

## Book Review:

# 'The Dead Will Arise': A Review of These Potatoes Look Like Humans: The Contested Future of Land, Home and Death in South Africa

(uMbuso weNkosi, Johannesburg: Wits University Press 2023)

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This book locates the debate about the historical injustice of land dispossession within the realm of African spirituality. This is reminiscent of the 'spirit' of *Chimurenga* against the Rhodesians in Zimbabwe which has resulted in the restoration of the land to the Zimbabweans as the rightful owners of the land of their ancestors.

Bethal, a white-owned farm on which African labourers were violently exploited and killed, is the case study to discuss the relationship between the land, violence and the law in South Africa. These African workers were forced to plant and harvest potatoes under dehumanising conditions. The logic behind this violent imposition of the regime of slave labour on the farms is the racist notion that blacks are not human. When these humans who look like potatoes died they are not buried properly on these 'white farms'. It is this sense that because of this lack of dignified burials, their bodies come back while other workers are labouring. For 'the potatoes that looked like humans'(p. 27) are actually humans who were denied their humanity both while they were alive and dead by the violent white farm owners.

The book has a prologue and seven chapters. These are well-structured and coherent, thus making this book a worthwhile read. The prologue is entitled 'Emazambaneni: The land of terror' which is about the origin of the book and the centrality of violence, law, and social order. The violence of the white social order through the imposition of the law of the white settlers is captured by one of the workers who wrote a letter



to register the resistance of the workers. WeNkosi encapsulates the significance of the letter and the core theme of the book by stating that ‘the violence captured by the letter reflects not only the conditions on the farm but also the social order at large. In looking at violence and law, I contend that violence as law-making is about securing the unknown future’ (p. 10).

‘The spectre of the human potato’ is the first chapter which provides the historical context of the Bethal scandal of the 1940s and 1950s and the overview of all the chapters of the book. The chapter also introduces concepts and themes which inform the entire book. The conceptual framework in this chapter comprises among other things the native question, paternalism, and the eschatological eye. WeNkosi captures the overarching theme of the book by stating that ‘in writing about Bethal and the brutality in this land, my aim is to reveal how land ownership and private property (such as the farm) are linked to violence and contestation’ (p. 16).

Chapter 2 (‘Whose eyes are looking at history?’) is about the politics of history and methodology in historical research. WeNkosi posits that the victims of violent land dispossession look at their condition through what he calls ‘the spiritual eye’, while white settlers look at it through the paternalistic eye as European conquerors and white supremacists. According to weNkosi (p. 33), the Indigenous people as victims of violent land dispossession use a spiritual eye to look at their land and regard the land as ‘the first and last destiny for their spirit. To create a home and be buried in the land is a spiritual activity.’ Most significantly, ‘the spiritual eye can see the spirits of the dead’ and thus captures ‘the demand of the dead for freedom’ (p. 34).

The third chapter (‘Bethal, the house of God’) discusses the history of Bethal as a product of white settler colonialism and the labour regime of violent exploitation which was introduced by white farmers. It also discusses the famous investigation conducted in Bethal by ‘Mr Drum’, Henry Nxumalo, to expose the violent exploitation and deaths of black workers on the farm. In line with the theme of violence, law, and the land question, weNkosi captures the structural essence of white settler colonialism to this day by stating that ‘therefore, the violence they inflicted was intended to thwart a future violent revolt by the Black people, to keep them docile, to prevent them from contesting the land’ (p. 75). White settlers live in fear of being attacked by the ‘natives’ who want their land back. The violence they use is aimed at securing their future as white masters in South Africa.

Chapter four (‘Violence: The white farmers’ fears erupt’) discusses white anxiety and the native question. To capture its libidinal economy, weNkosi states that ‘the use

of violence on South African farms reflected an anxiety about the future in a country where white people are a minority' (p. 93). He concludes this chapter by dealing with the fundamental question of white settler colonialism, the antagonism between the native and the settler who according to Fanon (1963 p.28) 'are old acquaintances'. WeNkosi affirms this by stating 'much more important, however, is that while the farmers positioned themselves as owners of the land, the same land was occupied by workers and families who regarded it as their home. They would die and be buried on the land' (p. 96). As 'old acquaintances' the farmers as settlers and the workers and families as natives had already met in the late 1600s when the Indigenous people asked Van Riebeeck the fundamental ethical question 'and to say the land is not big enough for both, who should give way, the rightful owner or the foreign invader?' (Troup 1975: p. 53). This fundamental question of historical justice is yet to be answered to the satisfaction of the Indigenous people.

The fifth chapter ("These eyes are looking for home") discusses how the violence of white settler farm owners seeks to negate the collective identity of the Indigenous people and denies them the foundation to have a society. But despite being subjected to the ontological violence of being called 'kaffirs' by paternalistic white settlers, weNkosi (pp. 113-114) states that 'beyond the national and global resistance that was already shaking the South African landscape, there was one thing that always bothered the farmers: the Black farmworkers recognised the farm as their home.' The penultimate chapter ('Bethal today') discusses the interconnection between the history of Bethal and its consequences for the present generation of workers. It also underscores the fact that the current generation of workers still regards Bethal as their home. They are haunted by the living past of their ancestors. WeNkosi encapsulates this by stating that 'in considering all the farms in northern Bethal, where the labour tenants speak of encountering many unmarked graves, I cannot help but wonder whose ancestors those are. These are living dead beings...' (p. 120).

The last chapter ("Our eschatological future") discusses the relationship between violence and the future. It underscores the persistent antagonism between the workers and farmers who regard the land as their home. It highlights the fact that white settlers use violence to dispossess the Indigenous people and retain the land. It also focuses on the spiritual link between the land and justice. WeNkosi affirms this by stating that 'those who died remained on the land and were resurrected; they came back looking like potatoes...an encounter with spirits that refused to be forgotten and demand justice' (p. 132).

The book makes an opportune intervention into the land question in the so-called post-apartheid era, by stating that ‘this spiritual future always refers us to the past. As we discuss land expropriation without compensation, there is need to look into the meaning of land beyond its material value’ (p. 133). ‘The ontology of invisible beings’ and ‘triadic ontology’ (Ramose 1999) which centre the inextricable connection between the living, the living-dead and the yet-to-be-born should inform the debate on the land and national question: ‘those who do not retaliate through violence are in the space of nothingness or invisibility’ (p. 136). Thus, all ‘the dead will arise’ (Peires 2003) because ‘even the ancestors are fighting for the land’ (p. 132).

## References

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