

Not Only Our Land but Also Our Souls

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IN 1997, JUST THREE YEARS INTO “DEMOCRACY”, South African church leaders gathered in Johannesburg for a Church Land Conference. The children of God were gathered together to confront a bitter reality: the church in South Africa is more than an accomplice in the un-peopling of Africans through land dispossession. Indeed, the church is a land thief and it is keeping the loot.

The conference grovelled, confessions of sin were declared and commitments made to repent and redress. Notwithstanding, and almost 20 years later, land has not returned. Ironically, the same band of thieves left a message in their official conference communiqué back in 1997: they declared that land was above commerce and politics; land was the source of life and death; it was, they suggested, like a mother who gives her children sustenance without which they would perish. We were reminded that land is always with us, it gives us life and when we die it takes us back.

If land was more than just land, what then have Africans lost by being dispossessed of it? Moreover, can this other loss be named, and the conditions of redress concretised in a set of demands that can speak the language of rights and fit into the established lexicon of the losses that can be repaired? Will these losses be repaired and satisfied with the return of the land?

When one loses a lover, it's not so much the loss of this beloved person, but a loss of one's capacity to love without fear again in the future. One grieves for not only the past, but also a future that is so linked with the present in ways that already are too damaging. A charred future? Without understanding the dialectical relationship between history and the future, we end up being unconscious agents of a history we wish to obliterate. We have to plumb the heart and soul of history, crack open the narratives and data that organise our contemporary agonies and desires.

When I reported these thoughts, a friend pointed out that I had, by accident, put my finger on three things that haven't been sufficiently reflected upon: love, loss and land! My friend indicated that a loss to death is traumatic, but nevertheless a loss fully accounted for and for which closure, of sorts, can be attained. Loss of land is altogether more devastating because we are condemned to encounter it every day – in passing koppies, smiling mountains and angry rivers – as a loss that exists as a gain for the other. The loss of land dramatises the loss of too much for the African who became the Black – a void and a great menacing silence. This loss is the most complete.

My friend noted that the foremost Africana scholar, Lewis R Gordon, had also ventured into similar territory in one of his meditations on melancholia: “[A] form of suffering that is a consequence of loss that is distinct from bereavement. In the case of death, there is not a chance of reconciliation with the lost object. But in the case of melancholia, there is a continued presence of that which has been lost.”

Blacks in South Africa, and perhaps the world over, live with a loss that resists demands for reparations. When we lost our land, it was part of the trajectory of the irreparable loss inaugurated by slavery. Once the African was reduced to property next to other beasts in the auction block, claims to territory, to autonomy and bodily integrity became silly luxuries not available to us. Often, we forget that land dispossession through colonialism is the second coming – the first being the dispossession of the selfhood of blacks through the long nights of trans-Atlantic horrors untold. Most narratives of loss have focused narrowly and dangerously on land and thereby cut off the black experience, or rather the creation of blackness from its very base. There are grave implications for this move, which the current obsession with the 1913 Land Act repeats with relish.

When in 1997 the South African clergy declared land the mother who took care of us in life and in death, they were talking the language of the living among those who exist through death. This register failed to account for the impossible way of being in the world for blacks. The rights to land, which the church – and later the constitution – gave, were spoken in a language whose structure automatically and fundamentally excluded black people. I’m not accusing the church of scheming – in fact the clergy may have meant every word – but words refused to speak! This is the danger we face 100 years after the Land Act: generating another set of discourses of denunciation, commitment and disappointment.

Six years after the church’s land declaration, we lived through an incident that speaks to what signifies black life today. Sipho Makhomboti, our brother and leader of the Landless People’s Movement, who had been ill for some time, declared he would be buried with his forefathers on the land from which they were forcibly removed by whites, who now occupy it under the protection of the law. I remember how the instruction: “bury me at my land” was delivered to us. Makhomboti, who knew clearly that he had not many days left on earth, smiled and told us: “You are cowards! You won’t bury me at my land.”

It must be remembered that Makhomboti had been violently and forcibly removed from the land where his ancestors rested. Now, with the existence of a movement and friends, he made a clear demand that the fight must be had over his bones. On the night of the burial, a vigil was held. The family was divided. The less militant ones said it would be best if the body was buried at the nearby squatter camp, among the discarded. The more militant said, “the word of a dead man can’t be defied.”

Those of us who represented the movement had heard clearly what he said. The representatives of the movement said they couldn’t defy Makhomboti and therefore all must at once leave and go to prepare the grave of a warrior. We moved in dark cold night and dug with anticipation and reverence. Morning came. The people arrived in their hundreds and buried the body of their beloved brother in defiance of the police and white farmers armed with guns and dogs.

Two years later, the farmers won a court order and exhumed the body of our brother. It is said that they did it with total disrespect. Makhomboti’s bones were made landless by a court of the democratic state, the exhumation was presided over by the guns of the democratic government of the people, which is committed to “dignity and equality for all”.

Makhomboti’s bones – landless in life, landless in death – still scream for justice across the fields and plains of Mpumalanga.

With hindsight, and struggling now with the location of white and black bodies in regimes of loss, I see clearly the contrast, observed through an exhilarating moment in 2004 in the small city of Montpellier, France. I was there at the global meeting of peasants and the landless (La Via Campesina). José Bové, a highly respected veteran land activist and small-scale farmer, had just been released from prison, having served time for fighting global food polluters, McDonalds and Monsanto. (The story goes that Bové and others broke down a McD's structure brick by brick.)

There was a concert of celebration planned as part of the conference and at which Bové was to be welcomed back by thousands of supporters. Some 10,000 waited for him to show up, and gave him a deafening and long standing ovation when he did. By evening, the gates to the large farm where the event took place had to be closed because more than 350,000 people had gathered! A stampede was feared. At one point during the concert, José Bové appeared back on stage, with me and other representatives of movements across the globe. We raised our hands and voices in unison: ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE! More than a quarter million voices shouted back in affirmation.

Away from the seductive moment of brotherhood in struggle, I had to acknowledge the contrast. In France, small-scale farmers are fighting with a grammar that responds to their demands or rejects them within a community of shared language, desires and pain. However, Siphso Makhombothi's struggle and that of millions of dispossessed people in South Africa, extend beyond the loss of land into the realm of a loss of fundamental human rights. Bové's humanity, however harsh it might sound, is derived from the un-peopling of Makhombothi.

Perhaps it is to Orlando Patterson's brutal coinage we need to turn in an attempt at explanation: particularly his idea of a "social death", which offers insights to Black lives in a White world. The fact that José Bové can call for a recognisable demand for autonomy and Makhombothi cannot, speaks sharply to the conjoined reality: for Bové to be human, Makhombothi was produced and existed in the zone of death.

Patterson doesn't seek to speak back to power; he seeks to show that slavery has shaped blacks' desires in ways that even when they seek liberation, reproduce the plantation. Patterson is scathing, for example, on the cultural heritage of blacks in the US: "It was not a heritage to be passed on. Like their moral compromises, this was a social adaptation with no potential for change, a total adjustment to the demands of plantation life and the authoritarian dictates of the masters... A people, to deserve the respect of their descendents, must do more than merely survive spiritually and physically. There is no intrinsic value in survival, no virtue in the reflexes of the cornered rat."

Enter Sol Plaatjie

What I'm thinking about is how the same regime of compromised expressions of freedom has wobbled black South Africans on the land question? The problem is not the creation of Sol Plaatjie, but he was certainly its modern founding father. Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* records the sadistic destruction and dissolution that the 1913 Land Act visited upon the majority of South Africans, as evoked in the opening line of the classic: "Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth."

Plaatje catalogued the consequences of the Land Act and invited the world to condemn the unnecessary and vile suffering these caused. But the world didn't respond. The sensibilities of some in British high society might have been offended by news of such naked brutality taking place in their colony, but most likely shrugged their shoulders and swanned off to the next important social function. Plaatje's words had no place to land and germinate and thus were rendered landless. It must have felt like speaking into the white void that gained its coherence by resting on his blackness. The black can't speak!

Plaatje's problem was that he arrived too late and helped author a discourse of demand that was already compromised. What he saw in the Land Act was the impact of desperate whites, who needed to carry out petty thieving and exhaust their desire of whiteness through total brutality, which, in turn, led to the scores of blacks gravitating to the roads with no sense of place or time. Plaatje recorded the opportunistic evil of whiteness, but not whiteness itself. The 1913 moment was a dramatisation of what had been taking place for more than 250 years, from the arrival in 1652 of Jan Van Riebeeck and his gang. Bambatha's fall in 1906 was the confirmation of a sad truth: the Maxim gun had gained total dominance over the assegai and the shield. Shaka's horse-shoe formation did not hold the white tide back. We blacks were created! The Land Act was a codification of a fact, not a creation of one.

Plaatje listened and recorded whites debating what they could do and would do with blacks and he was moved to indignation. But our 'thingification' was long achieved and Plaatje, like so many black political actors, assumed the position of common humanity with the oppressor. He constructed a set of concerns in the grammar of suffering that was understandable to the white world. As Frank Wilderson, the dramatist and filmmaker, so beautifully put it: "to act politically the black must assume a structurally adjusted position."

As a result, we have two discourses which have been rarely examined in parallel. Plaatje and the Congress movement represent one, the other is represented best by Okonkwo, the tragic hero in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Yet, there is a historical figure who carries the mark of Okonkwo better – Autshumao, also known as Harry die Strandloper! Recall how Harry was brought from Robben Island by Van Riebeeck to negotiate peace with the defeated; he, unlike the 1994 negotiators, spat at the face of the invader and ended the dialogue. He wouldn't sell his birthright for peace. It was about the land.

Plaatje believed in the powers of dialogue, but he didn't realise how loaded the dice of dialogue was against the dispossessed of the world. His appeals were sent to Europe, packaged to be understood and empathised with by the world. One wonders if he should have wasted his money and time with such niceties, or rather given serious consideration to turning the Maxim gun on the enemy and chasing them out of town, once and for all; kill whiteness so that new relations could be realised.

Native Life reproduces the colony of blacks as the beings without being. Thus our imagination of the devastation of colonialism was dramatised by Plaatje's accounts. This first mistake has led to other, bigger mistakes in the contemporary era. When the African National Congress took power in 1994, it was advised by whites and it happily agreed to peg the land question to 1913. Here, one can't help feel that the African educated class, of which Sol Plaatje was a member, entered the chambers and continued the debate on what to do with the native and the land. Like good house Negroes, they carried the motion of legitimating dispossession through a devious plan of doing something to ensure nothing happened. The South African Land Reform programme is a perfect example of such.

The mistake of placing the black and white on the same humanist plane without accounting for the fact that the white is human at the expense of the black, led to tragic mishaps. Plaatje ended up repeating the US tragedy of good whites from the north and baddies from the south, albeit his discourse took the form of bad Afrikaner vs. the good English. Pleading with the British crown, Plaatje went further and, in the end, legitimised and sanitised British colonisation:

"[T]he British vocabulary includes that sacred word Home – and that, perhaps is the reason why their colonising schemes have always allowed some tracts of country for native family life, with reasonable opportunities for their future and progress, in the vast South African expanses... [I]n 1910 much against our will, the British Government surrendered its immediate sovereignty over land to colonials and cosmopolitan aliens who know little about Home – because their dictionaries contain no such loving term..."

Contrast the above with his take on the bad Afrikaner: “The northward march of the Voortrekkers was a gigantic plundering raid. They swept like a desolating pestilence through the land, blasting everything in their path and pitilessly laughing at ravages from which the native races have not yet recovered...”

It is hard to understand how Plaatje could possibly have made such a neat distinction – heaping scorn on the one faction of the same band of marauding thieves and murderers, while at the same time praising the other. Was this a desperate attempt at placating the Brits against their Afrikaner cousins? There is a simple but devastating truth we must face: whenever whites are at war with each other, blacks need to know that it’s about finding the best mechanism to subjugate the blacks. The idea of bad and good whites is an oxymoron; whites exist within a system of power which by definition is anti-black.

It is too easy to claim that Plaatje’s problems could have been improved had he not been among the early nationalists within the African Native Congress, who spent day and night preparing petitions to the British Crown. The discourse around land and the demands for it that Plaatje launched permeate all formations that claim to speak for liberation in South Africa, including the Africanists who broke away from the ANC. It’s not enough to say Izwelethu! (The land is ours!) We need to see that what was taken was far more than the land.

If we look carefully at the church and its theft of land, we see that it was not only the land they took, but also the souls of black people. If we take seriously the burden of loss and the hopes of redress and reparations within a paradigmatic reality that doesn’t yield to the coordinates and charms of dialogue, rationality and proposition, but rather to the very demand of life itself, then we must imagine the impossible. We are indebted to Aimé Césaire, who anticipated and framed the task of reclaiming one’s soul in another world; we sit with him the whole night, holding vigil from a small European island in his majestic *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*:

“But who misleads my voice? Who grates my voice? Stuffing my throat with a thousand bamboo fangs... dirty end/ of the world. Dirty end of day break. It is you weight of the insult and a hundred years of whip lashes... What can I do? One must begin somewhere. Begin what? The only thing worth beginning. The end of the world.”