



Civilising Grass: The Art of the Lawn on the South African Highveld.

Jonathan Cane.

Johannesburg: Wits U P, 2019. 233 pp.

ISBN 9781776143108.

On the surface, *Civilising Grass* seems to offer a quirky and visually rich aesthetic engagement with the lawn. As one starts reading, the discourses thicken: author Jonathan Cane rejects a seemingly shallow horizontality in favour of a dense and sustained vertical unpicking of the apparent naturalness of the lawn *beyond* the aesthetic. By uprooting familiar lawn landscapes, he poses an understanding of the lawn as a “transplanted concept” that crosses colonial thresholds and hovers between the ideal and the real (22). Through successfully eroding the concept of the lawn’s contradictions (clean/dirty, shallow/deeply rooted, domesticated/wild, inside/outside, human/nonhuman, good/bad), Cane points out the ways in which the lawn can “at best, only ever be a temporary victory” (13).

In the book, which contributes to an international body of literature providing thorough discussions of the lawn-phenomenon since the late 1990s, Cane uses theoretical and conceptual tools provided by interdisciplinary fields such as visual studies, ecocriticism, postcolonial studies and queer theory (2). As the first sustained investigation of the lawn in Africa, the book contributes to conversations about the ambiguous entanglements of humans with these landscapes that have hitherto been considered mere backdrops. The power of Cane’s critique is that he reads the lawn landscape not as an object, but as a process. Following W. J. T. Mitchell, Cane argues that landscapes should be considered “verbs”, “unfinished processes, inconclusive attempts at fixing a permanent vision of nature”, rather than as “nouns” which can be surveyed or owned (3). Through this theorisation, the author teases out the ways in which power relations function in and through landscape.

Ideas about the lawn, much like the grass used for lawns itself, come from elsewhere. In the case of the former, Cane untangles the British imperial roots of the lawn as a site of naturalness, beauty and tranquility, and in the case of the latter he tracks kikuyu grass (South Africa’s most common grass used for lawns) as

originally from the East Africa Protectorate and sent via Pretoria to London for propagation (141). In contrast with the ideas of colonial landscapes as timeless and finished, Cane engages with the lawn as constantly moving, destabilised and changing. In this sense, Cane lets the imperial ideas of landscape as permanent and passive “fail” (5). Further, in the theoretical manoeuvre of queering the landscape, Cane not only successfully foregrounds the work of LGBTIQ+ gardeners, writers and artists but, further, craftily critiques heteronormative constructions of ‘nature’ and dichotomous relationships between the lawn and the wild, and similarly, between human and nonhuman actors.

Civilising Grass’s broad archival engagement must be commended. Its richness is owed to Cane’s consideration of anything “from poetry to pornography, [...] hate speech to children’s homework exercises, physical places to paper plans” as potentially useful (16). The book’s archive is composed of two types of texts roughly divided along the lines of ‘scientific’ and ‘artistic’ (15). Without drawing unnecessary distinctions (who says scientific texts cannot be aesthetic?), the chosen texts are written by historians, administrators, scientists, botanists, teachers, gardeners, garden owners and (landscape) architects. In engaging with this literature, Cane also thoughtfully and masterfully navigates the South African *linguistic* landscape “fraught with discursive danger” (xvii).

The book further includes eclectic visuals of urban design plans and maps, poems, advertisements, ethnographies, literature by Ivan Vladislavić and Marlene van Niekerk and 25 colour reproductions of lawn artworks by South African artists including Sabelo Mlangeni, Moses Tladi, Jane Alexander, Lungiswa Gqunta, Brett Murray and David Goldblatt. The close reading of not only artistic or literary lawns, but also implemented (or almost implemented) architectural lawns makes this work highly applicable to various social situations in that it investigates naturalised historical, gendered and racial aspects of the lawn.

Cane contains his negotiation to the South African highveld and teases out this location in terms of the “unique” combination of historical events that played out here, like the discovery of gold, the Anglo-Boer War and Nelson Mandela’s presidential inauguration on the Union Building lawns (6). Especially the highveld in

winter—characterised by dusty dry veld—is one of the “brownest” landscapes imaginable and is “particularly unwelcoming” to the lawn (14). Imagining a plush and playful lawn here (“never mind actually plant[ing] and keep[ing]” one) pushes the lawn’s ‘naturalness’ to its utmost limits (14).

The author presents the South African lawn as political, as moving, as work, as desiring a family and as a failure (11). He rhizomatically refers to these five theses throughout the book’s chapters, which is each dedicated to “lawn moments” between the late nineteenth century and the present day (14). Chapter 1 provides a thorough definition of the lawn. In texts where the lawn (and its ideological dimensions) was pushed to the back, Cane deliberately foregrounds it as a political act of denaturalisation to make clear the intimate and strange ways in which humans interact with lawns. Chapter 2 engages with the “fundamental quality” of the lawn as something that must be made and kept and which requires labour and resources like money, tools and water. In South Africa these conditions are constituted by racial inequality that dictates which humans of what gender, age and race, for what reward, in what clothes, on which day and with what equipment are responsible for this upkeep (47).

Chapter 3 takes a spade to the roots of the ideals of the lawn promised by modernity in the first half of the twentieth century through reference to utopian discourses in urban design. Historicising the continuously preferred (garden) landscape provides a perspective on lasting apartheid spatiality (111). Drawing on queer theory, Chapter 4 explores the notion of failure as a potential freedom from the goals of heteropatriarchal capitalism. Despite modernist discourses’ best efforts, the lived lawn is a mess oscillating between dying, scratching, soothing, browning and living.

Forming part of an unjust and violent colonial lineage, the lawn cannot be innocent. *Civilising Grass* provides fruitful insights into South Africa’s past and present societies shaped by variegated historical and racial factors. With this in mind, it makes sense that the book’s point of departure is, à la Mitchell, “What does the lawn want?”, implying a shift from *meaning* to *doing* (175). Cane’s engagement with this question is provocative, unexpected and presented in a concise, lively and witty form. The author opens the backdoor for further cross-fertilisations beyond the highveld, even beyond South Africa (14). I suspect this well-crafted book will appeal equally to scholars interested in interdisciplinary approaches, as to the general reading public.

Olivia Loots

olivialoots123@gmail.com

University of Pretoria

Pretoria, South Africa

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3603-6059>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v58i2.11264>