

These Potatoes Look like Humans: The Contested Future of Land, Home, and Death in South Africa. By Mbuso Nkosi. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2023. 172 pages. \$20.00 paper.

In *These Potatoes Look like Humans*, Mbuso Nkosi offers a brilliant and compelling telling of Indigenous labor, dispossession, and belonging in South Africa. Stretching from the early apartheid era to the present, the book offers a profound and expansive view of the violent and intersecting histories of colonial occupation and dehumanization within the country. *These Potatoes Look like Humans* traces the lingering histories of violence and carceral power surrounding the region known as *Emazambaneni*—“the place of the potatoes,” a region of intensive potato and maize farming in the Eastern Transvaal (today known as Mpumalanga). Focusing on the interlocking systems of compulsory labor that white minority farmers enacted over Indigenous Black South Africans, Nkosi provides a comprehensive and thoughtful history of labor and violence. In addition, *These Potatoes Look like Humans* offers a novel synthesis of methodological approaches to center the humanity of the African laborers denied under the apartheid regime.

By focusing on Bethal and the potato farms located therein, *These Potatoes Look like Humans* situates itself within broader narratives of apartheid and well-recorded histories of state and colonial violence. By the 1950s, the apartheid state colluded with white-owned farmers to force imprisoned Africans into fixing the labor shortages experienced across the agricultural sector. By 1958, over 200,000 African prisoners—largely incarcerated for violating the humiliating and demeaning pass laws of apartheid—were forcibly working on white-owned farms (12). The ramping up of these labor systems led to a dramatic increase in violence against farm workers. News reports featured lurid stories of beaten, maimed, or killed laborers, and reports began to circulate about human remains found in fields and rumors of potatoes for sale that resembled human body parts. As a result, activists supported a nationwide boycott of Bethal potatoes in 1959 and forced the state into examining the systemic violence rife throughout the fields.

It is from these reports that Nkosi situates a multifaceted analysis of these farm histories and their legacies. As Nkosi asserts, “The potato was not a neutral commodity, for it had eyes that witnessed the injustices. It even took on the shape of the dead people that it encountered in the soil and became a commodity used to demand justice” (14). Continuing the analogy of the potato, Nkosi invites the reader to think through many kinds of eyes in order to understand the variety of perspectives that undergird the history of Indigenous dispossession in South Africa. To understand what occurred in *Emazambaneni*, he argues, “requires an eye that sees beyond material logic, an eye that apprehends the work of the spirit” (13).

At the core of this book is a frank and complex discussion of alterity as produced through settler colonial violence. By using the potato and its uncanny valley-like nonhumanness as a starting point, Nkosi turns the reader's eyes to the construction of the Other. The act of dispossessing Indigenous Africans of their land meant that Black people within South Africa truly did not belong anywhere, a state of being that Nkosi refers to as *ontological nowhere* (19). This concept effectively conveys the fundamental alienation experienced by Africans under apartheid, and reveals the desperation experienced amid the cruelty of compulsory farm labor.

By turning to the horror of the person-potato, Nkosi offers a reading of this ontological nowhere to effectively describe how the twentieth-century South African state sought to deprive Africans of their very humanity and render them as mere cogs in a broader labor regime. Simply viewing these histories economically "is a form of debasement that renders us part of the ontology of violence of ownership which conceals anxiety about the future," Nkosi argues poignantly (115). The use of the multiple eyes and Indigenous knowledge practices turn *These Potatoes Look like Humans* from more than just a materialist view about capitalist violence or a sociological text about structural racism. Instead, Nkosi uses these eyes to think about fears of the future, refashioning farm brutality, antiapartheid activism, and historic displacement into various hauntings of past and present in South Africa.

At its strongest points, *These Potatoes Look like Humans* turns critical eyes toward structures with startling clarity. When unpacking the fundamental anxiety of white farmers and their relationship to land and mastery, Nkosi uses the isiZulu concept of *iqunga*, ("a killing urge"). The deployment of *iqunga* to understand a broader systemic haunting is a methodological breakthrough. In linking *iqunga* to Derrida's conception of a spectral truth and haunted conscience, Nkosi effectively and concisely excavates the stakes of settlement and Indigenous alterity. To this end, he argues that, to the white farmer, "to employ violence was to secure the future, to ensure that the living, and even the dead, did not have a claim to the land" (74). *Iqunga* represents the shaky and uncertain future carved out by dispossession and colonial strength—it represents a claim to security that can never be truly satisfied and must be slaked endlessly, like a recurring thirst. This book deftly uses the concept to unpack archival descriptions of violence and to explain the systemic and recurring cycles of violence that shaped both a South African past and haunt the present.

Some of these incisive viewpoints are more convincing than others. Nkosi takes up valuable space in revealing the ostensibly invisible eyes of white carceral officials and politicians, but these revelations are largely self-evident. The fact that corrupt officials such as Native Commissioner P. J. De Beer imagined themselves as possessing a unique and singular insight into a "backward" African people is readily apparent in the archive. By focusing time and space to uncover this hypocritical posturing, Nkosi dedicates less coverage to his effective and thoughtfully analyzed conceptions of African alterity. Still, these are relatively minor quibbles from what is a profoundly unique and compelling text.

These Potatoes Look like Humans is more than a sociological or economic analysis of apartheid's history and legacy in South Africa. It is a methodologically novel

rendering that seriously integrates Indigenous knowledge with broader questions of ontology and belonging to describe just how dispossession demolishes the past in pursuit of a nebulous and cruel future. Nkosi turns the many eyes of the potato across the landscapes of Mpumalanga and recenters the humanity of African actors in a bleakly violent system. It is a beautiful and touching work that reminds us of the quotidian violences explained away in much of contemporary debate surrounding South African farmers and race. In this moment of Trumpian refugee claims, it is a powerful call to focus on African humanity and a reminder of the tenuous instability of settler authority.

T. J. Tallie
University of San Diego