

Abstract

CIVILISING GRASS: THE ART OF THE LAWN ON THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHVELD

The central object of concern for this thesis is the South African lawn: a colonial idea and ideal with far-reaching implications for the environment, for the expression of ownership and national belonging, the articulation of race, the representation of labour and the viability of sexed and sexual subjects. Theoretically, I advance the notion that landscapes aren't 'nouns' but are, in fact, more-or-less powerful 'verbs', part of a complex and vibrant process of human-nonhuman becoming. By way of a discursive analysis of scientific, nonfiction gardening and landscape texts, I propose a definition of the lawn, asking not so much what a lawn *is* but rather what a lawn *does*, or even more provocatively, what it might *want*. The common sense view of the lawn as a stable, flat, green, family-friendly and apolitical surface is measured against an eccentric archive of real and imagined lawns from the Highveld between 1886 and 2016. The 'lawn art' archive includes maps, (photographs of) geographic spaces, intentionally and unintentionally unbuilt architectural proposals, empty spaces on the page and the ground, patterns of lived space, uses and obscene misuses, reappropriations and rejection of spaces on paper, in person, by the body, against and with other bodies, both dead and alive. Attention was paid to absences and ambivalence, moments where the landscape arguably failed—sometimes almost imperceptibly and at other times in spectacular ways—to approximate the colonial ideal; failed to be successful, modern and in control. What the thesis shows is that neither the real nor imagined boundaries which supposedly divide civilised nature from the wilderness are able to provide an immutable, safe, impermeable bulwark. The South African lawn, like many other postcolonial landscapes, is muddy, queer and alive, resisting optimistic narratives of progress and growth.