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“The Gate”: Spirituality and the Contestation for Land by the Dispossessed Farmworkers

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ABSTRACT

At a dinner hosted by Ben Scully on 29 November 2023, Eddie asked me, “What puzzles me is that when we studied agriculture, we were interested in decent work, organizing farmworkers, the value chain, and the power of retailers in controlling the value chain. How did you arrive at the concept of spirituality?” I laughed but left the question unanswered, hoping to revisit it by recalling our farm visits in Gauteng a decade ago—experiences that shaped my book, *These Potatoes Look Like Humans: The Contested Future of Land, Home, and Death in South Africa*. In this article, I return to those moments through autoethnography, rethinking Eddie’s sociological concerns about farmworkers’ self-organization against capital. Our study of 600 farmworkers in Gauteng revealed widespread violations of decent work standards. Workers spoke of an arbitrary dismissal system called “the gate”, symbolizing the farmer’s unchecked power. As one worker, Moses*, described: “He tells you to leave through the same gate you came in ... The problem is the gate.” The gate reflected more than dismissal; it was a barrier to trade unions, labour inspectors, and belonging. Years later, my focus shifted to workers’ anxieties—migrant farmworkers who had lived on farms for decades asked, “Where will I die?” This question revealed the land’s spiritual significance: not just a site of labour but a home tied to identity and spirituality.

KEYWORDS

land; spirituality; labour;
Eddie Webster; ontological
nowhereness

Introduction

My first conversation with Eddie Webster was with a request in an email written on 30 January 2012 to shift our interview to a later time on 31 January:

Dear Prof Webster

I spoke to Thabang [Sefalafala] over the phone, and he tells me I have been short listed for the SWOP internship and we are suppose[d] to be at your house by 9am or so ... I have a problem with the time ... Today I just started with a mathematics and statistics pre-sessional course for research. The class starts from 9am-13pm ... I was hoping that the lecturer would allow me to miss the session for tomorrow, but he declined. Is it possible for you to squeeze me in around 2pm tomorrow, please?

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I was a Master's student enrolled in Development Economics at Wits, I had just graduated with an honours degree in Economic and Industrial Sociology, also from Wits. I began our conversation with an imploration to be accommodated and Eddie agreed that we meet at 2 p.m. at his house in Observatory. The day of the interview—as I was sitting in the famous garden at his house waiting for him to conclude his meeting—I had a sense that my life was about to change. In the interview process, he mentioned that the project was going to look at the promotion of decent work in the hospitality sector and agriculture and that he would like me to focus on interviewing farmworkers. He asked me what strategy I would employ to get the farmworkers to participate in the study given that it is difficult to interview them on the farm. On the spot, I said, I will go to taxis, where they buy their food if there is a shop, where they socialize [including taverns], and if they go to church, I will also find them at church. At the mention of the church, he was excited, and I knew that I got his attention. In asking me this methodological question, looking back, I feel that he was testing if I was aware of the many developments that had occurred in capturing the workers' experiences in the field of industrial sociology. Elsewhere, Eddie had collaborated in the acknowledgement of the variety of contexts from which worker solidarity could be achieved:

There is a large following of Pentecostal churches, and other religious organizations that provide spiritual, social and financial support and network. These faith-based organizations (FBOs) offer legal advice and job referrals, functions one would expect unions, labour brokers, legal advisors and other organizations to provide (Webster, Joynt, and Sefalafala 2016, 204–205)

Our first conversation went beyond organizing to explore the crucial spiritual support churches provide to South African workers, particularly those not covered by industrial relations laws or represented by trade unions. The church as they have noted above in their research in security industry and clothing industry was a socioeconomic intermediary. Anyone aware of the sociology of religion knows the ethical influences of the church on the individual (a subject well explored by Weber 1992). Closer to home, Dunbar Moodie's (1975) seminal book *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid, and the Afrikaner Civil Religion* showed the interplay between religion, ideology, and politics by studying how the Dutch Reformed Church propagated a civil religion by blending Calvinist theology with Afrikaner cultural identity, which helped justify and sustain the apartheid system. The work of the church begins with a spiritual outlook of the world—and by thinking of the church as a place where workers are to be found, I was already thinking of their spiritual outlook. However, as I continued my fieldwork, I found the farmworkers not at the church but on the farms. They termed the farm the "gate". The gate, as I will show, began to also take a spiritual form, which spoke to the physical reality of the workers, their worldly concerns about the farmer who dominates their lives because he has control over the land. There was no physical gate I used to enter the farm. I was confused when the workers said the farmer told them, "You have entered this gate, and you will leave through this gate." This gate spoke to how the land as private property reflects a process of boundary making, a *terra domini*—a land under the dominance of the white farmer.

In our last conversation at a dinner hosted by Ben Scully on 29 November 2023, Eddie asked me, "What puzzles me is that when we studied agriculture, we were interested in decent work, organizing farmworkers, the value chain, and the power of retailers in

controlling the value chain. How did you arrive at the concept of spirituality?” I did not respond, and I laughed—hoping that there would be another day when I remind Eddie of our travels to the farms in Gauteng—a decade ago and how that experience shaped some of the arguments I made in my book, *These Potatoes Look Like Humans: The Contested Future of Land, Home, and Death in South Africa*. In this article, I use autoethnography to return to those moments. I try to recast some of Eddie’s sociological concerns when studying the importance of the workers organizing themselves, as a way of creating an institution to articulate their interests against capital. In our study, we surveyed 600 farmworkers participating in Gauteng to ascertain if there was decent work in the sector. “Farm workers were asked what, if any, procedure was followed if employers wanted to dismiss workers. Only one in five workers (21%) said employers issued workers with a verbal or written warning” (Webster and Nkosi 2013, 79).

Workers described an arbitrary method of dismissal, which they referred to as “the gate”, implemented by the farmer. As one worker, Moses*, indicates:

He tells you to leave through the same gate you came in so I just hang in there just so I can stay here. I hang in there ... I have tried telling him about the working conditions, but the problem is the gate ... The gate! (Moses* cited in Webster and Nkosi 2013).

The gate reflected the power of ownership of land in agriculture—the farmer felt that the workers had no power to speak back. We argued that the gate created barriers for trade unions, labour inspectors, and other stakeholders, making it difficult for them to access the farm. While I was initially concerned about the gate, years later something else piqued my interest. Farmworkers who had migrated to the farms and lived on some of them for over a decade began expressing a deep worry: the farm had become their home, and when they fell ill, they wondered, “Where will they die?” This question profoundly affected me, shifting my focus to the spiritual connection to the land. I realized that for many farmworkers, working the land is not only about sustenance or livelihood; the land is linked to their spiritual sense of belonging. The land is not only a place of work but their home. And a place to be returned to when they are dead. The farmer, on the other hand, is aware of this gate and controls it by showing them its location so that they do not make any claims about belonging to the land. To elucidate this point, I reflect on the conversations we had with the farmers, and some of what we thought were racial prejudices associated with the paternal culture of the farm wherein an expression of anxiety about the future of ownership of land in South Africa remained lurking. I will first start by showing the journey in the farms in Gauteng and our key findings and what we missed now that I am looking into this material captured over a decade ago.

On method

In answering the question Eddie posed to me, I use autoethnography to guide the reader through the personal moments we shared, which later shaped my views. Therefore, autoethnography enables the sharing of personal experiences, treating the process of knowledge production as a “political, ethical, and auxological practice” (Nkosi, Murambadoro, and Mashayamombe 2022, 6). Autoethnography places at the centre the personal as a way of creating new experiences of knowledge production (Ellis and Bochner 2000).

By privileging the self, autoethnography not only fosters new ways of knowing but also challenges conventional methodologies that distance personal subjectivity from academic inquiry. This approach involves a critically reflexive process, wherein the researcher interrogates their own experiences in relation to the larger socioeconomic, ideological, and political contexts in which they are embedded. It acknowledges that personal accounts are not isolated but are linked with the structural forces that shape them. Moreover, autoethnography necessitates careful consideration of the ethical dimensions of centring the self, particularly in terms of how one's personal narrative interacts with collective histories, identities, and power relations. As such, autoethnography emerges as both a methodological and ethical stance, calling for an ongoing dialogue between the individual and the collective, the subjective and the objective, and the personal and the political (see Spry 2001; Wall 2006; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Phillips, Christensen-Strynø, and Frølund 2022).

Elsewhere we had argued that autoethnography draws (Nkosi, Murambadoro, and Mashayamombe 2022, 6):

... on ethnography, but as Linda Smith mentioned in her book "Decolonising Research," the limits of ethnography have played into the colonial ways of conducting research, which have led to the misrepresentation of the Other. The autoethnographic approach aims to overcome this challenge by directly drawing on the experiences of the Other and using this alterity to directly inform knowledge production.

I use autoethnography to relive the moments in the field with Eddie, and in the last part of the paper, I use the email communication that Eddie was to write to me when I finished my book about the experiences we shared on the farms. Autoethnography is a tool of remembering of reliving and also feeling a gap with now an ancestral interlocutor. Additionally, I reflect on the farmworker's report, where we developed a short, objective questionnaire to explore farmworkers' experiences. The questionnaire was brief, with simple yes/no or agree/disagree questions across several domains of decent work, such as equal opportunity and working conditions. The goal was to keep the questions straightforward to minimize response time while focusing on key issues. Responses were scored on a scale from 0 (no decent work) to 1 (maximum decent work) to provide a quantitative measure. I also conducted over 60 follow-up interviews to deepen the findings and address gaps in the survey data. These semi-structured interviews allowed workers to elaborate on their experiences, offering qualitative insights that enriched the survey results.

Challenges in organizing farmworkers in South Africa

Our study started with an awareness of the sector's challenges, particularly the lack of a collective voice for workers, highlighted by the absence of trade union representation. Given the sector's union density of just 3%, the low figures prompted us to explore strategies for unionizing farmworkers. This line of thinking aligns with the 2011 study by the National Labour Economic Development Institute (NALEDI), which identifies the key obstacles to union organizing in agriculture and advocates for a decent work strategy in the farming sector. The NALEDI (2011) study estimated that 34 unions are active in the sector. However, despite this relatively high number of unions, union density has remained low, rarely exceeding 10% since 1994. In 2003, union density was 6.6%, increasing slightly to

10.2% in 2007, but by September 2011, it had dropped to just 3.4%. The figures, essentially, express a decline of 6.8% in union density over a period of four years. NALEDI (2011) proposes that addressing this challenge would require adapting organizing strategies to access farmworkers beyond their place of work. This strategy could involve leveraging community networks, using cell phones, and engaging workers in off-site locations where they might feel safer or more open to organizing efforts (NALEDI 2011). Another explanation for the drop in unionization was that employment trends in the agricultural sector show a shift from a permanently employed labour force to one that is seasonal and residing outside of the farm. By 2007, the percentage of workers employed on a continuous full-time or part-time basis (permanent workers) had dropped down to 54.2% while that of temporary workers employed for a specific period (seasonal workers) and casual workers (intermittent or “stand by” workers) had climbed up to 45.8%.

The key question we started with was, what are the obstacles to organizing farm workers? Several factors are given to answer this question. Existing studies, such as those by NALEDI (2011) and the SAHRC (2003), have pointed out several reasons for the difficulty in effectively unionizing farmworkers. One major challenge is the strict control farm owners exert over access to farms, often citing safety concerns to block entry for unions and labour inspectors. Farmworkers’ dependency on employers for housing, social needs, and employment further discourages collective action due to fear of retaliation. The widespread shift from permanent to seasonal and casual employment has created a more precarious workforce, making unionization less feasible. Atkins (2007) had also argued earlier that such practices are rooted in the paternalistic culture of farms, where employers wield significant power over workers’ lives and livelihoods.

Findings

Decent work deficits in agriculture in Gauteng

The survey for the study saw the participation of 600 farmworkers and used the same questionnaire as the earlier security sector study wherever possible. This allowed for a comparative analysis between the security and hospitality industries, helping to highlight similarities and differences in working conditions and organizing challenges across these sectors. Among farmworkers surveyed, 38% worked on livestock farms, while 29% were in field crops. Men were more likely to work on livestock farms (43%), while women were more commonly found in field crop farming (35%).

The survey focused on nine of the ten decent work indicators developed by the ILO to create an index that could be measured at the individual, sector, or subsector level. These indicators included:

- Employment opportunities
- Stability and security at work
- Adequate earnings
- Decent hours of work
- Work–life balance
- Equal opportunity
- Safe work environment
- Social protection
- Social dialogue

Looking back at the farmers' emphasis on controlling the land and their perception of land ownership as an absolute right, we never fully acknowledged the deeper meaning of land in agriculture, nor the history of racism concealed under the guise of paternalism. We were working with the idea that there is already a progressive realization of labour laws that have created employer-and-employee-like relations in agriculture (that is why we emphasized compliance with the sectoral determination as a start).

Andries Du Toit (1993) argues that a key principle in paternalistic relations on farms is the creation of a "collective" understanding, where farmworkers are expected to align with, or at least not contradict, the farmer. This dynamic is reinforced by framing the farm as a threatened community, where the farmer is positioned as the protector and the workers—as integral to maintaining the stability and cohesion of the farm. The paternalism of the farmer, where the farm is regarded as a family unit with the farmer as the head, often conceals the violence on farms, which is framed as a form of disciplining the "children". For example, on one farm, when farmworkers exercised their right to strike through their trade union, the leaders of the strike were punished by the farmer after the strike ended. They carried heavy rocks over their shoulders. For farmworkers, the concept of decent work was deeply intertwined with the gate—a powerful metaphor symbolizing the farmer's control over the property and their lives. The gate embodied the social reality that the farm is owned and controlled by the farmer, reinforcing his authority and shaping the experience of life on the farm. We summarized our findings as shown in Table 1.

We asked farmers whether they believed the enforcement of decent work regulations was beneficial for farmworkers. One farmer, who owns more than 3,000 hectares of land and employs over 400 workers, stated:

They are worse off than it was in previous years, they are far more worse off ... because in the olden days you can ask my *old boys*, you see now I have got boys old man that has been with my father's days, 20 years, 30 years ... I have got one guy that is 80-year-old now; he is still working for me; you must ask him what he says. In the olden days his children went to school for free, the hospitals were in a decent condition. (Pete*¹, Interview, 10/10/12)

When we were driving back and reflecting on the interview with Eddie, he indicated that we had done a few things to shock the social standing on Pete's farm. He indicated that when Pete offered to drive us around on the farm, he had to take the seat at the back of the van, and I took the front seat. Indeed, the farmworkers regarded us with a mix of astonishment and curiosity as we traversed their familiar landscapes. However, we discussed Pete's paternalism, especially his habit of referring to an 80-year-old as a "boy". He explained his decision to relocate workers off the farm, citing improved housing options in the surrounding area. Yet, paradoxically, he lamented the dysfunction of local schools and hospitals, where, in his words, "people are dying in the hospitals". This raised the question of whether life outside the farm truly offered better conditions. At the time, we could not discern why he wanted workers off the farm—a question that only began to unravel during my PhD research. His notion of caring for workers revealed another contradiction: he perceived modern labour relations, particularly workers' bargaining rights for better wages, as a significant challenge. As he showcased his carrot

¹The asterisk indicates that it is a pseudonym.

Table 1. Summary of findings and recommendations.

Domain/theme	Evidence	Recommendations
1. Stability and security	Only 19% have a written contract 60% have no dismissal procedure	Ensure compliance with the current determination
2. Earnings	50% of workers earn below minimum wage of R1300 Women earn 20% less than men	Ensure compliance with the current determination
3. Working hours	Above 50% work over 45 h a week	Ensure compliance with the current determination
4. Work–family life balance	80% can't refuse overtime and the long hours impacts negatively on family life	Ensure compliance with the current determination.
5. Social protection	Only 9% get paid maternity leave Only 2% have medical aid Only 8% belong to a pension or provident fund	Ensure compliance with current determination
6. Social dialogue	Only 3% unionization	Implementation of Labour Relations Act right to freedom of association

Cited in Webster et al. (2012, 60).

harvester, radiating pride in this advanced machinery, the tension between technological progress and decent work became strikingly apparent:

Pete* (Interview, 10/10/12): I bought last year ... a carrots harvester. It cuts of the leaves on the ground and picks it up like a potato harvester ... what I did with that machine I reduced my work force by 50 people and I doubled up the production in my pack yards. We used to fight the whole day with 50 people to get 40 tons of carrots into the pack yards ... I doubled the production with the machines doing half a day of the work. This machine does not fall pregnant, will not complain about working, and wages!

Paternalism, racial anxiety and racism in agriculture

Another harrowing moment was the visit to a small-scale farmer, Joey*, who specialized in microgreens and employed 21 permanent Malawian farmworkers, all men, along with two Black domestic workers. She praised the Malawians for their “gregarious” nature and teamwork, contrasting them with South Africans who, she claimed, detest farm work. Joey* explained that she preferred Malawians for their skill in handling delicate leaves, adding her perception of South African men as uninterested in such labour, dismissing it as work that “does not put hair on their chest” (Joey*, Interview, 19/04/12). Her sister, a professor at Wits University's School of Science, attempted to challenge Joey's racialized remarks, cautioning against generalizations. Undeterred, Joey doubled down, citing instances of crime and violence allegedly committed by South African men in the area, including one case involving a worker's abusive partner. She detailed the security measures she had implemented to protect herself and her workers, continuing to make sweeping comments about Black South African men and their behaviour, including relationships and family dynamics. Despite her sister's visible discomfort and attempts to steer the conversation, Joey* turned to me—her only Black South African guest—and asked, “Is this not the case?” The question left me numb. This encounter, my first extended visit to a white female farmer's home, was marked by discomfort and undertones of racism.

This experience lingered with me, encapsulating the layered tensions of race, gender, and power on the farm. At the same time, I discovered a pattern in the interviews with

farmers that they all indicated that Black South Africans do not want to work and prefer not to employ Black South Africans. Initially, the evidence suggested that many of the immigrants on the farm lacked formal citizenship, making them more vulnerable to exploitation. However, as I delved deeper into questions of paternalism, belonging, and land contestation in South Africa, it became clear that this issue went beyond mere labour dynamics. The refusal to hire Black South Africans, or their reluctance to work on farms, was tied to a deeper, more contentious reality—the land itself. Black South Africans often view the land they work in as part of their home, a connection that unsettled many farmers. This tension, I realized, was not just about employment, but about the contested future of land ownership and the power it symbolized. For me, this was reflected in the farmworkers' spiritual connection to the land—not just as a place of labour but as something intertwined with their work. In the areas they came from, where some farms had graves, the farm was also seen as a resting place. However, the farms I visited in Gauteng lacked such markers, highlighting a deeper unsettling disconnection between the workers and the land in that region. This expressed itself in the question of "Where will we die", a question I later explored in my PhD research.

The gate, as a symbol of control, exposes both arbitrary dismissal practices and the deep power dynamics tied to land ownership in South Africa. This control concealed in the language of paternalism reveals how racism operates as a structural force on the farm. The farmers' dismissive, often racialized language, as seen in the interviews, reinforces Black inferiority and subjugation. Paternalism conceals racism and presents the farmer as a responsible father/mother even when the evidence indicates that this ideology is based on the racial subjugation of Black people and denying them a positive reference of self. Pete's use of a "boy" to refer to the 80-year-old worker speaks volumes about the entrenched racial hierarchies in South Africa. Even though this worker is an octogenarian, Pete still diminishes him to the status of a child, a boy, highlighting the normalization of a power dynamic where Black people, regardless of age or experience, are infantilized and denied dignity in the South African farms. Despite being an octogenarian, the worker's life, shaped by decades of hardship and wisdom, is dismissed as unworthy of the respect and dignity typically afforded to elders.

Even more troubling, the logic of racism, framed as paternalistic or maternal care, emerges in how Joey* expresses a preference for Malawians. However, in her description, she views them as children—incapable of surviving without her authority. This treatment of both Black South Africans and Malawians points to a shared experience of racial subjugation. South Africans are resented because they were born in the country and seen as a threat to land ownership, while Malawians, perceived as outsiders, are presented as less threatening but still subjected to racism on the farm. Both groups are infantilized and treated as incapable of making their own decisions. On the farm they are reduced to the status of children or "faecal entities" (Bollas 2004, 6) in the eyes of farmers. As our research indicated, the preference for foreign workers does not mean they are better paid or treated any more fairly. Another disturbing observation came when I read more about the violence in agriculture. At the time, we believed workers falling off the tractor was an issue of work safety. However, looking back, many workers, including undocumented migrants, shared that farmers would intentionally speed up the tractor while workers were riding on the back. When workers were not holding on tightly enough, they would hit a bumpy patch, causing them to fall.

One compelling avenue for future research would be to explore how Malawian or undocumented migrant labourers relate to land in ways that go beyond financial necessity and contingency. Do they experience a sense of homelessness or non-belonging, perhaps reserving their spiritual attachments to other spaces like the church? What is their spiritual outlook on the land? The findings on undocumented migrants emerged during my Master's research, when I was travelling through the farms with Eddie and recording comments made by Joey*. At the time, my focus was largely observational. However, at the PhD level, my analysis shifted towards understanding how South Africans articulate a spiritual connection to the land. I began to engage with the paternalistic dynamics present on the farms. This reflection led me to expand the question of land relations by turning my attention to the case of Bethal, as I discuss in the section that follows. So, a possible future avenue of study would be to explore the spiritual relationship with land between the different worker groups on South African farms—how it takes form, where it is expressed, and what it reveals about belonging, displacement, and identity.

Spirituality, belonging, and death

My PhD study aimed to rethink resistance by focusing on the everyday experiences of farmworkers. Specifically, I sought to understand the forms of resistance and engagement that farmworkers in Gauteng create to bring change to their lives. I planned an ethnographic study on a large farm in Germiston, where I would work as a farmworker, starting in February 2016. However, the farmer reneged on our arrangement. After discussing my disappointment with Mam Winnie*, a farmworker I had been in contact with since 2012, she advised me to shift my focus, saying, "To understand yourself and your project, you have to study me. It is through your relationship with me that you will begin to understand the truth about yourself and your study" (Conversation, Mam Winnie* 7/03/2015). Mam Winnie* is central to my work because, during my research on the farms, she reached out to me in 2012 for assistance after being assaulted by the farmer—an experience I have discussed in more detail elsewhere (see Nkosi 2023). We travelled to the farm with Eddie and a trade unionist from the Food Allied Workers Union to offer support. However, the case did not progress, as no witnesses came forward.

In "studying" Mam Winnie*, I was already beginning to see with a spiritual eye, as everyone regarded her as a "healer". This was my first encounter with the concept of seeing with a spiritual eye, which I explored in *These Potatoes*. To see with a spiritual eye is:

a process of assessing the land through its aggregating sufferings endured by the farmworkers, and treating these sufferings as indicative of the farmworkers' pending deaths—because the farm was integral to the killings of the farmworkers. At the same time, Black people have always had a bodily and spiritual bond with the eschatological world of their ancestors, and this made the living farmworkers believe that in the end the dead would find rest in this land. (Nkosi 2023, 24)

Reflecting on our conversation with Mam Winnie* in her shack, she and the others expressed frustration over their unjust treatment on the farm, especially after being removed and the compounds demolished to make way for more planting space in 2013. When I first met Mam Winnie* in 2012, she lived on the farm with other workers

in these compounds. Later, while studying labour relations in Bethal, I noticed a striking similarity between those compounds and the ones where Mam Winnie's colleagues had lived. Mam Winnie* boldly states:

There will be a time when we fight harder than the other workers in the area who seem to be making some gains. This will be a fight we fight on our own (*sizozilwela*) ... But what keeps me up at night is that we are all aging and many of us seem to be fighting different kinds of sicknesses in these shacks. We wonder if it was even right for us to be removed from the farm in 2013. We wonder what will happen to us if we were to die. We ask ourselves, "Where will we die?" (*Sizofelaphi Na?*) ... There is no rest here!

The sadness is evident in the faces of Ma Dladla* and Ma Mbatha*. Ma Mbatha* says, "Eyi, now she's starting with things that will make us sad, and when she's like this, she gets very angry." Ma Dladla* adds that working with the soil is not easy, as everything is now brown, and perhaps "our lungs are also brown". They laugh. This strikes me, I am also feeling sad and interestingly I have been reading some literature on land dispossession in preparation for the fieldwork. I did not ask any questions when this topic of death is discussed. Ma Dladla* adds that it was deeply sad to see that the only thing of value that Ma Setshaba* had was her shack. She felt it might be a mistake to sell it, given that Ma Setshaba* spent most of her last days there. This topic of death was not new to me. In 2012, while Mam Winnie* was still living on the farm, I met an inebriated man who, in hindsight, I had dismissed due to his state. The man spoke of the pain of the insults from the farmer, being called dogs with no place to live or die.

Spirituality for farmworkers is not abstract; it is embedded in their everyday experiences. Their conversations reveal everyday anxieties about displacement, impermanence, alienation, and longing for belonging. For example, workers express sadness about their deteriorating health due to harsh working conditions, with humour often masking physical pain. In touching on spirituality, I am arguing that it encompasses not just a final resting place but also dignity, identity, and the struggle for existence in the present. In this context, the gate takes on a spiritual dimension. While it symbolizes exclusion and control, it also reflects the workers' yearning for belonging and permanence. Their connection to the land signifies their existence as spiritual beings, where their labour and identity intersect with their existential and ethical claims to the land. Thus, the spiritual significance of the land includes both the workers' quest for justice and their desire for a place where they can exist in life and death. As farmworkers, they are alienated from the land and must seek permission from the farmer to connect with it. For instance, farmworkers in Gauteng noted that living on the farmer's compound often requires them to request permission to perform cultural rituals, such as the slaughtering of a goat for thanksgiving or cleansing rituals following a death in the family. However, farmers sometimes refuse, asserting ownership of the land and dismissing these practices, at times demonizing them as witchcraft.

These conversations pushed me to the question of time (temporality). I saw that the past was questioned in the shack. The history of dispossession and the relationship that had now emerged with the land, that as farmworkers they are not only selling their labour power, but the land to them is also a home. Their present becomes their future—a future where their spirits return to the land, linking the past, present, and future. This question was clarified for me through the works of Emmanuel Levinas

(1969, 1974, 1979, 1999). He argued that the face of the Other makes a demand, an ethical one, starting with the imperative of not killing and extending to the infinite moral responsibility in every encounter with the face of the Other. For Levinas, this was eschatological, directly addressing justice that transcends historical and temporal boundaries. This justice for me, through the face of the Other, was now present in the discussion, and as they were touching on the question of their future—they were seeing it in a spiritual sense an eschatological way, beyond the current temporality. At the same time, in this present, I was already existing in the future, the future where the land in South Africa from 2015 was the subject of conversation through the debate of expropriation of land without compensation.

I argued in my PhD that the challenge with this debate was viewing the “land question” merely as a material problem (see Nkosi 2018). I also began my analysis from the material perspective through participation in a decent work project. Then, from the above conversation with Mam Winnie*, I began to learn that home is spiritual as well, that the land was a home, was a question of one’s spiritual home. If you then do this simple calculation: past + present = future then one can locate the violence that befell Mam Winnie* and see the farmer as a being who is haunted by the living presence of the past that is being contested in the present by the social fact of making a home in this land. The mistreatment of farmworkers also highlights indecent working conditions, with the removal from the farm itself serving as a stark example of this injustice. This state of being haunted I saw as an anxiety, that the language of paternalism presented through the benevolent father on the farm. The “children” are seen as potential usurpers because they saw this land as home, which the farmer had come to take through the violence of dispossession. This anxiousness has always found various forms of expression in South Africa, this is the anxiousness of the white society which creates a dangerous figure of the Black person (Swaart Gevaar) or some ideological influence that seeks to redistribute wealth through the ideology of socialism (the rooi gevaar) or later in the period of the democratic transition through the various family suicides of white farmers who were panicking about the coming of a new social order where the Black government will cause a new upheaval (Falkof 2016). Nicky Rousseau (2014) in her chapter on “Death and Dismemberment: The Body and Counter-Revolutionary Warfare in Apartheid South Africa” shows how the white society, in the farms, through the state, began to use torture, murder, and concealing dead bodies on the farms. This was to send a message to anyone opposing the tyranny of the white society that the apartheid state was willing to use violence to psychologically destabilize the communities while at the same time concealing the violence from public knowledge. This is what allowed me to argue that the farm as a space of this violence is also haunted and in the potato boycott of 1959 when people refused to eat potatoes from the Eastern Transvaal, Bethal, they went as far as arguing that the Potatoes Look Like Humans. In the book, I quote Frances Baard, unionist and founding member of the ANC Women’s League (ANCWL), who reflects on the potato boycott in her memoir *My Spirit is Not Banned*:

We used to condemn a potato when we see one that had a hole or a black mark. We used to tell the people in the public meetings, “you see this mark here? It’s where your child’s blood went in. You see this mark here? It’s the blood of our children, that’s why the potato is so.” (Baard cited in Nkosi 2023, 15)

I then argued that to understand how the challenges in Bethal were viewed one must look at the land question through the spiritual eye, the eschatological eye, “which means that the spirit of the past remains in this land”. Therefore:

I have argued that this means that we need to write the question of the land Otherwise, to see not only the face of the Other and its demand, but also the spirit of the land. When the workers were looking at the land, they were using an eschatological gaze. I go beyond this theory of alterity, which in itself is anthropocentric, for the face of the Other is positioned as a spiritual entity that is visible. (Nkosi 2023, 115)

In being with Mam’ Winnie* and her colleagues, I acquired the eye of seeing Otherwise, seeing from the position of the Other. Had I had a chance to expatiate to Eddie, I would have told him that in his speech given at the Ceremony for an Award of an Honorary Doctorate by Rhodes University on 2 April 2016 he had titled his paper “the present as history; conversations with my ancestors”:

I stand before you then as a son of the Eastern Cape where I spent the first two decades of my life, in its villages and small towns. It is in the Eastern Cape where my ancestors settled on the left bank of the Kowie river in the early nineteenth century. It is here where they now lie in solitude in the graveyards of Cradock, of Graaff, Reneit, of Fort Beaufort, and, of course, Grahamstown.

I speak about my roots, because we are gathered here today, as a University and as a country, at the cross-roads. Who are we? What is our identity? And who amongst us are South Africans?

This “identity”, this connection to the land “where ... ancestors settled”, reflects a spiritual view of the land—a contested state of being in South Africa. Many Black people struggle to call the places they work or live their home, as even in death, there is no final resting place, as Dineo Skosana (2022) points out. This is the challenge in South Africa—the graves of the settlers are also in a land where those who were born on it, worked it, have become pariahs of nowhere (using Plaatje’s (1998) words). I have called this ontological nowhere of a Black person not being able to have a home in South Africa. Those who work the land are asking a haunting question “Where will they die?” This view sees the body, spirit, and land as interconnected. For the farmworkers, this connection is disrupted by “the gate”, which also causes anxiety for the farmer. The farmer is aware that land ownership in South Africa is contested, and that the farm, their home, is also seen as a home to be contested by those who work it. The settler is unsettled in many ways in South Africa, and the fact of belonging returns to this grave that exists in this land as a way of claiming a spiritual identity. This identity is questioned, and that is why the farmer uses violence, and is yet to explore what it means to belong to the land, a notion which is different to what it means to own and protect the land.

We did not delve deeply into the metaphor of the gate, as our analysis was obscured by an emphasis on promoting the concept of “decent work” and we failed to problematize paternalism as we argued:

As White (2011, 31) argues “at the heart of paternalism is the idea that workers and the farmer share a common interest.” But she continues to argue that “paternalism is not always a harmful relationship; farmers can provide a fair wage package and, for example, medical care, education, transport and crèches.” However to transform this paternalistic relationship into a more equal employer employee relationship will require the collective power of farmworkers in alliance with social movements (cited in Webster et al. 2012, 61)

Our focus on decent work overlooked the underlying power dynamics inherent in controlling labour and land, as symbolized by the gate. While the call for decent work is crucial, it risks reducing complex social relations to simplistic frameworks that fail to address deeper systemic issues of dispossession, labour exploitation, and racialized divisions in the workplace. This tension highlights the difficulty of reconciling ethical labour practices with the structural inequalities that persist in sectors like agriculture, where the worker's role is often confined to a position of subjugation, symbolized by the gate as both a literal and metaphorical boundary. By looking at the spiritual, I had not lost sight of the demands that workers were to make through the trade unions, but I was looking at the matter "Otherwise", highlighting a tension that is inherent in South Africa, an anxiety about belonging to the land.

When looking at Bethal and doing interviews with labour tenants in 2022, the spiritual outlook became much clearer to me, as the elders who were living on the farm relayed to me that the younger generation is not working on the farms because they feel a sense of injustice and they have decided to go try find accommodation in the townships. Mr Mathebe was to say:

They [children] say they are not happy here on the farm and that the home we have created is under threat because we are always bothered by these white farm owners who are always seeking to move us from the land. They say it is better to go to the city and work and get a house in the township. What will they do in the city if they are not educated or employed? Even when they are educated, what will they do? They do not have houses; they must pay rent, and do not even have [own] a home yet. When they leave the farms, they say they are running away from oppression. (Mathebe cited in Nkosi 2023, 123)

Mr Mazibuko adds another layer of complexity about ontological nowherehood where he says:

... Where will you go? There is nowhere to go. Where will you go? You work here and you stay here and you need a place to stay, a home. There is nowhere to go; where can you go? Even if you go to another farm, it is still the same ... this means you are looking for a place to live. Where will you find life if you do not have [a] place to stay? ... Where will you go? Remember in the past it was not just easy to go and stay in the township—you needed permission. At least now they can find stands in the township, but during apartheid it also meant that if you do not want to work on this farm, you go to another farm. But they are all the same. (Mazibuko cited in Nkosi 2023, 122)

Looking into Bethal today, Mr Mgwaza puts poignantly when he says there is no longer work for the younger generation and the graves of their ancestors are left on the farms and:

This is life today here on the farm. We are poor and the elderly are left with their children who have no work on the farm. We are seeing the coming of coal mines and hope that maybe our children will be employed in them. But as you can see many of the young have left the farm ... they have left the graves of their ancestors. Those graves are not taken care of. The ancestors are left to see for themselves ... Unfortunately, you cannot run away from your ancestors. In the future they will call you even in your dreams. To come to make life better at home. (Mgwaza cited in Nkosi 2023, 130)

From our travels to the various farms, I was bothered by a sense of not having a way to describe what was happening to me internally, to those whom I studied, who were Black like myself, and whom I see myself through their eyes. I was struggling to deal with history

as the present, and by being with Mam Winnie* and studying Bethal, I was able to open up for myself, a way of expressing the challenges of South Africa through the land question, and this question has failed to look at the land Otherwise through the eyes of those who are seeing rapid changes, those who are working the land without the land, concerned about not having a place of return. Therefore, through the spiritual, I was able to see that the return of the land question today as Magwaza said to me was a return of the challenge to make life better at home.

The puzzle and contribution to scholarship

In your words, Eddie, you would ask, what is the puzzle of one's work? Through Mam Winnie*, I began to appreciate the spiritual relationship with the land in ways that moved beyond legal ownership or formal property rights. She helped me see this relationship as beginning at birth, with the burying of the umbilical cord in the land. This practice establishes a natal relationship to place: a spiritual anchoring that records the body's connection to a specific landscape. It marks a circularity of life and death. In my PhD thesis, I examined how dispossession, as the legal system of ownership, interrupted such intimate relationships with land. Legal instruments cast land as property: a thing to be owned, transferred, and bound by the individual as a legal subject. But for many farm-dwellers—those who lived and worked on the land as labour tenants or farmworkers—another mode of belonging emerged, one that was deeply spiritual and collective rather than legal and individualized.

This spiritual relationship began with the ethical and cosmological link of the child to the land through the burying of the umbilical cord. This act did not simply tie the person to the land as a location, but rather to the entirety of the cosmos, suggesting that to respect the land and all its beings was to honour the self. The land became not property, but a living entity that holds human lives, histories, and spirits. The land “knew” those who lived and died on it.

Another layer of spiritual belonging came through the graves on the farms. People born on farms pointed to these burial sites—alongside buried umbilical cords—as markers of rootedness and claims to return. This belonging was not defined through documentation in the deeds registry but through years of working the land, intergenerational labour histories, burial practices, and ancestral presence. This is what Bethal came to represent for me on a spiritual level: a site of embodied and ethical belonging that exists in tension with legal regimes of property. This created a particular anxiety for the farmer, who could present legal documents to assert ownership, while workers asserted a different kind of claim, based on labour, burial, birth, and being.

I also began to grasp another form of spiritual connection to the land—one born not from birth or burial, but from labour. This was especially evident among farmworkers in Gauteng, like Mam Winnie*, who were not born on the farms where they worked and could not bury their umbilical cords there. Nevertheless, they spoke of forming a relationship with the land through the act of working it. I came to understand this as working the land with the land—a mode of relationality in which labour is not extractive but dialogical and spiritual. As Mam Winnie* put it: “Thina umhlaba sikhuluma nawo kuqala ngaphambi kokuthi sitshale. Lo mhlaba uyasazi sonke thina esiphila kuwo” (We speak to the land first before we start planting. This land knows everyone who lives on it).

This spiritual sensibility transforms the labouring relationship into something more than economic—it becomes a communion with land that recognizes its aliveness and agency. From this perspective, the success of the farm is not only a matter of agricultural technique or market prices but depends on the spiritual link between the workers and the land. This invites a broader theorization through African cosmologies and ontologies of land, not as inert matter but as a relational being that knows, holds, and responds.

Yet, this connection is also marked by a deep spiritual precariousness. Although these workers worked the land with the land, they could not be returned to it. In the Gauteng farms we studied, there are no graves, and workers are uncertain about where they will be buried when they die. This raises a painful contradiction: they are spiritually connected to the land through labour, but they remain unrooted in death. They worry about being buried elsewhere, away from the land that knows them, thus revealing the profound separation that defines life on the farm despite the deep spiritual investments.

In my PhD, I began mapping the question of spirituality by revisiting works produced from the 1970s (onwards) on dispossession in South Africa (Bundy 1979; Wolpe 1972; Morris 1976, 1988; Trapido 1971). These works provided a materially grounded understanding of dispossession in South Africa, linking it to processes of proletarianization and capital accumulation. Bundy's *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (1979, 12), for example, asked important questions about "The relations of the peasant and the land he farmed, his crops, cattle, ploughs and pastures." This framing was pivotal for me. While Bundy captured the economic implications of land loss, his analysis fell short of exploring the deeper relational and ontological dimensions of land for Black people. It was precisely this gap that prompted me to consider not only how land was a means of material production, but also how it functioned as a site of being and becoming. I was fuelled by the pain captured in Solomon Plaatje's (1998) *Native Life in South Africa*, where he traces the devastating aftermath of the 1913 Natives Land Act. His account of the Kgobadi family haunted me deeply. As labour tenants were forcibly removed from the Free State, they wandered in search of land where they might settle, carrying with them a sickly baby. When the child died on the journey, the family had nowhere to bury her—they were landless in every sense. In desperation, they "stole" a grave, digging silently by night on someone else's land. This moment crystallized for me the violence of land dispossession not just as a material loss, but as a spiritual rupture. I began to ask: what does it mean to be a person through land, not just to work or own it, but to exist about it cosmologically and ethically? In the work, I aimed to move beyond the economic to consider the ontological and eschatological: how is a Black person's being linked with the land through life as relational-birth, burial, memory, and spiritual continuity? In other words, land is not only that which is lost, but that through which being itself is shaped and returned. I then argued that much of this work conceptualized dispossession primarily as a material loss for Black people, often treating cattle, goats, graves, and other ontological dimensions raised by those pushed from the land as relics of an "ideological past" (Morris 1976, 324). Simultaneously, the 1994 democratic period saw a surge in ideographic and nomothetic scholarship on land reform, focusing on the three pillars of restitution, redistribution, and tenure reform (Hall 2004; Hall et al. 2012; Walker 2008; Cousins and Cherry 2015). Scholars like Lungisile Ntsebenza (2005) illuminated another dimension of the rural struggle—where land-related claims increasingly targeted traditional authorities. Chiefs, once seen as custodians of the land, were suddenly being viewed as obstacles to

democratic land reform, their role recast as compromising both land justice and democratic accountability in the rural landscape. Scholars remain divided on why land reform in South Africa has been slow. Some return to the constitution to argue that Section 25 of the constitution—the property clause—protects private property and enshrines a market-based, compensation-driven model, thus impeding radical reform (Hendricks, Ntsebenza, and Helliker 2013; Ntsebenza 2007). Others counter that the constitution allows for expropriation without compensation and that policy and implementation failures—rooted in corruption and a lack of political will—which are the real obstacles (Hall 2020; Ngcukaitobi 2021).

These studies contributed crucial insights into the lackadaisical efforts by the state to redress the historical injustice of land dispossession. These works reveal how the land question has been co-opted by political and economic elites, undermining efforts to address deep-seated inequalities (see Mtero, Gumede, and Ramantsima 2023). A survey of the literature shows that the core challenges relating to land have also touched on the sidelining of gender and livelihood issues, the lack of a unified national development vision linked to land expropriation, the entrenchment of market-based land reform, and the shifting terrain of land struggles from rural to increasingly urban contexts (see Cousins and Cherryl 2015, 4). In inserting the spiritual relationship with land into my analysis, I sought to argue that the land question in South Africa must go beyond the material loss of territory or productive assets (seeing land beyond a person-to-a-thing relationship). It must also contend with the spiritual linkage with the land—a severance from land as a living, cosmological entity that ground's identity, ancestry, and ethical life. Interestingly, I began this inquiry through the question of labour, initially focusing on how Black people were dispossessed and incorporated into capitalist relations as workers. Yet, as I traced the experiences of farmworkers and labour tenants, I began to see that labour was not only economic but also relational. Through labour, a connection to the land was forged—one that exceeded wages, contracts, or productivity. Farmworkers spoke of “speaking to the land” before planting, of knowing its rhythms, of burying umbilical cords and ancestors in its soil. Labour thus became a medium through which people cultivated a spiritual and ethical bond with place—a way of becoming with the land, not merely working on it or owning it.

What does this mean? It suggests that in attending to land, there is an urgency to account for the loss of ontological and spiritual rootedness, not just the economic or political consequences of dispossession. Land, in this sense, is not merely a resource, but a relation. In centring the spiritual, I aim to foreground the centrality of life itself, because dispossession is not merely the removal of land or material resources; it is the removal of life. To attend to dispossession, then, is to ask: what forms of life were severed, displaced, or rendered impossible? And what does it mean to restore life—not just through redistribution or compensation, but through a recognition of land as a living, relational force that anchors being, memory, and return?

Adieu

It was, perhaps, an ironic twist of fate that in the comfort of your home—at those working lunches so casually steeped in intellectual conversation—Professor Luli Callinicos reminded us of a critical moment in history: the 1959 potato boycott when the issues

of farmworkers suddenly took centre stage. How strange, and yet how fitting, that the very space where discussions of history and power unfolded should also be where my understanding began to take shape. In that environment, where the past and present collided with such clarity, I found myself pondering not just the struggles of farmworkers, but the enduring contradictions in South Africa's labour relations. For many years you were working on the labour process, "the hidden abode of production", but we were to go to another "abode", the farm, a home, controlled through the "the gate". This home is a contested terrain. It is distant from the cities and difficult for unions to access. I aimed to elucidate that the issue lies not in access only but in perception—seeing Otherwise through the eyes of the other. I was able to later show that even the boycott, after all, was more than a consumer boycott or a protest against exploitative labour practices—it was a manifestation of the bitter irony that the very land worked by the oppressed continues to shape the contours of their lives in ways that needed to be seen Otherwise, through the spiritual eye, as the potato was now haunting South Africa, looking like all those who died in Bethal, demanding justice, reminding us about the spiritual state of the land, that there is no home for those who work the land, that those that "own" the land are anxious beings, seeing in all Black people usurpers, and criminals. Our limitation was that we took only a fleeting snapshot of labour relations, never critically revisiting the long shadows cast by South Africa's unjust history of dispossession.

On 24 August 2023 you wrote [after I had extended an invitation for you to be a discussant for my book launch on 8 September at the Rethinking Economics for Africa Festival at Wits]:

I would have loved to have been a discussant at the launch but sadly I will not be in South Africa on 8th September. I am on an extended holiday in the village of Kioni at Iulis's ancestral home on the island of Ithaca in Greece. I needed time to reflect and recuperate after a busy time at the SCIS over the last six years. I return to South Africa on 16th September and I hope very much you will be able to attend my launch on 12th October. I attach a flyer on the book. In a way it is also my farewell to Wits as I formally retire after 47 years on the payroll of Wits.

I fondly recall the time we worked together on the farm worker project and the interesting knowledge we gained into the working lives of these dispossessed workers. I could see at the time that your interests went beyond their material conditions and into the symbolic significance of the land they worked. I am sure your book is going to make an important contribution to the land question.

I think you make an excellent point about the anxiety of the white farmer but I am not sure if "land expropriation without compensation" on its own provides a sustainable solution—certainly not without a range of other possible interventions. But that will have to be a topic for another occasion.

My response on 24 August 2023:

Even though you deserve your well-earned rest, please know that we'll still be reaching out from time to time to tap into your wealth of knowledge and seek your wise counsel. A true mentor (a Madala) never truly rests, as the questions and enthusiasm of the younger generation continue to invigorate their wisdom ...

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