Other Geographies
Antipode Book Series

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Other Geographies

The Influences Of Michael Watts

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Series Editors’ Preface

The *Antipode Book Series* explores radical geography ‘antipodally’, in opposition, from various margins, limits, or borderlands.

*Antipode* books provide insight ‘from elsewhere’, across boundaries rarely transgressed, with internationalist ambition and located insight; they diagnose grounded critique emerging from particular contradictory social relations in order to sharpen the stakes and broaden public awareness. An *Antipode* book might revise scholarly debates by pushing at disciplinary boundaries, or by showing what happens to a problem as it moves or changes. It might investigate entanglements of power and struggle in particular sites, but with lessons that travel with surprising echoes elsewhere.

*Antipode* books will be theoretically bold and empirically rich, written in lively, accessible prose that does not sacrifice clarity at the altar of sophistication. We seek books from within and beyond the discipline of geography that deploy geographical critique in order to understand and transform our fractured world.

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Antipode Book Series Editors
Notes on Contributors

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Thomas J. Bassett’s research centres on the political ecology of agrarian change in West Africa. He earned his PhD in Geography at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1984. He was Professor Michael Watts’s first PhD student. Dr Bassett’s long-term research in West Africa grapples with the question of why peasant farmers and herders, despite their access to land and labour, remain vulnerable to food insecurity. His research in Côte d’Ivoire traces the transformation of farming and pastoral systems, their interactions with markets and the state, and the multi-scale political ecological dynamics that produce vulnerability as well as opportunities for reducing it. His recent publications focus on world market prices and cotton grower incomes in West Africa (World Development), the adaptation concept in the climate change literature (Geoforum) and political ecological perspectives on socio-ecological relations (Natures, Sciences et Sociétés). He also writes on the history of maps and mapmaking in Africa with contributions to three volumes of the six-volume The History of Cartography.

Joe Bryan’s research draws from 20 years of experience working with indigenous movements in the Americas, including work in Ecuador, Nicaragua, the United States and Mexico. Much of that work focuses on efforts by indigenous peoples to formulate claims to territory, in particular through the production of maps. He has written extensively on his
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**Sharad Chari** is at the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa and the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, and, from 2017, at the Department of Geography at Berkeley. He has taught at the LSE and at Michigan, where he was in Anthropology, History, and the Michigan Society of Fellows. Sharad has worked on gender, caste and work politics in agrarian and industrial South India, in *Fraternal Capital: Peasant-workers, self-made men, and globalization in provincial India* (Stanford, 2004); development theories and trajectories, in the edited *Development Reader* (Routledge, 2008, with Stuart Corbrige); he is finishing a palimpsestic book on the past and present of racial capitalism and opposition in South Africa, called *Apartheid Remains*; and he is beginning research on archaic and emergent formations of racial/sexual capitalism in the Southern African Indian Ocean region. He works with agrarian studies, the Black radical tradition, documentary photography and other traditions of Earth-writing that have sought to stretch Marxist thought to realities considered (but not actually) peripheral to the planet.
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Susanne Freidberg received her PhD from Berkeley Geography in 1996 and is now Professor of Geography at Dartmouth College. Her research centres on the politics, practices and cultural meanings of food supply chains. While her dissertation examined the social and environmental history of commercial gardening in Burkina Faso, her more recent work focuses on the agricultural sustainability initiatives undertaken by the world’s biggest food companies. She is the author of two books, French Beans and Food Scares: Culture and Commerce in an Anxious Age (Oxford, 2004) and Fresh: A Perishable History (Harvard, 2009), as well as articles that have appeared in journals such as Economy and Society, Comparative Studies in Society and History, Science and Culture, Geoforum and Gastronomica.

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**Vinay Gidwani** is Professor of Geography and Global Studies at University of Minnesota. He studies the entanglements of labour and ecology in agrarian and urban settings, and capitalist transformations of these. He is particularly interested in the cultural politics and geographies of work. Vinay is the author of *Capital, Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008). Recent publications include articles in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* and *Economic and Political Weekly* (India). He is presently working on an ACLS-funded collaborative research project on the life-worlds of urban migrants in India who work in precarious informal economy jobs, and will be soon embarking on a new NSF-funded comparative study of Jakarta, Indonesia and Bangalore, India called ‘Speculative Urbanism: Land, Livelihoods, and Finance Capital’ with collaborators at Minnesota, UCLA, the National Institute of Advanced Study (Bangalore) and Tarumanagara University (Jakarta).

**Julie Guthman** is a geographer and Professor of Social Sciences at the University of California at Santa Cruz where she teaches courses primarily in global political economy and the politics of food and agriculture. She has published extensively on contemporary efforts to transform food production, distribution and consumption. Her publications include two multi-award-winning books: *Agrarian Dreams: the Paradox of Organic Farming in California* and *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism*. She is the recipient of the 2015 Excellence in Research Award from the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society.
Lucy Jarosz is Chair and Professor of Geography at the University of Washington. She first met Michael Watts through his book, Silent Violence, a gift that her advisor, Harold Scheub, Professor of African Language and Literature at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, gave to her. That book was an important introduction to Geography. Michael’s intellectual breadth and depth have remained an inspiration to her. She especially appreciates his interest in literature and the art of photography – in particular that of August Sander. Her interest in rural development, agriculture and food has remained constant since her graduate school days as one of his students at Berkeley. She has been fortunate to continue to study these topics in Madagascar, South Africa, the US and Canada. Her research draws from feminist political ecology and critical discourse analysis to examine how hunger and poverty are produced, addressed or magnified through agricultural development and change.

Moussa Koné earned his PhD in Geography from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign where he worked with Professor Thomas Bassett. He is Maître Assistant and teaches at the Institut de Géographie Tropicale (IGT), University Félix Houphouet-Boigny, Cocody-Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire. Dr Koné’s research interests centre on the political ecology of natural resource management and land rights systems. He utilizes geospatial technologies and qualitative and quantitative field techniques to investigate the social and biophysical dimensions of environmental change with emphasis on vulnerability and adaptation to climate change and variability. Dr. Koné currently participates in research projects that (1) assess the impact of the value chain approach on women farmers and household food security in the context of the New Green Revolution for Africa and (2) investigate how farmers and herders use fire as a tool for natural resource management in West African savannas, and how these practices modify landscapes over time and contribute to greenhouse gas emissions.

Jake Kosek is Associate Professor in Geography at Berkeley. He has been a Lang Postdoctoral Fellow at Stanford and a Ciriacy-Wantrup Fellow at Berkeley, and he has taught Anthropology at Stanford, and American Studies and Anthropology at the University of New Mexico. He is co-author of Race, Nature and the Politics of Difference (Duke, 2003) and author of the prize-winning Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico (Duke, 2006), an ethnography that examines the cultural politics of nature, race and nation amid violent struggles over forests in northern New Mexico. His forthcoming book, Homo-Apian: A Critical Natural History of the Modern Honeybee (Duke) examines manifestations of natural history in the present, exploring contemporary
taxonomies and varieties of nature, charting their resonance and discord with fossilized formations of prior natures.

Rebecca Lave is an Associate Professor in Geography at Indiana University. Her research takes a critical physical geography approach, combining political economy, STS and fluvial geomorphology to focus on the construction of scientific expertise, market-based environmental management, and water regulation. She has published in journals ranging from *Science* to *Social Studies of Science*, and is the author of *Fields and Streams: Stream Restoration, Neoliberalism, and the Future of Environmental Science* (2012, University of Georgia Press). She is co-editor of four forthcoming collections: the *Handbook of Political Economy of Science*, the *Handbook of Critical Physical Geography*, and two volumes on Doreen Massey. She also edits two book series: *Critical Environments: Nature, Science and Politics* at University of California Press (with Julie Guthman and Jake Kosek), and *Economic Transformations* at Agenda Publishing (with Brett Christophers, Jamie Peck and Marion Werner). Her current research focuses on the co-constituted hydrology, history and political economy of non-point source agricultural pollution in the US Midwest.

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Other Geographies, in the Work of Michael Watts

Sharad Chari, Susanne Freidberg, Jesse Ribot, Wendy Wolford and Vinay Gidwani

‘Remembering surely stands at the center of what a critical intellectualism must strive for’
Michael Watts, Introduction to the 2013 edition of Silent Violence, lxxxvi

Reflecting back on the 30 years since the publication of his monumental study of food, famine and agrarian change in the Nigerian Sahel, Watts (2013 [1983a]) notes the durability of hunger and famine, and the importance, against the odds, of squarely facing the many fronts of ‘silent violence’ in the contemporary world. Over four decades of research, writing, teaching, mentoring and performing exactly this ‘critical intellectualism’, Michael Watts has reconfigured our intellectual geographies, and enabled large numbers of students, colleagues, interlocutors and readers of his work to further such a critical project. His corpus has been dizzyingly wide and deep. From climate change to oil politics, decolonization to the spectacle of the everywhere war, gendered production politics to the commodity sensorium, African development to documentary photography, Michael’s work has pushed boundaries; he has transformed and bridged multiple fields, including the political economy of development, agrarian studies, political ecology, food and famine studies, African studies, and the cultural and political economy.
of the postcolonial South. He has written accounts of global social injustice with a close and critical attention to lived histories and geographies; and he has sought innovation in scholarly explanation, expression and advocacy. What stands out most is how prescient his work has been and how necessary it continues to be for understanding the present and the future. His generous and generative oeuvre shows how scholarly work can shape politics and praxis in multiple and unanticipated ways.

In this collection of essays, scholars touched by Michael’s writing and teaching map out and discuss his influences in their work and beyond. Mirroring Michael’s breadth, this collection ranges just as widely, including the political economy and ecology of African societies; governmentality and territoriality in various Southern contexts; critiques of the ‘resource curse’; cultural materialist expositions of capitalism, modernity and development across the postcolonial world; extensions of the classical agrarian question in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries; and persisting questions of food security, hunger and famine. The collection neither intends to follow the arc of his career, nor to exhaust all his contributions to the social sciences (but see the Appendix to this introduction for a guide to his oeuvre). Rather, the authors herein discuss the efficacy of Michael’s work in their own areas of research, outlining the possibilities for critical inquiry and representation that his ideas have engendered. In the spirit of engaging and extending Michael’s work, each essay presents research that builds on his legacy while exploring its theoretical, analytical and empirical implications for new questions, places and times. In other words, each essay is an opening for future work to pick up a set of questions in new places, and in new ways.

Like Michael’s writings, the chapters in this collection cross many categories. As a motley group of editors, we do not impose a view from on high that encompasses all possible engagements with his work; indeed this would be impossible. Neither do we aim to encompass all possible ‘other geographies’, following our title. There will be lacunae here for others to work with in productive ways. Rather, this introduction locates the chapters to follow in three generative areas of scholarship: political ecology, agrarian studies, and postcolonial power and praxis. These themes are intersecting rather than discreet arenas. An abiding concern with Third World and particularly African decolonization and development runs across his work and the work of several of his former students like a red thread. Similarly, Michael’s oeuvre is characterized by an abiding curiosity and openness that has allowed him to think across political economy and cultural studies, anthropology and history, social science and ecology, politics and aesthetics.
Changing Frontiers of Political Ecology

It is no exaggeration to say that Michael Watts is one of the most important scholars in the development of the now well-established field of political ecology. Political ecology emerged as a critique of the field of cultural ecology in the 1970s, which was at the time the dominant framework for human-environment relations. Cultural ecology, particularly the influential approach pioneered by Andrew Vayda and Roy Rappaport (1967), analysed how individuals, households and communities adapted to particular environments, in part by regulating access to resources through complex social rules. Cultural ecologists sought to understand how what they called ‘natural hazards’ – droughts, famines, floods – affected these complex adaptive rule-sets, particularly in so-called Third World settings. Beginning in the late 1970s, Michael’s work built on the valuable insights of cultural ecology to challenge some of the foundations of the field. He argued that cultural ecologists’ Darwinian notions of adaptation naturalized a set of relationships that were in fact fundamentally shaped by power and history, and particularly by histories of colonialism and capitalism. He further argued that while hazards such as drought and other ecological or climactic conditions may be beyond an individual’s control, political, social and economic conditions shaped how they are perceived and experienced – and indeed, whether or not they caused disasters.

In short, Michael showed that disaster is not natural, and that hazards are not hazards unless people are vulnerable – the precondition that transforms a natural event into a socially constructed hazard. Michael spent 15 months in Nigeria in the 1970s researching the social origins of famine among peasants. His (2013 [1983]) magnum opus, *Silent Violence: Food, Famine, and the Peasantry in Northern Nigeria*, remains one of the most important monographs in the discipline of geography today. Although journalist Alexander Cockburn, anthropologist Eric Wolf and environmental scientist Grahame Beakhurst had each previously employed the term ‘political ecology’, Michael’s conceptual and empirical insights in *Silent Violence* helped consolidate the new field of political ecology, connecting the political economy and social history of capitalist development to human-environment relations. ‘Political ecology’s originality and ambition,’ write Paulson, Gezon and Watts (2003, 206), ‘lay in its efforts to link social and physical sciences through an explicitly theoretical approach to ecological crises that was capable of accommodating general principles and detailed local studies of problems.’ Political ecology has since blossomed as a field, drawing on and developing insights from Michael’s work through multiple generations.
of scholars, including contributors to this volume mentored by Michael. Indeed, it is through this work that the Department of Geography at UC Berkeley became known for critical, fieldwork-driven social science research on nature-society or human-environment relations.

One of Michael’s first students, Judith Carney, went on to become another of political ecology’s foundational scholars. In retrospect, Carney was characteristic of the emerging reconstitution of the human geography of the erstwhile colonial or developing world at Berkeley through a combination of Marxist political economy, development studies, agrarian studies, anthropology, history and ecology. Carney’s early work (Carney 1986, 1988; Carney and Watts 1990, 1991) bridged the biophysical–social science divide by locating ecological inquiry within micro and macro political economies. Her chapter ‘Academic Journeys in the Black Atlantic: Gender, Work and Environmental Transformations’ recalls the method of intrepid curiosity that Michael has both practised and encouraged. He trained his students to pursue well-informed hunches: to situate their questions in history and place and to follow the chains of causality across time and space. In Carney’s case, cultural ecology could not answer her own questions about the power hierarchies that shaped people’s relations to land and other resources. In her early research on the culturally embedded, gender-differentiated effects of a Gambian rice development scheme, she turned instead to political economy, forging an approach that only later would be called political ecology. At the same time, she intervened in agrarian studies debates about the peasantry as a class, both revealing gender struggles within peasant communities and linking them to global trade policies.

While a progenitor of political ecology, Carney has also shown how the frontiers of this body of scholarship, as any other, must always shift. Indeed, Carney is a rare geographer to draw on the Black radical tradition in her important intervention on the Columbian Exchange, particularly in her 2002 book, Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas. In this and subsequent work, Carney has gone on to trace the historical connections between women’s roles in rice cultivation throughout the Atlantic world – from West Africa to Brazil’s quilombos to communities of slaves’ descendants in the US South – while continuing to pull gender and race into political ecology and indeed geography more broadly, and bringing insights from what Paul Gilroy (1993) called the ‘Black Atlantic’ to political ecology.

As any number of textbooks, edited volumes and handbooks attest (Chambers 1989; Blaikie et al. 1994; Mearns and Norton 2010; Redclift and Grasso 2013; Kasperson, Dow and Pigeon 2016), political ecology has since broadened and diversified. It has also attracted criticism for attending more to power than ecology (Vayda and Walters 1999), and as
strands of the field have moved towards post-structuralism, discourse analysis and deconstruction. Rebecca Lave has been at the forefront of a new initiative, another frontier of political ecology that aims to bridge physical geography, ecology and social science. Lave’s chapter, ‘Getting Back to Our Roots: Integrating Critical Physical and Social Science in the Early Work of Michael Watts’, argues that the nascent field of critical physical geography (CPG) can draw lessons from early political ecology scholarship. Lave characterizes the shift to ‘employ qualitative social science methods and constructivist epistemologies’ as part of a ‘post-structural’ turn signalled by Dick Peet and Michael Watts’ 1996 edited collection, *Liberation Ecologies*. While conceding that this work has yielded rich dividends in explicating the cultural politics and discursive entanglements of nature and culture (including race, gender, indigenous and class difference), her assessment is that it has increasingly neglected the material influence of biophysical processes.

As a corrective, Lave sees three key elements in the work of early political ecologists Piers Blaikie, Susannah Hecht and Michael Watts. These include first, a willingness to critically employ social and physical science, and qualitative and quantitative data, in the study of phenomena like soil erosion (Blaikie), deforestation (Hecht) and hunger (Watts). Second, Lave applauds the ‘critical realism’ of early political ecology, and its insistence ‘that researchers could peel back … ideological layers to find true explanations’. Finally, Lave says that while both old and new political ecology accepts that nature-culture is a relation, the strength of the former is in its attention to biophysical processes. In their response to critiques of political ecology, Paulson, Gezon and Watts (2003) pose three challenges for the field: ‘the first is to define politics and the environment in ways that facilitate a more thorough examination of the relationships between them; the second is to identify methods for carrying out and analysing research that encompasses relations between politics and environment; and the third is to develop ways to apply the methods and findings in addressing social-environmental concerns’ (2003, 208). Lave’s chapter, and the research program of CPG, deepens the question of what is to be done.

Like Watts (2013 [1983]), Lave argues for a renewed political ecology to face the immense environmental challenges of our time. As fears of climate change and environmental degradation grow, the concept of adaptation has been exhumed to walk the earth with a vengeance, not just with respect to natural hazards, but also variability, unpredictability and insecurity. From the Sustainable Development Goals to relief aid in the African horn, the drumbeat for adaptation finds renewed life through the concept of resilience (Bassett and Fogelman 2013; Watts 2015). Most major aid and development organizations now frame their work under
the resilience rubric, despite a widely recognized lack of clarity about what, when or where it is. As billions of dollars are made available for those who promise to identify, quantify and promote resilience, aid agencies, foundations, non-governmental organizations and scholars have rushed to deploy the term in plans for climate adaptation, smart farming or capacity building. As Michael argues, resiliency is the social Darwinist test of one’s ‘right to survive’ in a new global order characterized by systemic crisis and uncertainty. More than ever, Watts’ (1983b) seminal article ‘On the Poverty of Theory’ provides a much-needed critique of adaptation, then and now, by centring labour and politics in the analysis of the resilience regime.

From the first edition of Silent Violence through his much later work on ‘petro-violence’, Michael has consistently shown how the discourses surrounding human and environmental harm can also be violent. Along with other early political ecologists, he showed how Malthusian explanations for famine and environmental degradation were not only wrong but also often alibis for wrongdoing, whether on the part of colonial regimes or postcolonial governments and donor agencies. Training his students to think dialectically, he also pushed us to question explanations that relied on binaries of any kind. Lucy Jarosz recalls this in her chapter, ‘Binary Narratives of Capitalism and Climate Change: Dangers and Possibilities’. Watts’ review of journalist Naomi Klein’s 2015 book, This Changes Everything: Capital versus Climate, provides Jarosz’ starting point. As the book’s title suggests, Klein portrays the planet’s future as a take-no-prisoners battle between capital on one hand and nature and its defenders on the other. Michael’s review, while largely positive, points out that climate politics are not so neatly class-based. Some militants in the Niger Delta ‘want more from oil, not less of it’. Meanwhile some corporations, especially those dependent on agricultural raw materials, have become vocal advocates of strong climate policy. Jarosz discusses how Klein’s ‘capital versus climate’ narrative is just one of many binaries that political ecology has shown to be overly simple and analytically limited. And yet, ‘they’ sell books. ‘They’ can mobilize activism. The New York Times compared This Changes Everything to Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring, a book that changed, if not everything, then certainly quite a lot. Jarosz concludes that while political ecologists should continue to critique binary narratives, they should also recognize their potential to inspire positive political action – and especially the type of action needed, ultimately, to achieve a world less structured around their violent simplifications.

Indeed, if Jarosz points to the persistence of dichotomous thought in rhetoric, despite our best dialectical intentions, Jake Kosek’s work takes this attention to the politics of knowledge about nature in a different