Concurrently, the white minority operating in the Maize Triangle of Johannesburg's hinterland oversaw a maize export operation that continues to be among the largest in the world. At the height of 1980s apartheid, maize exports (extending into the rest of Africa) reached record highs. As emphasized by Fanon, mass exportation of crops does not aid in feeding everyday citizens (1963, 96). In Gauteng's hinterland today, field laborers are often unable to afford the food they helped to produce (Ledger 2016). Resultantly, haphazard piecemeal gardening, particularly of maize, proliferates across the agro-industrial hinterland in the clusters of farmworker residences.

Maize has been modified by humans for centuries to obtain the highest yields. However, commercial agriculture on the Highveld has taken genetic modification into dangerous territory. The Maize Triangle has always been vulnerable to drought and the situation will only worsen with climate change. The situation has led to government policymakers in post-colonial South Africa to support so-called climate-friendly seeds (Green

2020, 19). Most commercial maize farms of the hinterland propagate seed variants whose fruit cannot be replanted and which are grown with the polluting chemical herbicides to which only they are immune (Ala-Kokko et al. 2021, 1). Since a 1995 World Trade agreement, even maize seeds with minute genetic alterations are patented and practices of sharing them are criminalized (Green 2020, 125). Such proprietary attitudes to seed and tampering with soils ensure that—narratives of industrial hinterland maize see “expulsions and extinctions go hand in hand” (Green 2020, 13).

The kinds of growing born of desperation in the homelands were the result of forced migrations of subjugated people. On taking stock of the state of agricultural futures, all urban consumers would do well to consider these cleaner, humbler, and more nutritious ways of producing. Unsurprisingly, however, the ecological injustice in the corporate takeover of maize has done little to curb pejorative attitudes to cheaper small-scale farming. To further exacerbate the situation, government response to food scarcity and climate change has been to encourage maize expansion in the hinterland, as is the trend across Sub-Saharan Africa (Sandpoort 2020). Yet food cultures and the values attached to them are never fixed.

The stigma of piecemeal growing—which extends to the color of mielies (multicolored cobs are perceived as alien)—currently holds associations with the rural poor of the hinterland from city perspectives. However, maize dishes and drinks also carry rich food histories of resistance and cultural pride. There are over forty traditional Zulu maize dishes alone. Phutu, a crumbly congee like Italian polenta, predominates as a feature of migrancy and mining. Umqombothi (beer made with maize meal) has a narrative of resistance reaching back to the 1800s when women brewed it in their homes. Home brewing expanded significantly after the 1927 Liquor Act banning people of color from licensed alcohol establishments. Illegal shebeens (speakeasies) were spaces where disenfranchised women could make an independent living (Edwards 1988, 76–77). When these were interrupted by apartheid, many “shebeen queens” joined the struggle (Edwards 1988, 76–77).

With the above associations in place, particularly histories of home-brewing as an act of defiance, a shift in attitudes toward growing is not unimaginable. The changeable nature of hinterland growth itself, as seen in rapid-growing invasives that defy human activity, lays out a path toward what the future might demand of the hungry city. What independent plant growth (blackjack) and ways of growing (mielies) suggest, is that the most

workable systems of food production and distribution are the small circulations and soil-friendly practices of small-scale gardens.

FUTURE NATURE

Hinterland narratives of maize and blackjack see the former as an activist that has caused major human movements. As expansionist extractivist farming practices continue to be employed, blackjacks spread the literal seeds of future wildlands. These harbingers of landscapes to come are present in the urban center as much as its surrounds, further blurring categories of city and hinterland.

The lenses of once-alien blackjack and maize link to an idea of a global hinterland. Across the planet, mass commercial farming initiatives are decimating biodiversity, suggesting the need for other ways of growing and foraging. There is much to learn from what grows wild and how to deal with that which cannot, but this requires a reframing of colonial categories of botanical value and class-based suitability. The traumatic histories attached to this crop and weed warn that interspecies relationships cannot exist on terms dictated by profits. The specific situation of Johannesburg’s hinterland as a landlocked, degraded area demonstrates that all vegetation that can survive with less water will be needed, most especially edible weeds. The fate of human-reliant maize that requires large quantities of water during early growth, will depend on the manner of cultivation.

If the colonial-modernist logic of industrialization-as-progress is applied, then Johannesburg’s hinterland should be the most evolved one in Africa. Yet, the failure of the hinterland’s ancient role of supporting the city with crucial food supplies suggests the reverse. Small-scale farms that signify the dangerous deficiencies of Johannesburg’s fast-paced, mass-producing hinterland may well represent the most viable way forward. Thinking with the broader logic that emerges in the failures of hinterland and city relations in Johannesburg, at this point in time, points toward the future gains of slower, smaller, and healthier loci of growing, harvesting, and living.

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PALGRAVE STUDIES IN GLOBALISATION,
CULTURE & SOCIETY

Planetary Hinterlands

Extraction, Abandonment and Care

Edited by

Pamila Gupta · Sarah Nuttall
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"If Engels could once open an investigation of capitalism from the deck of the ship coming into harbor, this stunning collection makes clear that such an investigation today would have to begin from the hinterland. From swamps and drowned villages to windfarms and deindustrialized wastelands, these essays place the hinterland at the center of capitalism's new logistical form and chart a powerful global map for imaging, understanding, and resisting the subjection of hinterland networks to capitalism's multiple violences. No one will be able to ignore the political, historical, and planetary significance of the hinterland after reading this book."

—**Charmaine Chua**, Department of Global Studies, University of California
Santa Barbara

This open access book considers the concept of the hinterland as a crucial tool for understanding the global and planetary present as a time defined by the lasting legacies of colonialism, increasing labor precarity under late capitalist regimes, and looming climate disasters. Traditionally seen to serve a (colonial) port or market town, the hinterland here becomes a lens to attend to the times and spaces shaped and experienced across the received categories of the urban, rural, wilderness or nature. In straddling these categories, the concept of the hinterland foregrounds the human and more-than-human lively processes and forms of care that go on even in sites defined by capitalist extraction and political abandonment. Bringing together scholars from the humanities and social sciences, the book rethinks hinterland materialities, affectivities, and ecologies across places and cultural imaginations, Global North and South, urban and rural, land and water.

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