

These Potatoes Look Like Humans

The Contested Future of Land, Home and Death in South Africa

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Review by mpbo ndaba

Introduction

The land holds memories of the violence. This is violence, and its ongoing-ness, in the case of what currently exists as South Africa, has a secured future in the life of this country. Already ordained into the everyday state of ontological negation of black children, and what their mothers and fathers have encountered in the formation of South Africa, land, then, not only remains a critical site of violence. There are also memories of trauma, grief, and yearning for reparative practices of justice (Mzileni & Diko, 2022:72; Madlingozi, 2018; Canham, 2023).

With black people being the figures around which the organisation of life in this part of Earth — South Africa — takes place; how political and racial abjection was and remains the calculus of dispossession, partition, and labouring, sociologist eMbuso weNkosi by writing this monograph, drawn from his doctoral dissertation, expands onto the existing texts with which we think, engage, and attend to the unresolved land question.

This time around, the focus is on the history of Bethal, in Mpumalanga province. Looking at the creation of the black labouring subject on potato farmlands, which was ramped up using the judicial system's criminalisation of black people during the apartheid era, in which, for instance, black people who were found to have committed petty crimes were given the option of jail time or going to work on these farmlands for next to nothing (pp, 80-81), weNkosi, draws from the Marxian critique. Demonstrating how racial precarity is capital-driven; here, the logic is that black life is only useful if it labours; but most importantly, these acts of labouring are impossible without racialised death and dying. With this text, then, weNkosi attends to capitalism and how this abhorrent system affects the interiority of black life.

And although any text can hold stories, albeit without completeness, weNkosi, in a total of seven chapters, all of which fall into just under 200 pages, weaves a narrative that speaks to how death, in the history of South Africa and in the lives of black people, is interwoven with the life of the Earth. Here, the reader is called to think about how colonial modernity, as part of settler colonial imposition, appropriates various material objects and life forms (Mellet, 2020: 99). In the case of the farmlands of Bethal, weNkosi theorises using the figure of the potato.

In the book, weNkosi also uses death and life as a narrative devices to demonstrate how racial violence keeps the machinery of extraction and land exploitation alive. The capacity of colonial modernity to continue to live, as shown by weNkosi, relies on the over-availability of dying, death, and debility as largely targeted at black people. For scholars of environmental humanities, planetary studies, labour politics, food studies, and resistance politics, what weNkosi does with this book is to critically expand our understanding of violence as that which extends beyond black people. Meaning, we are called to consider how the Earth has been a witness to the forms of racial harm encountered across generations. Meaning, such histories are impossible without black people.

The critical intervention weNkosi makes — from which the reader is left thinking about three sets of figures and their interrelation: the black ~~subject~~, the White subject, and the potato — is to offer a critique of the ontological decimation of the black sovereignty and being.

weNkosi demonstrates how, although settler colonial violence affects nature and other Earthly material objects for the purposes of White comfort and claims to South Africa via land and generational practices of land farming, we learn how White people through the histories of violence enacted on the Afrikaners during the Anglo-Boer War, could summon

death as a way to mark a form of nationalism whose infrastructure cannot be understood outside of the land. As such, death, in the history of South Africa, is contested (weNkosi, 2023:17). Here, there is the valueless nature of black life, which shapes how the deaths of black people are historically not treated in the same way White deaths are handled in the minds of the Afrikaners.

Interestingly, then, what weNkosi does, is to pose a question: How might White death and its relation to inheritance be something that is contested, when in fact, colonialism opened up space for White farmers, through lineage, and the familial histories of stewardship of the land become deemed as people whose subjectivity could not be understood outside of working the land? Here, Whiteness reconstructs itself, an encounter that becomes possible through partition, racial violence, and land theft (weNkosi, 2023:18). By drawing from resistance politics that operationalised blood flows in which black people were killed and buried in these potato farms, weNkosi demands that we expand our understanding of what it means for the land to rebel. And this is precisely important when we take note of the forms of separation that come with settler colonial break (Madlingozi, 2018). This is the same kind of “break” Sol. T. Plaatje articulated following the institution of the 1913 Land Act.

In the writing of this book, considering the recent discourses around the failed market driven willing buyer willing seller approach, and the need to rethink the legal frameworks around the appropriation of the land without compensation, the unresolved land question, then, places black people as those who are permanently racially marked.

One of the things I wish weNkosi did with the necessary level of clarity, is how *being* as it relates to ontology – by which I mean the absence of coherent metaphysical infrastructure – is formed through land dispossession. And while he does introduce the notion “ontological nowhere-ness”, which gives way for questions related to what might repair look like as tied to land restitution, there is lack of theoretical clarity as to what this Otherisation translates into; despite that land is very much a feature of this violence.

While weNkosi’s work can best be described as sociological, his methodological deployment of historical archival materials and interviews analysis is generative in the sense that the book lands itself across various fields of study, amongst these philosophy and Africana existentialism.

And by inserting himself in these past-present-future histories, doing so by breaking the academic tradition of research, writing, style, and form, weNkosi, methodologically, then, proposes that we are all, in one way or the other, implicated in the things we research and write about. By returning to the archive, weNkosi (2023:21) argues that this act itself, sees the researcher already being confronted with violence.

Here, the usual expectation is that whoever deals with the archive must account for the problem of violence. And often the question becomes relegated to methodology and ethics. Perhaps there is something to be said when we imagine what constitutes the archive; thinking beyond materials and objects such as documents, photographs, etc (Sharpe, 2023:251). And rather begin treating the black body and life in general as an archive. And this is precisely because dispossession permanently racially marks.

The anxieties of having to show respect to the archive might generate different questions: meaning, these anxieties become secondary to how the ‘everyday’ becomes confronted as a thing through which racial abjection is lived. Further, the land question, in contemporary discourses, thus becomes an interesting way in which blackness is not treated as separate from the land. When we contend with the violence of the settler colonial project, we therefore come to understand how the objectification of the land was in fact the production of the black condition.

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