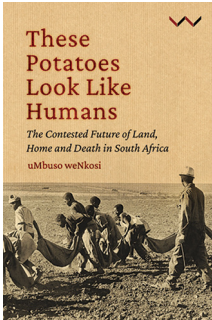




Check for updates

BOOK TITLE:

These potatoes look like humans:
The contested future of land, home
and death in South Africa



AUTHOR:

uMbuso weNkosi

ISBN:

9781776148400 (paperback,
186 pp)

PUBLISHER:

Wits University Press, Johannesburg,
South Africa; ZAR300

PUBLISHED:

2023

REVIEWER:

Peace Kiguwa¹

AFFILIATION:

¹Department of Psychology,
University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg, South Africa

EMAIL:

Peace.Kiguwa@wits.ac.za

HOW TO CITE:

Kiguwa P. On proceedings too terrible
(but necessary) to relate: Land
restitution and violence in South
Africa. *S Afr J Sci.* 2024;120(5/6),
Art. #18219. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2024/18219>

ARTICLE INCLUDES:

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

PUBLISHED:

28 May 2024

On proceedings too terrible (but necessary) to relate: Land restitution and violence in South Africa

In her recovery of American slave memoirs, the novelist Toni Morrison¹ draws attention to a recurring motif in these slave narratives that seek to protect an imagined reader from the abject horrors of slavery. In describing and confessing their experiences of torture and dehumanisation within the slave system, the authors of these memoirs often pull the narrative up short with the recurring phrase: “But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate” (p.91). In their careful choice of what to narrate about their lives, these authors, former and current slaves at the time of their writing, aimed to cushion the horrors of slavery for an audience far removed from, and yet connected to, such horror. This strategic narrative deployment was in large part an acknowledgement that an audience with the potential power to become allies against slavery – and thus alleviate their suffering and status as slaves – must also be protected from proceedings too terrible to relate for fear that they inadvertently turn away from these horrors through denial. Writing in a much different time and context, Sol Plaatje’s (1876–1932) petition to the British government similarly narrates stories of loss, despair, and suffering brought on by state-sanctioned land dispossession in apartheid South Africa. Plaatje’s classic book is a biting condemnation of the Land Act that would see a majority black population bereft of land, material goods, family, community, spiritual and psychic nurturance.

Against the backdrop of an opening evocative prologue, uMbuso weNkosi’s *These Potatoes Look Like Humans: The Contested Future of Land, Home and Death in South Africa* similarly excavates a history too terrible to relate – the dispossession and violence experienced by black South African farm labourers, ripping open a veil on a period in history that remains insidious in its interwoven afterlives today. weNkosi’s audience requires no protection from these proceedings but an invitation to be courageous in remembering. With beautifully visceral language, weNkosi takes up the mantle to rip the veil, recognising that it is in the courage to do so that we may finally begin to confront the afterlives of violence and trauma in the present. The book commences with an opening scene of a farmland in the region of the Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga), South Africa, in the small rural town of Bethal. The 1959 potato boycott in South Africa sets the frame for an insightful analysis of the conditions of farmworkers, the violence of white supremacy, the affective economy (especially white anxiety) that is part of this violence, the resilience of farmworkers, and the continued violence in the agriculture sector in South Africa today. Spanning seven chapters that take us on a journey of methodological originality, positing the eye as method that not only sees, records, and excavates history via registers imbued with political and affective influence. The chapters also engage violence in its multifaceted forms and effects, showing the specificity of violence in the context of Bethal and its interwoven connections to state violence more broadly, such as those embodied in the apartheid pass laws that restricted movement and employment. In dissecting the influence of affective formations of violence (primarily through registers of white fear and anxiety), the book further demonstrates how racialised violence may be rationalised as acceptable and even necessary under state law. But weNkosi does not limit his biting analysis to the past, with Chapters 5–7 offering critical insight into Bethal today and questions of land ownership more broadly. The three-tiered logics of identity, education, and state and how these informed dispossessions in the past come to the fore here; the spiritual meaning of land beyond current understandings of violence; the role of the past in current claims to land today; and a dissection of how current debates on land ownership and its conception is fraught with anxiety that is always connected to an unknown future.

These Potatoes Look Like Humans is an archaeological endeavour of sorts: the articulate map it offers of alternative research methodology that is available when we allow ourselves to think out of the traditional methodological and epistemological boxes of our disciplines; the poignant case studies and interview extracts that lend urgent human voice to theory, and the book’s own loyalty to the history and context it painstakingly seeks to make visible to us. Current discourse on the relationship to land is consistently relegated to discussions on the material and economic consequences of land ownership. Like Plaatje, weNkosi is at pains to challenge this narrow, individualistic, and market-oriented orientation rooted in Western, white, and imperialistic frames of reference. In *These Potatoes*, what we find is a wider picture of what the land means to black South Africans in terms of its material, social, spiritual, and psychic aspects. We see a powerful dynamic that connects all these elements, which in turn further allows us to see that the loss of land is more than material loss but also akin to social, spiritual, and psychic death. It is also about the loss of ancestors buried on the land.

Christina Sharpe’s² metaphor of ‘in the wake’ to describe what she calls the afterlives of histories of harm and oppression in the present is worth repeating here:

Wakes are processes; through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory. Wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual [...] wakes are also “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved, in water; the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow; in the line of sight of (an observed object); and (something) in the line of recoil of (a gun).”²(p.60)

Part of weNkosi’s wake-work is to *trace relationships* – whether it is the connections between loss and materiality, lost and present ancestors, or past and present violence. In so doing, he skilfully opens a veil to show us how loss

© 2024. The Author(s). Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.



materialises through *objects, relationships, interactions, broader social organization of life*, and a (*pervasively silent*) *psychic economy of white anxiety and paternalism* that influences debates on land restitution in post-apartheid South Africa.

A second part of wake-work evident in the text is via a narrative methodological tool that links past, present, and future temporalities. In tandem with Sharpe's enunciation of *living in the wake*, weNkosi's sharp, poignant, and yet hopeful text bridges these temporalities:

[...] finally, wake also means *being awake* and, most importantly, *consciousness*. *Living in the wake as people of African descent means living [...] the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment* [my emphasis].^{2(p.60)}

In his empirical documentation of what it means to be awake to history and its absent-present today, weNkosi undertakes a form of historical witnessing that attests to the ethical meaning of doing research in the present. In his multi-layered description of the different seeing eyes of

history – “the eye as heuristic model” – the figure of the Human Potato, much like the dockworker's figure of the River in the classic Ol' Man River showtune, is a call to witness the historical and continued denunciation of black humanity. Ol' Man River is a 1927 show tune from the musical *Show Boat* that is sung by the black dockworker, narrating the suffering of African Americans through hard labour while the uncaring flow of the Mississippi River serves as a silent witness to this suffering. The eye as method – in the figure of the Human Potato – is another kind of witness that sees and refuses the silence of history. weNkosi offers us what he describes as an “eschatological eye” – a call to see with a spiritual eye, a call to write with the Other in mind, the call to write the archive in terms of its spiritual and visceral logics. *These Potatoes Look Like Humans* is a critical sociological reading of dispossession and violence. But it is also more than that.

References

1. Morrison T. The site of memory. In: Zinsser W, editor. *Inventing the truth: The art and craft of memoir*. 2nd ed. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin; 1995. p. 83–102.
2. Sharpe C. Black studies: In the wake. *Black Sch*. 2014;44(2):59–69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2014.11413688>