Analysis of the Imaginative Geographies of Climate Smart Mining and their re-imagination by the

Khuthala environmental care group (KECG) in Mpumalanga province, South Africa

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Abstract: Mining communities in the Mpumalanga province in SA have been made to bear the brunt of the environmental and social costs of mining activities. In response to these issues, the World Bank initiated the Climate Smart Mining (CSM) facility in 2017. The solutions include the closing down of coal mines to be replaced with renewables and to ensure a just transition for workers. Preliminary findings show that CSM fails to resolve the environmental and social repercussions due to the rise of mining activities in abandoned coal mines and the lack of accountability of the World Bank for previous mining interventions. This research utilizes Edward Said’s Imaginative Geographies to show how colonial discourses are reproduced in main CSM documents. These false depictions justify continued Western intervention that do not address culpability nor present viable solutions for ecological and social restoration. Further, the research identifies responses by the Khuthala Environmental Care Group that forms a re-imagining of the geography of Mpumalanga as communities seek to restore their damaged environment. This article concludes that the World Bank’s CSM needs to shed these colonial discourses in form and substance to empower mining communities.

Keyword: Climate Smart Mining, South Africa, Environmental Justice, Imaginative Geographies,

Postcolonialism

In September 2022, the World Bank finalized plans to provide a loan to the South African power authority, ESKOM, to decommission a coal power plant in Mpumalanga province and replace it with a renewable station (Reuters 2022). The ESKOM renewable project would mean that up to $3.75 billion would be injected into the South African wind and solar infrastructure (World Bank 2022). This investment into South Africa and Mpumalanga province is not surprising since Mpumalanga is a key supplier of energy to the rest of South Africa and 60% of its surface area is dedicated to mining (Simpson et. al. 2019). This effort forms part of its Climate Smart Mining facility that was established in 2017 to ensure responsible extractions, while moving to renewables. While seemingly positive changes to the economy and society in Mpumalanga province, this shift to renewables has not resulted in net gains for the mining communities in the region. There are two gaps that CSM fails to address, namely the rise of mining activities in abandoned mines that were not properly decommissioned and the lack of accountability for the environmental health issues faced by the communities in the area due to the mining activities over the years. Utilizing Edward Said’s (2000) concept of Imaginative Geographies, this research posits that the continuation of colonial discourses within the World Bank’s Climate Smart Mining documents falsely represent mining spaces in South Africa and the strategic utility of these discourses hinder true empowerment of the Mpumalanga communities caught in an economic and environmental trap. This research also considers the activities of the Khuthala Environmental Care Group (KECG) to resist and reverse these imaginative geographies as a model of empowerment from below. The paper is organized as follows. First, it provides the background of Mpumalanga, its history and impact of mining in the area. Second, it explains the utility and importance of Said’s Imaginative Geographies to uncovering colonial discourses within the context of South African subordination of black communities and the methods applied in this research to produce these results. Third, it considers the imaginative geographies within the context of the World Bank’s CSM documents. Lastly, it considers the strategies utilized by the KECG to resist these imaginative geographies.

Mpumalanga: Background and mining impacts

Mpumalanga is one of nine provinces created after apartheid and the establishment of South Africa’s democratic government (Netshakhuma 2019). South Africa was occupied by the Dutch from 1652 to 1795 and 1803-1806. Great Britain then occupied South Africa from 1795 to 1803 and 1806 to 1961. In 1910, the English allowed the Dutch settlers to run their parliament from 1910 and was officially decolonized in 1961. Cape Town was the first landing spot for a Dutch trading company, Vereenigde Ootindische (VOC) who set it up as a halfway station. Recognizing the potential of the land, the company began moving inward to set up farms. Then when the British took over in 1795, other industrial activities ensued. (Oliver and Oliver 2017).

Industrial mining began with the discovery of gold in Pilgrims Rest, Mpumalanga. This led to the migration of thousands of people to Mpumalanga hoping to get rich by gold mining (Cadman 2007). Coal was another mineral discovery that led to the growth in Mpumalanga. It has become the main livelihood of communities in the area and the province now houses major coal-fired power stations - three of which are the biggest in the southern hemisphere. Mpumalanga produces about 80% of the country’s coal (ichorcoal 2022). These mines attract migrant workers into mining cities. These workers (African males) stand on street corners to be employed as day laborers and often live in shacks without their families. They face low and uncertain incomes and are vulnerable to the boom-and-bust cycles of the mining industry (Blaauw et. al. 2022).

These precarious work conditions are a by-product of the apartheid regime that continues to maintain power to mining corporations owned by elites. There are no proper enforcement and compliance mechanisms in place (Ramoshaba 2019). Communities were excluded from consultation and decision-making powers pertaining to the construction and continuation of mines in their area. They were also made to bear the environmental and health consequences (Leonard 2018). A problem created by mining industries is the dependence of coal mining as a main income producer in the region. Corporations have abruptly abandoned mines due to sudden drops in mineral prices, strikes and intra-union violence (Baxter et. al. 2017). The World Bank is also looking to finance the decommissioning of mining in Mpumalanga with the promise of establishing renewables (World Bank 2022). To resolve this income void, illegal miners or Zama-zamas take over mining activities in the area. They take huge risks to extract small amounts of available minerals (Siyongwana & Shabalala 2019). In 2015, there were 239 officially operating mines in Mpumalanga, contrasted with 788 “derelict and ownerless mines” (Simpson et al., 2019).

Beyond the social issues created by the entry and departure of mining industries, the environmental impact of mining has been extensive. A 2018 study in Mpumalanga found that land and ecosystem degradation due to improper mining techniques and a lack of proper cleanup, can negatively affect the health and livelihoods of surrounding host communities. Particularly, mining drainage can affect the crops and livestock, which small mining communities rely heavily on (Shongwe 2018). Farming is difficult due to sterilization of land due to mining activities such as underground fires, surface collapse and acidification of topsoil (Mbedzi et. al. 2020). Another problem is the degradation of air and water quality due to mining waste (Simpson et. al. 2019). One underground mine in Dullstroom, Mpumalanga was “decanting” into the nearby river (Leonard 2017). The crumbling infrastructure from abandoned mines, obstruction of the river system by the quarry, and mining dust result in polluted water and air for the nearby communities (Siyongwana & Shabalala 2019; van Tonder & Coetzee 2009). Acid runoff has led to destruction of the area’s biodiversity by killing local fish species, crocodiles, and frogs (van Tonder & Coetzee 2009).

These environmental impacts have subjected the locals to serious health risks. A study of coal miners in Mpumalanga, South Africa found a high association between pneumoconiosis and cumulative respirable dust exposure (Naidoo et. al. 2004). And a 2008 study into the pulmonary tuberculosis (TB) within Mpumalanga miners found there to be a high correlation between “lifetime mean exposure levels” and the presence of past and present TB (Mphofu 2009). Miners in the area were also more susceptible to “developing quartz-associated diseases, such as silicosis.” (Doyle et. al., 2009). The risk of death is also imminent due to the unstable conditions of mines especially for the illegal miners. Illegal miners often die in precarious situations as they enter dangerous mining conditions without proper equipment (Cosatu 2019). There have been documented cases of spontaneous combustion of abandoned coal mines from acceleration both above and below the ground (van Tonder & Coetzee 2009). Yet, there are difficulties holding mining companies accountable for social and environmental abuse (Leonard 2017). The mining industry has continued to exert power and influence over the South African government during and after apartheid (van Wyk et al., 2009).

Concept and method

Edward Said’s Imaginative Geographies remains underutilized in the study of politics and space and its interactions with race relations within the context of South Africa. It is a valuable tool to examine the World Bank’s CSM documents since it challenges uncontested memory of spaces and dismantles popular histories that have reified certain actors and priorities over the narratives and realities of those on the ground. Said’s Imaginative Geographies highlights the nature of fiction that has been birthed from within the colonial imaginaries to depict spaces in ways that justify intervention and destruction while capitalizing on the resources present in those spaces. Said himself presents the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through these narratives of the West and the exclusion of historical narratives produced from ethnic or collective memory (Said 2000). The erasure of local narratives of spaces results in the production of unequal social and spatial relations through which the Orient (uncivilized) was created for the Occident (civilized). Through these imaginative geographies, spaces occupied by the Orient are rendered to be peripheral or insignificant in contrast with the metropoles occupied by the Occident (Dawson 2013).

First, Said’s concept of imaginative geographies assists in explaining the processes that place the Whites over the Blacks in the delineation of functions of spaces. In the examination of suburban mixing in South Africa, Ballard (2010) examined the discourses presented by the settler colonialists to undermine and categorize ritual animal slaughter by their African neighbors as “uncivilized” and these practices would taint the living spaces owned by the Whites. The practice of animal slaughter to celebrate adulthood was described as “barbaric, cruel and unnecessary”. These imaginative geographies also include the building of environments where settler colonialist define what is aesthetically pleasing and decide on the flora and fauna that are acceptable while rejecting the natural inhabitants and species in specific areas in South Africa. Ballard & Jones (2011) for example explain the formation of eco-estates that situate White colonialists close to reserves whilst simultaneously excluding indigenous communities and other unwanted natural species. In addition, the concept of imaginative geographies also informs the study of South African landscapes and the ways that the White farmers have continued to monopolize land ownership on grounds that the Blacks could not be trusted with the ensuring productivity of land. Afrikaner discourses on modernity and tradition have kept African communities from working on their own lands (Fraser 2007).

Further, Said’s imaginative geographies provide the conceptual backing to support the resurgence of scholarship and activism on South Africa that connect environmental management with racial segregation. Keep (2001) for example studied the exclusion of marginalized groups to information and access to meetings. Kirshner et. al. (2019) also considers the segregating nature of environmental management through the formation of the solar PV socio-technical regime. In terms of activism, Said’s imaginative geographies would help to uncover the colonial discourses on spaces that have resulted in pushback by the natural inhabitants of the space. Scott & Barnett (2009) show how civic science has been used to pressure the state and capital to acknowledge the racial components in space management. They show how the environmental movement is reframing the environmental movement as a brown issue within social environmental justice and rights embedded within democracy.

The method utilized in this research is discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is the study of the performative function of language in the processes of knowledge making and its legitimization (Vennesson 2003; Jorgensen and Phillips 2002). Language and the context in which it resides determines, constructs, and molds the position of speakers and recipients in societies and systems. Interactions become the focal point of study since they enact and recognize socially significant identities (Gee 2014). Hence the study of the role of the World Bank in strengthening the relationship between capitalizing Western entities within the context of the extractives in South Africa and its Black mining communities calls for the study of distinct types of discourses employed within its policy documents. This method unravels the complex relations between entities in the maintenance of colonial superiority in a decolonized world. Texts also become the loci of power relations and the ways that dominant ways are legitimized over time through concealing strategies that normalize violence (Jaipal-Jamani 2014). This is because discourse analysis moves beyond the static concept of roles and examines interactions as constructed from one moment to another (Gordon 2015). The sources of data to study discourses could be evident in any type of text, conversations, symbols or actions. Within the context of the World Bank, I utilized historical archives, memoirs, interview transcripts, and policy documents and reports found in the World Bank databank dating back from the 1950s. The questions utilized when studying these texts include: How is the text situated within the broader society? What messages does the text communicate in terms of institutional and social conventions? What are the dominant ways of talking, doing, and being, and how does this perpetuate inequalities and power hierarchies? (Jaipal-Jamani 2014).

I examined key documents produced for the World Bank’s CSM facility to identify the modes of knowledge making and legitimation of mining lands and communities. For the purposes of this research, I examined three comprehensive reports on Climate Smart Mining (acquired through the World Bank open document website and various press releases issued by the World Bank since 2017. These include Minerals for Climate Action: The Mineral Intensity of the Clean Energy Transition (Hund et. al. 2020), The Growing Role of Minerals and Metals for a Low Carbon Future (The World Bank, 2017); Reuse and Recycling: Environmental Sustainability of Lithium-Ion Battery Energy Storage Systems – report on the advancements made in the recycling industry pertaining to lithium-ion batteries (ESMAP 2020). To provide examples of transference of colonial rhetoric, I examine narratives on the spaces occupied by the Africans by their colonial settlers between the 1870s to 1940s. These include historical documents such as legislative debates in the National Assembly of South Africa and reports by the Afrikaner government. These are accessible through historical archives maintained through the University of Witwatersrand. Finally, to study the reimagining of geographies from below by KECG, I examined their official research publications, events, social media, literature, and press releases on Khuthala environmental care group.

Imaginative geographies in the World Bank’s CSM facility

The imaginative geographies found within the CSM documents include certain false assumptions as well as the exclusion of the culpability of colonialist ventures on the environmental and social implications of mining in the region.

First, the World Bank’s CSM justifies the continued extraction of minerals in the global South on the grounds that there are economic development opportunities available for developing states whilst ensuring that there is enough metals available for the expansion of the renewable sector. The burden of the transition to a green economy therefore rests with the expansion of mining activities in developing states. The rhetoric seems to be that sacrifices need to be made by these states to protect the global environment despite the dangers to the environment and health that these extraction activities pose to local communities and natural resources. For example, in the World Bank report on Minerals for Climate Action, the organization suggested that “resource-rich developing countries will be major contributors to the clean energy future by producing a significant part of these strategic minerals and supplying them to the global market.” And then further, the World Bank explained in the “Growing Role of Minerals and Metals for a Low Carbon Future (2017), (that) a number of key developing countries have been identified as having a potentially consequential role in producing these strategic minerals.” (World Bank 2017, 97). Without the extraction activities in developing states, carbon emissions could not be effectively mitigated (World Bank 2017, 98). This is also corroborated by statements in other World Bank documents such as the “Reuse and Recycling: Environmental Sustainability of Lithium-Ion Battery Energy Storage Systems (2020), where the World Bank suggested that the world would not have access to green technology if developing states did not participate in the production of lithium-ion batteries. Consider the statement below that places the burden on developing states to extract.

“There is simply not enough lithium or other key metals being recycled to meet global climate targets. In addition, extending LiBESS beyond its initial transportation function to cover stationary sources (reuse rather than recycle), may result in an increase in primary extraction to cover EV battery demands. Resource-rich developing countries could be well positioned to provide those resources.” (Reuse and Recycling: Environmental Sustainability of Lithium-Ion Battery Energy Storage Systems 2020, 12).

This development approach is no different from earlier rhetoric of the World Bank in the 1950s when providing loans for the mining of coal. World Bank reports identify South Africa’s potential for growth through extraction of minerals and the capacity to pay back loans would be through mining (Collier 1950). To accelerate growth, the World Bank financed the South African Electricity Supply Commission (ESKOM) to build a 1,600-megawatt thermal power plant in Camden, Mpumalanga, thereby putting South Africa in debt for $20 million dollars (World Bank 1966).

The second imaginative geography observed in the World Bank’s CSM documents is the rhetoric of the under-utilization of minerals in the global South. There is a myth, according to Andrew Sluyter (1999), that pre-colonial landscapes lacked dense populations and productive land uses, therefore “native cultures” did not have the intellectual capacity to utilize their land and resources effectively. This notion continues to mold today’s land and economic policies and is used to justify institutions and technologies. It also justifies the legitimation of metrics of success based on modernity (Sluyter 1999). This form of imaginative geography is visible in the World Bank’s CSM documents as well. The World Bank proposes that it needed to have greater access to data to know where these minerals are and the extent of their reserves. Through better access to data, efficient extraction would ensure net benefits for the environment and global economy. Some examples of this type of narrative are presented below.

“In fact, the most striking conclusion to draw is that significant gaps exist in providing current and robust data with which to map relevant mineral and metal resources in developing country regions (Africa, Asia, and Latin America). For example, the U.S. Geological Survey’s 2016 global mapping of production and reserve levels of metals covered in this exercise show NO profile for potential contributions from Africa for cadmium, molybdenum, silver, rare earth metals, and zinc, and relatively small profiles for copper, iron ore, and lithium.” (World Bank’s Climate Smart Mining Report 2020, 26)

South Africa has the potential to be a big producer of manganese. The potential can be uncovered when data is collected for the purposes of renewables. The same can be said of manganese —while Africa is estimated to have about 32 percent of the globe’s reserves, the U.S. Geological Survey estimates that South Africa alone contains 75 percent of manganese resources worldwide (World Bank’s Climate Smart Mining Report 2020, 27).

This type of advice by the World Bank to the government of South Africa is not new. The World Bank has produced reports that identify the potential for coal and other mineral to be effectively mined in order to spur economic growth. Further, the World Bank has identified labor shortage as a barrier and pushed for greater insertion of African unskilled workers into the industry (World Bank 1955). Criticism of the inability to maintain a good transportation services to move coal was also mentioned in a World Bank economic report in 1958 (World Bank 1958; World Bank 1965).

Lastly, the World Bank’s CSM documents indicate that its intrusion into the mining economy of South Africa is justified on the ground of its superior knowledge on green mining. Western powers utilize environmental discourses of technological innovation to promise the formation of a utopic green society that ignores the colonial power structure embedded within global institutions. Through this colonial amnesia, the notion of the Anthropocene “sustains whiteness into the future” (Erickson 2020, 111-128). The World Bank continues to sustain these colonial imaginative geographies through the notion that it is the leading authority in guiding states such as South Africa to green sustainable living despite their involvement in funding polluting industries decades earlier. One example is the involvement of the World Bank in providing expert assistance in the production of Technical Guidelines for South Africa to reduce their GHG gases by all industries including coal mining (World Bank 2016).

Another example is the expert assistance provided by the World Bank to report and measure standards of recycling and reuse of lithium-ion batteries. For an example of this rhetoric, consider the statement below.

“While the growing demand for minerals and metals provides economic opportunities for resource-rich developing countries and the industry alike, significant challenges will likely emerge if the climate-driven clean energy transition is not managed responsibly and sustainably. Without climate-smart mining practices, negative impacts from mining activities will increase, affecting already vulnerable communities in developing countries, as well as the environment in which they operate.” (World Bank’s Climate Smart Mining Report 2020, 101)

This type of narrative suggests that since the World Bank is the expert on sustainability, it would be best for developing states to trust the entity to properly manage data on reserves, provide technical assistance for developing nations, such as South Africa and the assistance in the development of technology. The World Bank suggests that it is through this type of developmental assistance that mining could be sustainably managed and developing states could effectively deal with the externalities of mining. This type of rhetoric disregards the impact of mining so far and the historical emissions of the developed world. A few examples of statements that delegitimize the knowledge and capacity of developing states are provided below.

“Developing countries must engage on this issue as a matter of some urgency: the collection and retention of valuable materials from Li-ion batteries could represent a strategic economic resource. It could also help ease the cost of countries embarking on a clean energy transition” (25) Reuse and Recycling: Environmental Sustainability of Lithium-Ion Battery Energy Storage Systems (2020)

“This report will inform policy makers, private sector actors, and civil society organizations in their quest to help resource-rich developing countries sustainably and responsibly produce the minerals needed to deliver on SDGs 7 and 13.” (World Bank’s Climate Smart Mining Report 2020, 56)

“Africa is one of the regions that would most directly benefit from a robust circular economy program for Li-ion batteries. The continent is, by far, the poorest region with respect to electricity access.” (Reuse and Recycling: Environmental Sustainability of Lithium-Ion Battery Energy Storage Systems 2020, 23)

And this intrusion on the grounds of technological advancement has also been pushed by the World Bank earlier in its tenure. In 1953, the World Bank loaned South Africa $60 million dollars in capital to improve the railway system to ensure that ESKOM would be able to increase its energy output (World Bank 1953). The document produced by the World Bank suggested that their intervention was crucial to the overall development of South Africa. Then in 1961, the World Bank continued to provide loans to South Africa and ESKOM to improve its railways and electric power facilities to reduce traffic bottlenecks in moving mining goods to processing facilities (World Bank 1961).

These three main discourses found in the World Bank’s CSM documents – focusing on the developing world to extract, underutilization of minerals and the upholding of knowledge superiority of the West – strengthens the discourses that keep the developing world and South Africa in a place of continued dependence. These discourses also ignore the social impact of mining and the continued reproduction of race relations through extractives. In the case of South Africa, World Bank funding into mining activities strengthen the racial bar set forth by the Afrikaners (and African elitists) who own and run these mines. Mines have been significant sites in keeping back Africans from advancing socially and economically. Apartheid laws prohibited Africans from owning mining industry or sell minerals which belonged to their masters. Anyone who purchased minerals from Africans was subjected to cruel punishments including cropping of ears, destruction of property and fifty lashes in the public marketplace. Blacks were also not allowed to set foot on mines without their Boer masters nor would they be granted licenses to mine (Smalberger 1976). Africans were instead hired as cheap labor. Black mineworkers were placed in compounds where they were surveilled. These compounds were single sex living barracks where they were served poor quality food (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2011). They were watched by private mine police who were armed with batons and knobkerries. The mine police were supported by the South African police who had firearms and military vehicles. Restricted by fences and barbed wire, there was no difference between the workplace, the compound, and the jail (Kwet 2020). In addition, there was no way of advancement in rank since Africans could not be promoted, supervise any White mineworkers, or leave their contracts without serious criminal prosecution (Allen 2005; Merrett 2018). They were not recognized as employees and if they missed work without a lawful case, they would be charged as criminals (Report of the Select Committee of the Masters and Servants Act 1872, 5).

The mining prisons were justified on the grounds that strict discipline is needed to ensure that the Africans would be protected from vices such as drinking (Stoddart 1898). Certain historical texts justify these mistreatments as voluntarily experienced by Africans. Nevertheless, the nature of these “voluntary” contracts rendered them slaves. Those who go down to the mines “never came back at all or came back utterly demoralized” (Aborigines Protection Society London: Native Labour in South Africa 1903, 9). Also, the Afrikaners justified the compound system as a benefit for African workers. The statement below shows the justification of this exercise of power.

“The compound system in Kimberley has been one of the best things that has happened to the natives because it has saved thousands of them from misery and degradation” (Rev. Moffat in the Report of the South African Native Races Committee 1901, 145).

Likewise, in the case of Climate Smart Mining, justifications for the expansion of extractive industries in developing states like South Africa deny proprietary rights to indigenous communities with the noble excuse of climate protection and economic expansion. Further, these World Bank documentations are silent on issues of culpability of the apartheid-based energy complex that continue to allow for injustices to continue for communities impacted by mining activities such as in Mpumalanga.

Similarly, Afrikaners have consistently utilized inefficient extraction as an excuse for intervention. For example, in the farming industry, lack of optimization of land use justifies the annexation and taking of lands away from local pastoralists and forced their exodus into the mining industry (Beinart 2003). Prior to the arrival of the Dutch, pastoralists grazed freely on their ancestral land and accessed watering points when they passed through. The Afrikaners seized these watering points and forced the pastoralists to work for them to gain access to these watering points (Pooley 2012). Further, the Land Act of 1913 restricted land ownership of the Natives to reserves amounting to 13% of South Africa. (O’Meara 1975). Not only did these actions reduce the capacity of the Blacks to maintain their herds but it also created deplorable conditions in arid reserves (Report of the Native Economic Commission 1930-1932). These conditions also led to the syphoning of African labor into White farms and mines (O’Meara 1975). This denigration of African farmers and their cultivated space can be seen in the historical text below.

“As a stock farmer, the Native has not been very successful, and he is probably the worst agriculturist in the world” (Loram 1915, 235).

The settler colonialist narratives suggest that these Afrikaner miners have allowed Africans to survive due to their inability to pasture and produce efficiently from their land without acknowledging the oppressive policies that were put in place to create unjust conditions for the Africans.

In the context of environmental protection, early historical processes reveal the production of knowledge complexes that exclude indigenous communities. The Dutch colonialists introduced colonial scientism that brought botanists, hydrologists, foresters, and veterinarians to form a scientific bureaucracy. These formed large scale social engineering and social experiments and a colonial way of managing the African environment and of crafting knowledge on African societies (Bonneuil 2000).

Through this bureaucracy, the Afrikaners imposed a ban on game hunting and blamed the Blacks for hunting animals into extinction (Hornaday and Haagner 1922). These colonial narratives that reserve knowledge making processes with the Afrikaners simultaneously undermine the physical and mental capacity of the Africans. Colonial narratives depict African bodies as stronger and with greater abilities to tolerate pain. Therefore, they could be subjected to more work (Loram 1915).

Colonial narratives also describe the Africans as willing laborers who would accept any sum of money because they were not familiar with the currency system. The Dutch settlers even blamed their laziness on the Africans who were too “weak to demand more”. It made it possible for the Dutch to label certain work as “Kafir” work (“Kafir” is a racial slur) (Loram 1915). Through these narratives of the local inhabitants, colonialists claim supremacy over their bodies and their land. One example of the narrative

is provided below.

“Will the White population of the Union permit the Black population to slaughter game in season and out of season, so long as any game remains? Are the people of South Africa powerless to regulate, repress and at times entirely forbid game-killing by natives? Have the Blacks become so strong that they cannot reasonably be controlled?” (Hornaday and Haagner 1922, 8).

In sum, the World Bank’s CSM discourses that places the burden of an energy transition to the developing world, inefficient extraction in the global South and the superiority of knowledge of the West continue to strengthen the Afrikaner controlled mineral-energy complex in South Africa and ignores historical culpability of these Afrikaner controlled companies in its past mistreatment and continued subordination of African communities such as the one in the Mpumalanga province. In the following section, I explain the ways that communities within Mpumalanga have waged resistance against these colonialist imaginative geographies and are attempting to revive their degraded environment.

Re-imagining Geographies through the Khuthala (tireless workers) Environmental Care Group (KECG)

Attempts to redefine the landscape and community history of the Mpumalanga province have been made by the KECG group. The KECG was formed in 2000 and comprises young men and women from Wesselton. It is run by 14 members who volunteer their time. It began with the vision of the group to clean up the township. According to their Facebook page, early projects entailed the cleaning up of illegal dumping sites and transforming them into parks for children to play. Through its demands for the rehabilitation of abandoned mines and its cleaning up efforts, the group was awarded the Greening Project award and was recognized by the Department of Environmental Affairs. The KECG has even appeared before the legislative body to rehabilitate their environment. It has also shown initiative by partnering with international groups such as GreenPeace, WoMin, Khuthala & Reasoma, Groundwork and HEJN (Khuthala Facebook 2022). These efforts to re-narrate the stories behind the landscape and communities impacted by the establishment of mines, abandonment of mines and the continued extraction for renewables, take on four main characteristics. These are examined below.

Redefining the work of “Zama-zamas” to artisanal miners

The first is the effort to formalize and reverse the notion of “illegal miners” or Zama-zamas (which is a slur that means those who try to get something from nothing). By humanizing their experiences, efforts are underway to protect these workers under national labor provisions. The group has set up a de facto organization called the National Association of Artisanal Miners (Harrisberg 2020). Activists present the importance of highlighting the stories of these artisanal miners and seek to remove the stigma of their mining activities since they are not employed by mining companies. In a documentary produced by KCET, activists question the treatment of law enforcement against these hardworking miners who operate outside of the formal economy system (KCET & Thomson Reuters Foundation 2020).

“These people are not criminals. They are brothers and fathers looking for something to put on the table” (KCET & Thomson Reuters Foundation 2020)

This type of formalization efforts forms part of a broader emancipatory strategy to move the dial in racially driven labeling. Landless African miners targeted through restrictive land ownership policies should not be further subordinated through laws that render their minimal extraction illegal while supporting a mineral energy complex that extracts at greater volumes. These types of redefinitions as resistance are not new. For example, the Black Belt Initiative in the Southern part of the US. Black Belt communities worked in collaboration with regional universities to establish a regional commission to deal with conditions of persistent poverty (Harris & Hyden 2017). Another example is the redefinition of relationships between the local inhabitants and their land. In the case of the Unist’ot’en Resistance and Action Camp in Canada, the group redefined the movement from a “blockade” to “gateway” (Temper 2019). Thus, the change of terminology from a negative connotation of “zama-zamas” to “artisanal miners” equips local inhabitants with rights to the minerals and protection from the dangers of abandoned mines. Efforts to protect these artisanal miners are absent in the World Bank documents which merely identify efficiency in extraction and reduction of mining waste. This absence in the World Bank’s documents indicate a construction of these extractive spaces as devoid of a history and context that was built on racial, sexist and classist exploitations.

Restoring the position of community members as knowledge holders of the soil

The second effort by the KECG to redefine the imagined geography of Mpumalanga is by reversing the notion of productivity beyond extraction to restoration. The KECG have worked with artisanal miners and thousands of other community members for the last 20 years to grow food to feed themselves. Through local knowledge of the land, the KECG has initiated soil restoration processes and the land is able to sustain small farming practices (Mndebele 2021). Beyond restoration and transition work for ex-miners, activists also give crash courses about people’s rights and how air pollution negatively impacts the community (Rivin 2018). One activist has expressed her intention of joining the movement and the benefits of restoring the land.

“I love environment and nature, so I joined the struggle. We fought the Imbabala mine … People were already fighting the mine from before, so I joined that struggle. We do lots of things, as Khuthala: community-based work, donations, organising in wards … Our struggle in Ward 3 is dealing with education, water, and we have introduced Agricultural Development Committees (ADCs). As ADCs, we go to the Department of Agriculture. They provide seeds for people’s gardens since about five years ago. We can talk on behalf of community [in the ward committee].(Community researcher Linda Magagula, in Hallowes and Munnik 2020, 54).

These efforts within communities to reverse the colonialist imaginative geographies that render these spaces as unoccupied, barren, and lacking productive extraction are not new. In the case of the Moravian farmers in the Wupperthal, South Africa for example, their historical connection to the Cederberg and the historical cultivation of Rooibos led to their adaptation to engage in market-based production. They also have coupled these efforts with claims of social justice, racial reparation, and sociocultural healing (Keahey 2019). And while community gardens are not commonly studied as sites of resistance, these projects do empower women folk and their families. These efforts have succeeded in reducing poverty and increasing positive health outcomes for their families and community (Vibert 2016).

Hence, this move by the KECG forms a local effort that joins the global environmental justice movement that remains stalwart to the cause of social and environmental protection. The World Bank Climate Smart Mining documentation do not emphasize community and environmental health in these mining areas and hence, efforts need to be placed by global entities to ensure that local action from below would receive the necessary fiscal support to follow-through on their restoration projects.

Redefining productivity and establishing the community as environmental stewards

Moving away from the economic urgency to extract and profit, the group has pushed for educating the locals on climate change, planting trees, and how to rehabilitate open mines. They have also rehabilitated a 5-hectare dump into a park (Harrisberg 2020). And in videos posted on Facebook, the KECG is raising awareness of abandoned mines and its impact on the community. For example, the Imbabala mine is a sinkhole where people and animals have fallen into, the water is contaminated, and where underground fires occur (Mndebele 2021). The activists within KECG have a greater awareness of the need to redefine productivity within the context of environmental healing as could be observed in the statement by an activist below.

“Activists know what is happening because we have learnt about climate change. We can also see that many people are suffering and cannot grow food because it is too hot and there is no water. As for the elites, the climate crisis and the end of coal “The elites don’t care”: People on the frontlines of Coal, Covid and the Climate Crisis. They don’t care that people are suffering from climate change impacts, for what they do or want is to make money because they don’t feel the impact the same way as poor people. It is important for activists to teach people about what is happening about climate change because most people have no idea, especially young kids (Hallowes and Munnik 2020, 211)

Projects such as these have connected the youth to the land within the context of their cultures in accessible spaces. Through these types of efforts to restore roots and rebuild broken communities of stolen lands, it provides opportunities to reclaim cultures by affirming indigenous methodologies and pedagogies – alternate ways of knowing and connecting with the environment (Fast et. al. 2021). These projects also allow for the legitimation of local knowledge and practices pertaining to the notion of productivity. Recognition of local knowledge and practices can be used to address problems that face global society and the process of embodying this knowledge in environmental management and decisionmaking (McGregor 2004). There is evidence to show that ethnodevelopment projects based on local knowledge have contributed to the overall biological and cultural conservation and it forms a dynamic and adaptive process of relationships that cannot be coopted into scientific ways of knowing (Congretel & Pinton 2020). These attempts to redefine the notion of productivity within the local context of Mpumalanga indicate this shift in knowledge making. However, this type of legitimation of local knowledge is absent in the World Bank documentation. Rather, knowledge is dispersed from the “experts” within the World Bank, and this does not facilitate the strengthening of communities from below.

Redefining Mpumalanga as a healthy environment versus an extractive site for green technology

Finally, there is evidence that the KECG is rebuilding a broken community to counter the effects of unjust development and mining policies. For example, the KECG has established the Nomzamo Agricultural village - a shack settlement that accommodates those evicted by the municipality. The land was acquired from the Imbabala coal mine since it was abandoned by its owners in 2011. They encountered a few challenges from the bureaucratic and institutional structures in the region as indicated in the statements by the activists provided below.

“Nomzamo is next to Imbabala mine. It is an abandoned open pit mine. Some time ago, we [Khuthala] talked to the mine boss to give us the land. There is lots of space there but also lots of sinkholes and now parts of the cliff face are falling in. We have been fighting him since long before because the mine is too close to the community – causing the usual problems of dust and cracked houses. But they ran away and left it abandoned. We looked for the mine owner to return to rehabilitate the mine – but he could not be found. We have talked to the provincial departments of agriculture and environment and requested the land. Amongst other things, we took a petition to Parliament and approached the DMR (Department of Mineral Resources). We want it rehabilitated for human settlement as there is no other land.” (Hallowes and Munnik 2020, 55)

The KECG continue to challenge the ownership of the land and they continue to resist the encroachment of mining companies onto their surrounding environment. Unlike the World Bank’s CSM imagined geography that coaxes developing countries like South Africa to extract for the sake of the development of green technology and renewables, the KECG is resisting these notions of development for the restoration of their local and global environmental health. Activists visit homes of community members, form shared experiences through communication and work together to empower each other (Rivin 2018). These resistances could be observed in the statements below.

“We are fighting with the municipality so that they can use local companies to build RDP houses, not companies from Johannesburg. But when you talk against these companies, you risk being assaulted. These companies are politically connected, and they have their local connections too. (Hallowes and Munnik 2020, 97)

“When climate change gets more intense, they’ll come down on us like hell fire – the big guys don’t like to be told what to do by little guys like us. We need protection for activists. Nevertheless, under climate change: I see activism becoming stronger. We have always been clear about our demands. I do not see the intensity declining. Especially because coal is still with us. (Hallowes and Munnik 2020, 210)

This move by the KECG forms an “environmental repossession” which describes the processes of responses by local communities based on their local needs. Through self-determination over their land, indigenous inhabitants are claiming rights to their material resources and their history, knowledge and responsibilities that are intrinsic to these spaces (Nightingale & Richmond 2022). These efforts have also assisted in the empowerment of youth in achieving agency. Environmental repossession has the capacity to decolonize and can restore the health and wellness of locals (Hatala et. al. 1982).

Conclusion

Communities in Mpumalanga province continue to be impacted by mining activities and the aftermath of mining. This paper has explained the far-reaching impact of mining on the health of the people and the environment in the area including exposure to diseases and pollution of its vital resources. The World Bank’s CSM facility presents false narratives that the developing world should bear the burden of a green transition, the under-utilization of land for extractives justifies intervention and the setting up of the World Bank as the knowledge holder to navigate through massive environmental problems. In response to these colonialist imaginative geography, the KECG has waged a resistance to alter these narratives through the formalization of artisanal miners, restoration of the soil, reclamation of knowledge, rebuilding of the communities, and environmental repossession. This research aims to show that there is much room for improvement in the World Bank’s repertoire to include marginalized voices whose lives are most impacted by extractive industries and their dangerous reimagination within the renewable sector.

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