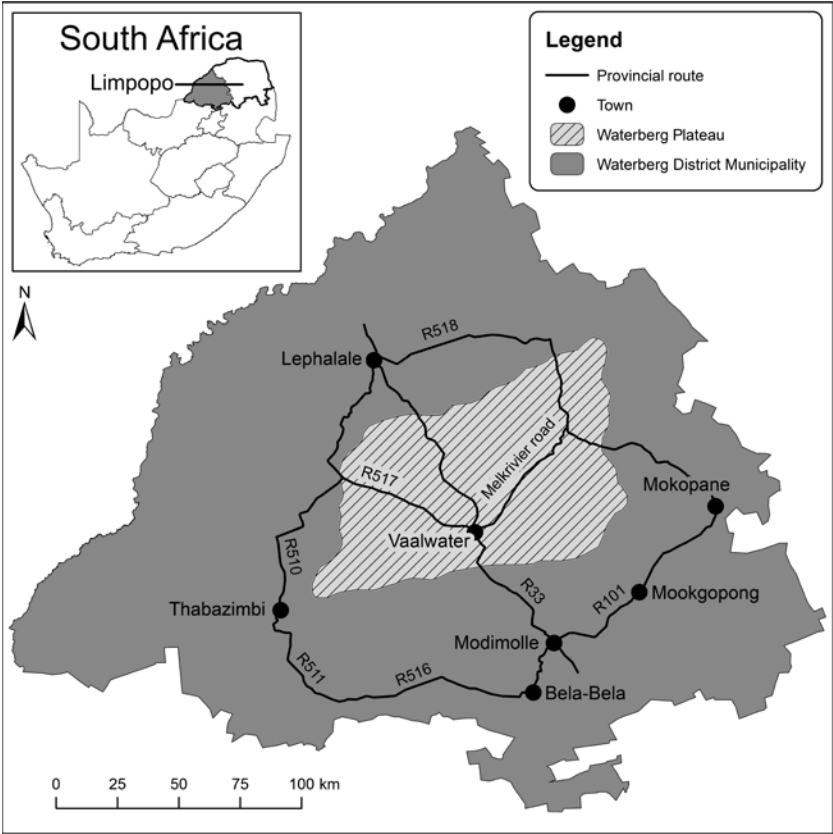
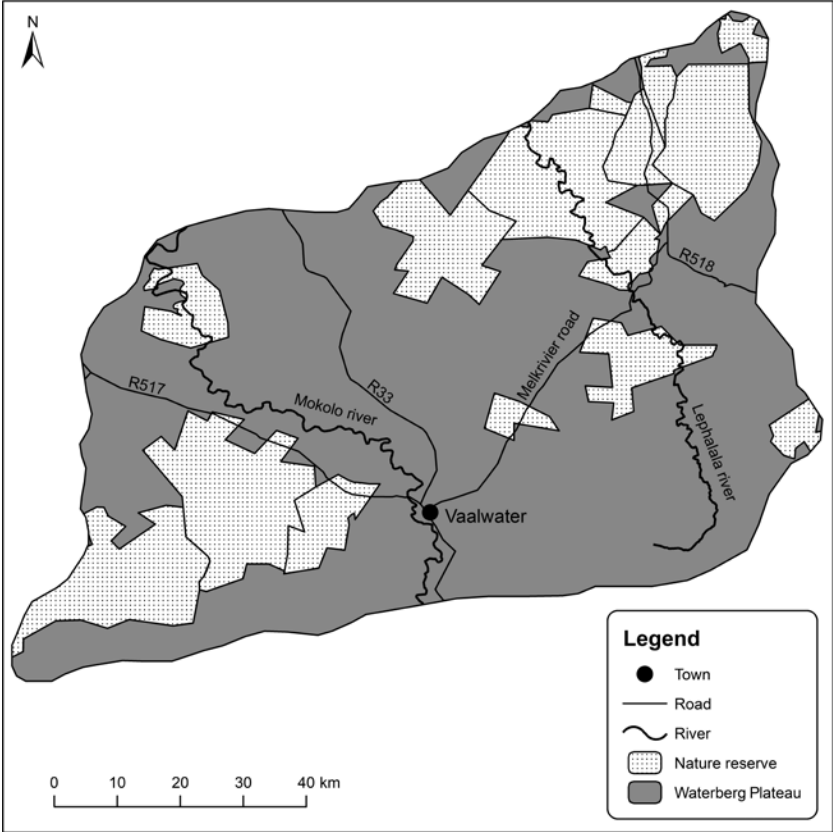


# Naturalizing Inequality



Map 1 The Waterberg Plateau. (Image by Arno Boozyen.)



Map 2 Land-use change in the Waterberg Plateau. (Image by Arno Boozyen.)

# Introduction

What a painful paradox it would be if, after decades of struggle and sacrifice, we succeeded in doing what apartheid could never do—legitimizing inequality. It would continue as before but would be regarded as natural, or, worse still, as the fault of the disadvantaged.

—Albie Sachs, *Advancing Human Rights in South Africa*

In 1992, amid the negotiations to end apartheid, Albie Sachs warned against the possibility that formally dismantling a system of racial segregation and discrimination might not be enough to tackle inequality in South Africa.<sup>1</sup> Democracy could perpetuate existing inequalities and, more worrisome, could naturalize and hence legitimize them. Instead of being ascribed to the country's historical, political, and economic structures—and for that reason fought against—inequality would become normal, even natural. In keeping with Sachs's painfully accurate prediction, this book aims to show how and why inequality has been reproduced *and* naturalized in post-apartheid South Africa. It does so by looking at one of its most striking manifestations: access to water.

Water access in South Africa remains extremely unequal, despite an ongoing redistributive water reform and the inclusion of “free basic water” within the country's social policy. Official statistics tend to give a false sense of progress when they show, as they did in the last census, that 91 percent of households have access to piped water (Stats SA 2012, 78). In fact, only 64 percent of those households benefit from a reliable water supply (DWS 2018b, 19). More importantly, water access is still plainly racialized.<sup>2</sup> Black households are more likely to depend on yard or communal taps compared to other population groups, and almost all households without access to any form of piped water are black. Water poverty is spatial and usually materializes

in historically black spaces, like townships, informal settlements, and ex-Bantustans.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, since households are expected to cover the full cost of water service provision and black households are poorer on average,<sup>4</sup> they tend to use less water, both when they pay for it and when, paradoxically, they receive it for free from the state (Loftus 2006).

Set against this background, this book investigates water inequality from the vantage point of an apparently marginal rural space, the Waterberg Plateau of Limpopo Province (see map 1). Marketed as a “hidden gem” of South Africa, the Waterberg strives to position itself as a hub of conservation and tourism while lying next to the country’s last reserves of coal—something that makes the place, and its water resources, central to a national political economy still founded on the so-called minerals-energy complex (or MEC; Fine and Rustomjee 1996). To look at water access in the Waterberg and vice versa, to look at the Waterberg through the lens of water, illuminates important processes and relationships that are key to making inequality appear natural. As later chapters will show, these processes and relationships revolve fundamentally around growth, land, and race.

My main argument is that water inequality in South Africa is continuously reproduced and legitimized through a neoliberal biopolitics of water. In Foucauldian terms, water is inherently biopolitical in that it is necessary to sustain life. Instead of realizing better water access for all, however, the post-apartheid state has embraced a neoliberal government of life based on supporting economic growth (see also Fletcher 2010). In other words, the state believes and expects that the benefits of further growth will trickle down to the majority and materially improve their lives, including their access to water. This implies two things in the government of water: applying a market rationality to it while also prioritizing the distribution of the resource to those population groups that the state depicts as using water productively and hence as contributing to the creation of more goods, services, and, crucially, jobs. The rest (deemed unproductive and wasteful) must wait patiently.

In South Africa, like elsewhere, growth is increasingly framed as “green.” The state tends to conflate the notion of green growth with that of a “green economy” (Death 2014), whereby the country’s abundant wildlife and biodiversity are conceived of as new economic opportunities that will guarantee prosperity, while still protecting the environment.

Water sits somewhat awkwardly among narratives of abundant natural resources that await to become more profitable, as South Africa is commonly

perceived as a water-scarce country. Actually, ideas of natural resource scarcity require caution when used within extremely unequal contexts like South Africa. This became evident during the severe drought that affected the country between 2015 and 2019. The drought made international headlines because of the threat of “Day Zero”—the day when Cape Town, a city of four and a half million, would be forced to turn off its taps. Eventually, while waiting for rain, Cape Town was able to avert Day Zero by imposing severe water use restrictions. These laid bare water inequality within the city: in the emergency, the mostly white wealthy and middle classes living in the suburbs had to limit their water consumption to levels considered “normal” for the mostly black working-class and poor residents living in informal settlements (Robins 2019).

As part of its green rhetoric (Satgar 2014), the South African state is committed to an efficient allocation and use of water that will conserve the resource quantity and quality within a context of climate change. The African National Congress (ANC) government aims to achieve efficiency through market instruments, and hence the country’s biopolitics of water is largely operationalized through the commodification of the resource, intended as the establishment of private property rights in water (if not *de jure*, then at least *de facto*) and its pricing.

In rural South Africa, ownership of water is closely intertwined with that of land, and this relationship, the “land-water nexus,” is crucial to the reproduction of inequality. Historically, the land-water nexus emerged from and developed through the process of accumulation and dispossession that took place under colonialism and apartheid. The post-apartheid state has recognized the racialized property relations deriving from such a process (mostly to sustain continuous economic growth), and even though redistribution for the purpose of equitable resource access (via land and water reform) is a government’s objective, very little has been accomplished so far. Furthermore, new instances of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2005) and “green grabbing” (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012) have occurred too, for instance in the Waterberg, whereby land and water have been appropriated by powerful actors for environmental ends, thus exacerbating existing inequalities.

Water pricing, on the other hand, has to do with acknowledging the “true” value of water and then extracting it (via commodity production or rent). The post-apartheid state has introduced charges for raw water use while

deracializing and increasing tariffs for drinking water consumption. Payment for water services has become a very effective incentive to encourage all citizens to think about water in economic terms (von Schnitzler 2016) and to regard this as natural. Following the recent drought and related representations of a country on the brink of environmental collapse, the government has introduced the notion of a “new normal” whereby water must become more expensive and everyone (with only a few exceptions) must use less of the resource and pay for it (DWS 2018b, 8).

As noted by Karen Bakker (2005, 545), water commodification is always a “contested, partial, and transient” process. In South Africa, fundamental contradictions have emerged as commodification has naturalized racial inequality in water access by reinforcing white control over the majority of the country’s water resources and by making water services unaffordable for a large number of mainly black people.<sup>5</sup> The state has intervened to manage these issues, most notably by regulating the distribution of water-use rights (now called “licenses”) and by incorporating minimal water supply within its social policy. And yet these interventions have not fully resolved—nor were they meant to resolve—the tensions surrounding water access. Adding to and complementing a rich tradition of political ecologies of water in South Africa (which started with McDonald and Pape 2002 and McDonald and Ruiters 2005), the book will explore how green neoliberalism intersects with and deepens these tensions in the rural Waterberg.

## The Waterberg

The Waterberg Plateau rises 250 kilometers north of Johannesburg, the economic capital of South Africa. The iconic Seven Sisters massif signals to visitors that they are about to enter “the most beautiful place” in the country, and a billboard outside the local Spar supermarket in the small, unassuming town of Vaalwater invites them to “Relax. You’re in the Bush.” Vaalwater, in fact, lies in the middle of a large tract of mountainous bushveld divided into private white-owned farms. Following white colonization in the mid-nineteenth century, the Waterberg was transformed from a remote frontier into an agricultural district of the Transvaal state and later province, although it remained quite a poor and backward piece of farmland throughout the colonial and apartheid periods. Since the 1980s, landowners have increas-

ingly reinvented the place as a conservation area by converting crop and cattle farms into game farms and private nature reserves (see map 2).<sup>6</sup> In this way, the political economy of the Waterberg has shifted from one centered on traditional commercial agriculture to one revolving around wildlife-based production (i.e., hunting, ecotourism, venison production, game breeding, and trading). At the same time, and in apparent tension with the objectives of nature conservation and green growth, an accumulation strategy based on mineral extraction and energy production is currently being reinvigorated in the plains to the north of the plateau. Here, next to the town of Lephalale, the parastatal utility Eskom is building the new mega coal-fired power station Medupi and trying to make it more palatable from an environmental perspective by depicting the plant as “cleaner,” meaning more resource-efficient, especially with regard to water consumption.

Despite landowners-turned-conservationists’ infatuation with the language of transformation, the changes of the last forty years have not altered the place’s fundamental social and economic structures. Ownership of the land remains firmly in a few white hands, whereas the black majority forms a reserve of unskilled, and increasingly unneeded, labor. Indeed, the Waterberg follows a general trend observed in relation to land-use change to private nature conservation in South Africa—an increase in farm evictions motivated by the lower labor intensity of game farming and by the need to clear the space of poor black people, whose sight would spoil white tourists’ encounter with “African nature” (Brooks and Kjelstrup 2014; Mkhize 2014). Invisibility and disregard were already typical of the historical production of “surplus people” in apartheid South Africa, of which black farmworkers and dwellers forcibly removed from white-owned farms constituted the most sizeable group (Platzky and Walker 1985; Wenzel 2018, 186). Conservation is now making black rural labor superfluous to the needs of green capital, while providing a strong moral justification for its abandonment: it is not about race discrimination anymore; it is about saving nature.

Following farm evictions, along with “voluntary”<sup>7</sup> relocations from white-owned farms as well as from rural villages in the former Bantustan of Lebowa and from other Southern African countries, black people have concentrated in the new post-apartheid township of Leseding, on the outskirts of Vaalwater. Here, land access for housing is a constraint, but even more so is access to water. Since the early 2000s, Leseding, and to a lesser extent Vaalwater



(intended as the formerly white town), have experienced what I call an ordinary water crisis. This crisis is not related to climatic extremes, such as the recent drought. Instead, it manifests in severe and sustained water shortages, meaning that water comes out of the tap only for a certain number of hours per day and sometimes it does not come out at all for days, if not for weeks. Visually, the crisis is captured by empty buckets lined up at communal taps (see figures 5 and 6)—quite a common sight across rural South Africa. Crucially, this image embodies a relation of inequality.

White landowners, in fact, keep control of most of the plateau's water resources and, except for cyclical dry spells (now made worse by climate change), "their" water is if not abundant at least sufficient to produce agricultural and increasingly green commodities. As later chapters will demonstrate, water represents a critical vehicle for capital accumulation. And yet the importance of water goes beyond the economic motive. For many landowners, both South African and foreigner, who decide to live on a farm in the Waterberg, private and exclusive control of land and water serves as the material foundation of a "project of white belonging" similar to that analyzed by David Hughes (2010) in relation to English settlers in Zimbabwe. In both cases, white people try to justify their presence in the post-colonial space, to feel included in it, by turning to nature vis-à-vis (black) society. More specifically, some Waterberg landowners strive to be recognized as the "right" custodians of the land by protecting all natural resources and wildlife to be found in the bush while excluding black people (apart from little labor) from it, both materially (as in the case of farm evictions) and discursively. To borrow from Hughes again, this exclusion often takes the form of "other disregarding," which means ignoring local black people and their needs. At times, however, this implies a more active process of separation between the white and black residents of the Waterberg, and especially between the space of the white farm and that of the black town. Water access has become a crucial terrain where this process plays out and inequality gets perpetuated, as one example will illustrate.

I had found in the Waterberg Nature Conservancy, a landowner association with a loose interest in conservation, a key gatekeeper. When I asked the then chair for a list of their members to possibly interview, however, my request was met with some initial skepticism and resistance. The point did not appear to be a concern for the members' privacy but rather some honest confusion: If I was interested in those who did not have water, why would I

want to speak to those who had it? This declaration of disconnection, almost a refusal to see any relationship between the haves and have-nots, is strangely reminiscent of the very idea of separateness at the core of the apartheid project. Once again, however, race is removed from the discourse, and nature provides a new source of legitimation for white people keen on protecting their privilege in resource access.

The post-apartheid state has been surprisingly complicit in defending and even reinforcing white landowners' access to water despite continuous shortages in Leseding and Vaalwater. Indeed, landowners themselves do not hesitate to accuse the ANC of not doing enough for "their own people"—perhaps unaware of what they might be asking for. The state, in fact, is constitutionally enabled to redistribute water resources, even through expropriation, within the context of a water reform aimed at redressing the results of past racial discrimination (RSA 1996, s. 25). However, no water redistribution has taken place on the Waterberg Plateau. In its absence, water access has inevitably become a site of power relations—although, unexpectedly, not of contestation—among landowners, local state authorities, and town and township residents.

## Chapter Outline

Following this introduction, the book is composed of six chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 discusses South Africa's neoliberal biopolitics of water, as reflected in the country's water reform. It shows how, despite an apparent break with apartheid water governance, post-apartheid water laws and policies embody similar yet distinct rationalities aimed at advancing the commodification of water resources and services. The chapter draws out those aspects of water reform that are most relevant to water access in formerly "white" rural South Africa.

Having set the scene in terms of South Africa's water biopolitics, chapter 2 zooms in on the Waterberg Plateau by offering a socio-environmental history of the place from the vantage point of its land-water nexus. Since the mid-nineteenth century, white settlers appropriated land and water in the Waterberg for farming. The apartheid state, however, quite literally channeled the plateau's water resources to the more profitable mining and energy sectors in the northern plains. All along, the water needs of black people

were disregarded and their presence made invisible through displacement and relocations, which have continued unchallenged under democracy.

Chapter 3 unpacks water inequality on the Waterberg Plateau. First, it examines inequality in relation to the poor implementation of water reform and especially the lack of redistribution. Second, the chapter shows how different and racialized spaces (the formerly white town, the black township, and white-owned farms) are characterized by uneven patterns of water access. It describes in detail how the drinking water supply in Vaalwater and Leseding is shaped by power relations between local government and white landowners, along with how black township residents experience the contemporary water crisis.

The next three chapters consider how three land-based productive activities contribute, each in their own way, to reproduce and naturalize water inequality in the Waterberg. Chapter 4 examines white irrigation farmers' perspectives on the land-water nexus. It makes the point that farmers have been largely compliant with water reform not only because very little has hitherto been asked of them, but also (and more importantly) to protect their property rights in all natural resources. Furthermore, the chapter demonstrates that by moving their (ex-)labor off the farm (either by force or agreement), farmers are shifting the responsibility for its water access onto the state, and in this way, they feel legitimated to disregard the water crisis in town.

Chapter 5 analyzes private nature conservation as the prevalent mode of production in the Waterberg today. It indicates that conservation rests on the discursive and material representation of the plateau as a wilderness. White landowners with an environmental inclination depict themselves as rightly belonging to this wilderness and hence as being entitled to claim access to and use its resources—including water, despite the common belief that conservation has little to do with it. Meanwhile, black people are rendered aliens whose water demands are both illegitimate and unsustainable.

Leaving the plateau to follow the water to the north, chapter 6 investigates yet another productive activity in the broader Waterberg region: coal-based energy production at Medupi Power Station. It provides a comprehensive account of Medupi's water requirements and of state intervention to meet them. The chapter demonstrates how Medupi has made the water crisis in Vaalwater even more invisible, as *not* solving this crisis is instrumental in guaranteeing water supply to the plant.

Finally, the conclusion restates the major arguments and contributions of the book and offers some suggestions on how to solve the reproduction and legitimization of water inequality in South Africa.

## Some Notes on Reflexivity

Research for this book involved spending considerable time in the Waterberg Plateau. I lived there for one year between 2013 and 2014 and then visited again in 2015 and 2018. During my longest stretch of fieldwork, I resided in a one-room cottage on a small farm thirty kilometers outside Vaalwater. In that year, I never experienced a single water shortage. Water abstraction from a borehole located inside the property appeared to me as a rather straightforward process, which enabled us farm residents to enjoy as much water as we wanted for domestic, recreational, and even productive uses. Tellingly, this was less true for one farm resident—the single black general farmworker living on the property—who had access to only very basic water and sanitation facilities and did not work the land for himself.

If water access proved unexceptional (I simply had to turn a tap, like in Europe), what felt new to me was learning how to live in a highly securitized space made of wire fences, burglar bars, security gates, alarms, and firearms. Most notably, how to inhabit the night. Usually, sunset signified the moment to cease outdoor activities and lock women and children inside the house. Men were allowed to go out on patrols, usually self-organized among neighbors within a specific area of the plateau. Being outside was perceived as potentially dangerous, but so was being at home. As much as this feeling of insecurity became concrete at times, I believe that the very idea that the context of the farm could be harmful to my person (in other words, that I rather than the property could be attacked) largely derived from the social construction of a generalized “black threat” reminiscent of apartheid narratives.<sup>8</sup>

My research field “proper” consisted in a loosely defined “Vaalwater area” comprising the town itself and those farms that depended on it for a number of services: selling produce, hiring labor, buying groceries, dumping waste, taking kids to school, going to church. This means that I spent a fair amount of time traveling up and down an area of approximately 6,500 square kilometers, crisscrossed by a network of dirt roads. By exploring and mapping this space, I soon realized that besides the wire fences delimiting private

properties, there were other “invisible” boundaries separating different “communities” living in the area. The border dividing the black township of Leseding from the rest of Vaalwater (and the white-owned farms, for that matter) was perhaps the most apparent but by no means the only one. For instance, I noticed that, in general, crop and cattle farmers did not engage much with game farmers. Since my research interests went beyond one particular group of people living in the area to rather unravel the interactions among them (from a water perspective), I made contact with all kinds of residents.<sup>9</sup>

Race figures prominently in my findings, but it did so also in the research process. Despite being a white foreigner who could only greet them in Sepedi, black township residents were usually ready to open their house to me, provide a seat, and answer my questions, but I started to question to what extent I was being able to interest them in my work and touch upon issues that lay beyond the surface. Sometimes, people perceived me as an emissary of the municipality and would not talk freely to me. Other times, they wanted to know how I was going to help them solve their water problems before sharing their knowledge with me. On the other hand, when I met with white landowners, I could perceive not only their comfort in finding out that the researcher who had made contact with them was a white young woman from Europe but especially their taking for granted that we could understand each other because we shared a number of assumptions about how things worked in the country. At times, this made me feel complicit, in that although I did not share such assumptions, especially when they were overtly racist in character, it was true that I could at least grasp them. And yet I remained silent to save my relationship with the respondents, hoping that, in this way, I could engage with them at a deeper level.