Just a DRAFT. Please let me know if you have any contribution to this article. Thanks!

Scattered Ontologies and Narrative Challenges (HUMA Seminar/ Feb, 15th, 2024)

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Abstract

Damon Galgut's The Promise won the prestigious and (one must add) controversial Booker Prize in 2021. It has been analysed by literary critics from different angles.
In my discussion, I want to approach the novel from my position and background as an anthropologist.
The book portrays how incommunicability between human experiences over time responds to a universe of shattered ontologies. The novel's particular sense of incommensurability helps us **to problematise our ethnographic challenge as theorists and storytellers**.
Despite a commitment to multiple ontologies that undeniably anthropology has developed conceptually, the quest of **imagining adequate narratives** to acknowledge these different worlds needs further exploration.
Everlasting fundaments of indifference, alienation and individualism are considered bedrock for most of our scientific institutions and parameters of validation.
If even an artwork lacks the power **to break this expectation**, what to expect from anthropological works?
That is the central question this conversation wants to raise.

Introduction

Last January I visited Clark's bookshop in Cape Town CBD. It should not be a surprise to see some piles of The Promise in prominent display at the shop. The book and its author have definitely replaced other prize winner white South African authors from the front shelf (Coetzee, Gordimer).

As some critics have appointed (Muponde and McLean), I had to raise some basic questions. Is this book meant to be mainly read by an international audience (like myself) as a literary depiction of contemporary South Africa, and therefore that was the reason it was displayed like that? Or it also clings a local note? Despite its author's commitment to a non-realist narrative that entails inaccuracies any South African would easily recognize, who is the South African reader of this novel (since the book was so in evidence in Clark's)? How do South Africans relate to the work depending on their race and language?

I am not in the literary studies field. Neither I do a sociology of literature as if following Bourdieu steps.

In my paper I want to deal with some specific questions insofar they inspire anthropologists to deal with their own problems – specially in what concerns narrative construction.

For many anthropologists based in the global south, an ethnographic article well hosted by an international audience might not receive the same accolade at home. Usually these academics don't even have their work publish internationally because the particularity annoys the cosmopolitan reviewers. More important though, in case it is published, an ethnographic text

that might be well accepted by the author's academic peers might not be welcome by those who the research takes as subject matters, the former called "natives".

In the last case, and that is my hypothesis today, the disagreement around the narrative might come from the fact that criteria of scientific validation in social sciences still depend on a voice that renders the fieldwork tangible to the academic peer through a tapestry which threads are necessarily social threads. And, by social here, I mean, features that resonate the ontology of a modern, western, individualistic subject and are therefore "easily" and "universally" understood.

In short, I am not denying that anthropology does not acknowledge other world views. That is one of the "pillars" of the discipline. My problem here concerns the dominant genre and the ideology underneath this predominant taste or inclination towards the ethnographic text.

It is in this context of a previous ethnographic journey and dialogues with literature on the narrative impacts of colonialism that the novel The Promise is read.

Before I get to my concern with Scattered Ontologies and Narrative Challenges, I will first present a bit of my trajectory and the main reasons I consider literature a productive third to think about anthropology.

In a second section, I will briefly touch into the prize politics and the effects it might have on our reception of some novels and their reproduction as model narratives that fit into a global white liberal taste that shapes contemporary canons.

Then I will present the novel according to the previous frame I have introduced, namely, its centrally modern gaze devoted to certain "human" subjectivities.

Why literature as a third?

Before I get into Damon Galgut's novel The Promise , let me talk to you about how I got to the novel.

Before this particular analysis, I have done some other experiments comparing my fieldwork with issues related to land struggles, racism and ontological differences, in Brazil and in South Africa.

I did it with Brazilian literature and, more recently, with South African literature.

I have been working with novels and exploring them ethnographically for a few years. In the first experiment, I put a Brazilian author called Lima Barreto, activists from a rural development NGO and resettled people who had had their original land flooded by a dam into dialogue. In an imagined and imaginative conversation, everyone spoke from their perspective about their understanding of the saúva (a leaf-cutter ant), the alliances and confrontations they were involved in. Avant la lettre, I ethnographically put into conversation humans with incommensurable perspectives and approaches towards what is named non-humans.

More recently, I have published two articles that seek to balance and set in motion the voices of literary fiction and the ethnographic fiction that I construct.
In one case, I look at animals other than ants but dogs. Starting with the novel Disgrace, by the laureate John Maxwell Coetzee, I explore the insults between humans who use the figure of the dog to sustain attacks that are intended to be confined to a realm of nature and, therefore, beyond politics and state racism in the case of apartheid.

In the last article, I study the trilogy by Zimbabwean artist Tsitsi Dangarembga. In it, I explore the psychic transformations undergone by the main character, Tambudzai. Her illness, her supposed hallucinations when she feels ants climbing up her body indicate a composite figure (human and non-human) in conflict with the post-colonial burden in revolutionary Zimbabwe. I explore the potential of this clash between her body and that of the insect as a (painful) dispute between the ideals of composition-land and composition-plantation in which Tambudzai saw herself involved.

In South Africa, since 2006, I have been working with farm tenants or labour tenants, which means black people – whole families – who work for white farm owners, sometimes and each day less commonly living within these private properties.

Since the official end of apartheid in 1994 – due to legislation that, in theory, assures labour tenants the right to stay where they have been living inside the farms – farm owners have promoted massive eviction and peoples displacement.

In opposition to unlawful eviction, black farm tenants have organised themselves in social movements to get their land back in South Africa, which is called redistribution processes.

I have been working with activists – farm tenants – from the Landless Peoples Movement.

In 2021, during the pandemic, I read The Promise, written by a prestigious South African novelist called Damon Galgut.

After finishing it, I was appalled. Really shocked.

The novel has undeniable qualities in its formal aspects. Orbiting around a farm and a white family in the heart of South Africa. However, it doesn't make any effort to reach the subjectivities of its black characters – and less of the earth itself and its earthbeings (La Cadena). The book, in short, reenacts what Povinelli calls geontopower, through the figure of the desert, the no-man's land.

> It seems that the farm has been in the hands of the Swart family for a few generations.
> We don't know how far back this settler ownership goes either:
> "the whole valley belonged to Paul Kruger ... they outlasted the British and will outlast the Kaffirs too".
> No mention to originary peoples.

Black people though are important in the plot – actually, they (black people and their land) are essential to the plot, but we, readers, don't get to know anything about them as ontological entities. They are framed and described from the settler perspective. No wonder the book is described, despite its author's will, as a plaasroman or a settler novel.

The novel's plot evolves in contemporary times. It is not a historical non-fiction book. It is also not explicit racist. It's narrative is not limited or narrow. And it was written by an author who is known as a white liberal, a leftist, we could say.

We could say: ok. It's acceptable. In his artwork, the author is building a fictional world where a white Afrikaner cum British/Jewish family is built upon shards of reality and imagination[1]. As an artist, he can ignore what Blacks think and feel, their names, ages, and personal histories. He can also ignore the multiple and incommensurable meanings earth and earthbeings have in each context.

Well, I don't think so. That's why, after finishing the book, I felt uneasy.

> Galgut seems not to have aggregated sufficient experience of black life to be able to write about it meaningfully. (Muponde, 2023)

Prize Politics

Despite the neglect of black voices, the book and its author were laureated with the prestigious Booker Prize in 2021. A prize for literature in English from authors from the former Commonwealth countries and the US, since 2014.

I am sure the kindle algorithm led me to the book because of my profile but also because the book was long listed to the prize. In other words, do prizes sell books or books are awarded because they sell the prize and its ideology (specially in the case of the Booker Prize)?

Today, with my presentation, I want to come to terms with my discontent. Why a book that is racist in its framing of South African broader history – especially contemporary history – has had so many accolades? Obviously, I am not alone in my critic. Other academic dismissed as bitter readers who cannot appreciate the value of art for its own sake have also been writing on the book.

> What stands out are Galgut's white characters while his […] depiction of blacks is truthful, but superficial because of Galgut's underworked conventions of perception and representation. (Muponde, 2023)

[1] "Jewish Capetonians Derek and Janet Lubner, who now live in London, have shown a commitment to the arts in their former home country through their very generous funding of the production." (2023)

As you will see, I think it is because in our so-called postcolonial or postimperial societies, whites and whiteness are still acknowledged as the legitime connoisseurs who have superior perspectives on how to create a work of art – especially in figurative artworks, like this novel and others – based, but not restrained to "reality".

And that is exactly where ethnography comes into the scene. We have been struggle to decolonize our syllabus. The way we do fieldwork nowadays should not resemble a colonial mission. We have read enough about the ontological turn to understand that we have more than different perspectives on the world. Actually there are many different worlds where the so-called humans inhabit with other beings they relate to in quite incommensurable and incommunicable ways. Nevertheless, we still have ahead of us the hard task of playing with a writing machine that invites us to disrespect borders of reasonability. We still stick to an omniscient narrator that – despite his voice could be mouthed by different vessels – assumes a cartesian, modern, Eurocentric perspective of the world, its components and the meaning of its existence (Ferreira da Silva)[2].

The Booker Prize is awarded by a London-based foundation to the best novel written in English by an author from the former British Commonwealth. Strongman (2022) analyses several works awarded the prize, looking for features that unite them. Of the novels in his sample, he emphasises the backdrop of post-imperialism in the warp of the plots.

Instead of understanding the actual moment as a post-imperial, I rather understand the fact that this kind of novel is so palatable to a global audience precisely because it ignores other perspectives on the world beyond that of the modern gaze and its ontological subject – in other words, whites and their framing of reality[3].

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[2] by the sagacious voice of a narrator whose raced (and suspiciously male, heteronormative) identification with the family extends rather unnervingly to implicate the raced reader as both witness and participant, shifting an abstract, singular moral imperative and exercise of reading race academically to a collective embodied paradigm of knowing it. […] The narrator's fluid shifts from the third-person plural pronoun 'they' to the second-person plural pronouns 'us' and 'we' invites a disquietingly embodied responsiveness to, and recognition of, our collective, inter-subjective raced biographies as well as complicity in the everyday machinations of being white
[…]
In her essay 'Home,' Toni Morrison calls for a reconsideration of 'the subtle yet persuasive attachments we have to the architecture of race,' to rethink 'what it means and what it takes to live in a redesigned racial house … as a way of calling it home' (7). In Galgut's novel, home is conceived differently. In The Promise, where racial architectures are stubbornly intact, and the debt of white shame translates into black (dis)inheritance, there is no conceivable home to perceive. Phiri, XXXX)

[3] McLean, tries to establish "the influence of the Booker Prize on transnational literary circulation" (2022). For this author, the Booker values works that present "a unitary and exotic identity for metropolitan readers":
"prize culture encourages readings for unique exoticism that treat each location of settlement as very distinct and as representative, thereby obscuring similarities"(192)
the particular texts easily available and familiar to international critics because of their success as Booker prize winners are not necessarily representative of the context from which they emerged
despite its anti-realism "the novel [is read] as an exotic representation of white South African experience within the metropolitan tradition, rather than aligning it with a distinct settler tradition which could otherwise be identified.
"we do not, for example, at any point gain access to Salome's thoughts."
The prize rewards features other than those which encourage local circulation. – same critic we find in Muponde's analysis.

In short, these novels and their plots depend on scattered ontologies left outside the fenced plot of land, private property spaces, or land ownership. Their main characters developed their world vision without the blacks, without other earthbeings neither, dealt with as part of the landscape – as mere human resources to be drained and exploited (people who are not really considered human and the innards of the soil).

The novel for me

The ethnography of literary fiction proposes a conceptualisation that has in itself a tangible form, an ethical and aesthetic purpose, which brings it closer to the idea of a work of art [Martin Holbraad (2022) uses the term shape to contrast the conceptualising purpose of theory in anthropology with the desire for description, explanation or interpretation].

In my presentation today, I listen to the voices emanating from the work of fiction and place them in an **imaginative dialogue** with voices I have heard in other circumstances of my fieldwork in South Africa.

Assuming that the writer/artist is a kind of para-ethnographer, as Michael Fischer (2023) argues, when I read The Promise, I believe that I am faced with fictional creations that are based on a sort of ethnographic material of different densities and intensities which I produced as "my" collection and which are in intense dialogue with it.

Insofar as Galgut is somewhat native to the places and events he narrates in his novel, the hypothesis defended here is that the acclaimed author fictionalises elements he had ethnographed [Archie Mafeje was a South African anthropologist who said not just professional ethnographers do ethnography] .

My analysis, therefore, is a kind of ethnography of a literary work. As a Brazilian white academic with some knowledge of contemporary South Africa, I do not feel so alienated from the world shared in the novel. In short, I feel able to develop an authentic interlocution (cf. Mafeje) with the author, his characters and the plot he has woven.

My purpose is not to scrutinise the novel or its author, but its PLOT – and why this plot is so appealing and not problematized.

The notion of plot, as proposed by Sylvia Wynter, has been fundamental to thinking about some of the perennial issues in my research, such as the land, the plot, the house, funerals and the educational devices that produce the monotonous epistemes of modernist monoculture: plot as a place of refuge and dwelling on the large farm and plot as a turning point in the modern novel.

The book tells the saga of the Swart family - the Black family in Afrikaner.

Galgut assumes that he was inspired by William Faulkner in The Sound and the Fury (1929), in which the downfall of the Compson family is told in four parts, from the perspective of the three sons and, in the last part, by Dilsey, a black employee of the aristocratic family from Mississippi.

Anecdotes told by a friend about family funerals also strongly inspired him to divide the book around four rituals/funerals.

A decade passes between one chapter and the next. There is nothing between one death and another. Forty years of South African history are illustrated regarding the achievements of the federal administration of the African National Congress, considered pathetic or scandalously flawed by the White Liberals.

The Swart family made up of the father (Pa or Manie) and the mother (Ma or Rachel) live on a small farm on the outskirts of Johannesburg (we do not know much about their main crops or livestock - "a barn, a stable, a horse, a few cows, goats, some chickens ... useless land, full of rocks, you can't do anything with it")[4].

The mother meets Salome, the black servant, after her marriage to Manie (Grandfather used to say about his wife: "Oh, Salome, I won you with the land").

Salome lives in a somewhat distant shabby house called Lombard House, where she was allowed to live after Grandfather bought it to prevent an Indian family from moving in ~~[Long Beard – as adult men].~~

The Lombard house belonged to the first white settler in that black indigenous land.

The couple will have three children. All of them with names beginning with the letter A - which would be, as I've heard many times in South Africa - a distinctive feature of Afrikaans tackiness.

Anton, Astrid and Amor.

Salomé (peace) would have at least one son, Lukas (light). About the father of this boy-man, we know that he died in a gold mine in Johannesburg when he was still a child. Salomé's mother tongue, Setswana, is rarely mentioned (once, on page XXXX). The family driver is called Lexington. Another labourer is Andile (the single one with a non-European name).

The children were born between the late 60s and 70s (the author was born in 1963 in Pretoria). As such, they live their childhoods amid apartheid - in a South Africa under a partial embargo.

When they reach adolescence and adulthood, they see their country changing, crumbling in the face of the "communist threat and black revenge" (Crapanzano, 1985).

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[4] In contrast to Magogodi oaMphela Makhene:
"They didn't believe, as authorities do, this land is too sterile – a suitable plot to blackspot with natives." (2023:8)

Each noteworthy event in the lives of this family is presented against a backdrop of contemporary South African history related to the official end of apartheid and events that gained notoriety in the mainstream media in the following years. Previous events whose protagonists were white rulers are not emphasised.

When Amor, the youngest daughter, was still a child, aged 13, on the eve of her menarche, her mother died of a disease. The novel begins with this first funeral, in 1986.

Before her death, the girl hear, in whispers, her father promising her mother, on her deathbed, that Lombard House will be Salomé's property.

The overheard conversation between Manie and Rachel is the PROMISE that gives the novel its title.

The woman's deathbed wish was to donate a ruined house and a tiny fraction of the land occupied by the Swart family of white settlers to the farm worker who has lived there without property rights for ages.

In Salome's prayer to God, commending Rachel to him, she recalls that before she became a Madam, the two of them were one person - perhaps an allusion to an affective and sexual relationship, as worked by the artist Zanele Muholi.

The mother, a benevolent character in the novel, leaves her legacy to Amor.

Amor will punctuate the entire course of the novel with an eternal flag - shattered by her father, sister, brother and others like them: she wants the ownership of Lombard House given to Salomé [the ownership of a stollen land].

There is no talk of restitution or redistribution - institutional terms present in South African public land reform policies. It is a private matter – in all senses of this word.

Let us recall that after the official end of the Apartheid regime in 1994, the government - first of Nelson Mandela - established the goal of restituting at least 30% of the land back to black hands since the old regime had stolen it and confined more than 80% of the population (black) to less than 20% of the territory.

It is something else that Rachel, the mother, and the daughter want - less belligerent and disturbing.

It is about a promise, almost of a transcendental nature, a domestic affair - after all, Salome was like a mother to the white children. [sucking nipples].

Beyond this PROMISE, the novel is crossed by fundamental religious debates and convictions.

The mother is of Jewish origin. When she marries, she joins her husband's Dutch Reformed church.

When she gets sick, she asks the rabbi - whom she visits again - for a Jewish funeral, much to her husband's chagrin.

He, in turn, after his wife's death, immerses himself in the affairs of a Pentecostal church - the first assembly of the revelation, led by Pastor Alwyn Simmers.

This clingy figure sticks to the farm to the point that when Manie dies, he manages to inherit a portion of land on the farm, where he erects a huge temple. [a white stranger gets its land within the stolen land, while the black servant keeps waiting]

Neither on her mother's death nor her father's, which took place in the following decade, did Salomé receive Lombard House, despite Amor's discreet but insistent efforts.

Amor, frustrated, moves away from everything and everyone.

She leaves no trace. She goes to Durban, London, Cape Town - she takes up an almost nomadic life without touching the family's financial resources.

The two older brothers, for their part, do not stop orbiting that satellite of African whiteness that is the farm[5].

Astrid will live in the city, and Anton will live on the farm until the end.

Astrid divorces her first husband, with whom she has two children. She remarries a Catholic man and gradually converts to Catholicism, finding a parish priest who listens attentively to her dilemmas.

Her husband, a businessman in the post-apartheid era, has among his partners black men with connections to the government, for whom they provide privileged security services. [the subject of black corruption].

They are so close that Astrid goes to the inauguration of President Thabo Mbeki (in 2004), who is portrayed caricatured. [womanizer]

Astrid goes on to have an affair with her husband's black business partner.

Betrayal and a relationship with a man "of another race" torment and seduce her (Mcclintock, 1995).

The eldest, Anton has the most challenging time adapting to the new South Africa.

During his time as a recruit, he shot and killed a woman in a township during an uprising at the end of apartheid.

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5 Even if it is not statistically relevant

The murder occurred moments before his mother died, with his military rifle, in Katlehong township.

Anton deserted.

He would become an outlaw, subject to martial sentences.

He spent a decade in exile in his own country until the regime fell, and he was able to return home, coinciding with his father's death, as a hero rather than a criminal.

Manie, the father, who never worked on the farm, made money as a partner in a rather peculiar theme park called Scale City: a reptile park.

Encouraged by the pastor of his church, he had exposed himself to venomous animals to test his unshakeable faith.

In an unsuccessful performance, he was bitten and poisoned.

His last days were in the hospital still called Verwoerd. [the untouched architecture of Apartheid]

His funeral and the outcome of the inheritance were set against the backdrop of Mandela's rise and the reconciliation of the rainbow nation, epitomised by the commemoration of Youth Day (19 years after the 1976 Soweto massacre) and the Rugby World Cup - in the first year of the new South Africa's life.

Anton's next few years are spent on the farm after sacking the old employees, evicting those living there and hiring them as daily labourers when necessary.

He tries to get rid of an invasion of the land, with a raid on the storage room, with prayer meetings at the top of the Koppie - a hill.

He marries an adolescent crush. His wife, Desirée, was the daughter of a torturer who had escaped any punishment by testifying to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission - which had caused great embarrassment for her entire family and who would eventually die of dementia. [Lukas go to jail, but not the torturer]

She always opposed giving Lombard House to "the girl" - who would destroy it. Salome is called girl, no matter her old age.

As time passed, his wife, who was unable to get pregnant and blamed Anton for her infertility, turned to a guru and his esoteric orientalist sect.

The couple's life gradually falls apart, just like the big farmhouse.

As soon as Sister Astrid reveals her sin to the Catholic parish priest, she is the victim of a kidnapping, the abrupt outcome of which is her murder.

"South Africans kill each other for fun".

Her body is abandoned, and her car (a BMW, a sign of the corrupt times) is stolen.

Sister Amor returns to the farm for each funeral, always bringing her vegan provisions, which separate her from the commensality around the braai.

At her sister's death, she comes across the new airport - a critical move by Thabo Mbeki to put South Africa on the cosmopolitan route.

On these occasions, she takes a walk to Koppie (the little hill), where, as a child, next to the kapoc tree that still stands there, she was struck by lightning, which burned the soles of her feet, leaving them forever insensitive and placing a halo of fear over the six-year-old girl.

According to Boehmer (2023):
"Amor's lightning-inflicted injury sustained as a child, in my view, probably references the Afrikaans writer Totius, or Jacob Daniël du Toit, whose child was fatally struck by lightning.[6]

[6] Oh the painful thought

Oh the painful thought: my child is dead!
It burns like a dart in my flesh.
People don't see anything.
Only God knows my suffering!

Days come and nights go,
Shadows grow tall and short.
Behind me, the echo of my work's moving spirit;
and I continue my way to the cross.

But then, a pain poked through my heart!
so much, the brilliance of my life disappeared;
Your child is dead: died a horrible death!
And I clenched my chest due to the pain.

Oh the thunderbolt-thought! ….yes, beloved child!
One flash of lightning scorched your tender body,
but numerous thunderbolts burnt my heart
and left it …. bleeding.

She was so tender, like a butterfly,
She glided lightly about,
A breath of wind could damage her tiny wings
and…what a death she died!

Few children die like this,
only one in ten-thousand!
and oh! …It's my little girl,
witnessed by me…. and died in my arms!

Oh the painful thought: my child is dead!

She meets Lukas, Salome's son, who is the same age as her but has a bitter outlook on the Swarts - he would never use the term Baas to address his employers.

When his mother dies, her brother tells Amor that THE PROMISE his father made on his deathbed had no chance of being realised because, at the time of his death, black people were not guaranteed the right to any private property: it is against the law.

Times change, and so does legislation, and it was not until Amor's last visit to the estate, upon the death of her brother Anton, that she was finally able to assure Salome that she would receive the title to Lombard House.

Anton, who had been discussing his dedication to a novel for years, faces a tedious marriage and financial hardships. The value of the property is plummeting. He is disappointed with the country (with the fences cut and the invasion of shacks, with the load shedding, with the corruption that ranges from the Zuma government - the fat termite queen - to the black police officers who do not arrest him when they catch him drunk in a blitz, in exchange for a bribe[7]). In the depths of an existential crisis, he takes his life with his father's old gun.

Amor is the only and final survivor of the Swart family. When she arrives at the farm for her brother's funeral, Zuma has stepped down - the Guptas are to be arrested.
Salome's son, returning from prison, repudiates that trojan horse - pointing to the ruin where they live.

Amor had arrived so late that she herself would warn the family that Lombard House might not even be Salomé's, as a group from the region was claiming the entire farm in a reparations process.

Amor would return to Cape Town, where she lives, working in a health service where she comforts terminally ill HIV patients.

At the end of the novel, in the background, we have the water crisis (day zero), which forces White liberals like her to come face to face for the first time with something daily and perennial in townships and rural areas: the lack of water and the fetid odour of human excrement [as worked by Minga Kongo].

The ontology of narrative choices

It burns like a dart in my flesh.
People don't see anything.
Only God knows my suffering!

[7] *If a black character is not a domestic worker, then he is a hijacker; if not a politician, then a corrupt BEE beneficiary; if not an Mbeki, then a Lukas. Muponde, 2023: 22*

Galgut creates the characters in this novel: there are no striking features about the Swart family; no, they look like the family on the farm next door and the family after that, a bunch of ordinary white South Africans.

They are not portraits of anyone in particular but fictional constructions from the perspective of a group of white people about a PROMISE, based on the logic of apartheid**, in which non-white people are not allowed to participate in the plot.**

The author justifies his choice saying that he did not want to try to write about the black characters:

> It is certainly true that as a white South African I lack the intimate knowledge to properly imagine a life like hers. But it is also true that I could have done a far better job than I have, if I'd wanted to try. (Galgut, 2023)

my opinion he activates the notion of "blankies", transparent. Why then does he decide to grant Salome and others this one dimensional role in his novel? Why are they there at the end if they are not granted with a voice by the artist, even being central, a cornerstone to the PLOT, since the PROMISE is to grant her the stolen shabby Lombard house?

Here, I get back to the concept of PLOT in its two meanings – as worked by Sylvia Wynter.

When blacks do appear, it is from the perspective and scrutiny of whiteness.

The author portrays this perspective. About Salomé, the narrator says: nobody seems to see her, she is apparently invisible... and whatever she feels is invisible too. [blankie]

Thirty years have passed between the PROMISE and the outcome - not necessarily favourable to Salome, who, though we do not know indeed, is at least in her seventies.

Lukas, in an outburst of fury and lucidity, summarises the misunderstanding of Amor's benevolence, of his effortless construction of conciliation, of democratic peace:
You still don't understand, it's not yours to give us. It already belongs to us. This house, as well as the house you live in and the land it sits on. Wow! ... Everything you have, white lady, is already mine. I don't have to ask.

In an interview, the author recognises the apparent association between Lukas' revolt and the outbursts of anger of the post-1994 generation, which came to regard Nelson Mandela not as a redeemer but a sell-out. He also points out the similarity between Lukas' rage and movements such as #rhodesmustfall and the Economic Freedom Fighters (interview with Colm Tóibín).

It is prudent to pause for a moment to evoke the debate promoted by Marylin Strathern about the distinct nature of evolutionary time and the time of events that mark the different readings in PNG about the transformation of legal land rights.

On the one hand, it is believed that improved legislation "guarantees" rights. On the other hand, the living time of the land is not confined to the limits of legislation. As we shall see, this case deals with a similar issue.

The author even admits that there are fragments of his biography - from his tender years in Pretoria (the administrative capital of the country, let's not forget, with its neoclassical architecture of imposing buildings, vast parks and monuments to the Anglo-Boer union, certainly far removed from the townships and rural areas).

His family was partly Jewish and partly Protestant, and his parents, from the lower middle class, did not support but did not oppose the regime.

The big turning point for Galmut came when he went to study Drama at the University of Cape Town.

As I discussed in my article called Very Rural Background, Galmut distanced himself from those poor whites who had caused him so much embarrassment in moving to Cape Town and the university world.

In his words, "reality was the other way round" for those around him in Pretoria.

The book is devoted to these people: people who, despite their lack of higher education (it is not clear whether Amor went to university or just did technical training to work as a nurse), managed to have black people at their disposal as low-paid workers and saw the end of apartheid as a threat to this distinction, to their privileges as whites, as colonisers.

The novel approaches the peaceful transition to post-apartheid from the perspective of a family of racist, though fairly liberal, whites who have been getting poorer (losing the usurped farm) for over forty years.

Like those in the country outside the book pages, the whites in the novel lose without losing, as Lukas reminds Amor at the end of the novel when he cannot even mention her name, calling her just "white lady".

The land on which Pretoria stands today was Ndebele territory immediately before the Boer and British occupation.

It is usurped indigenous land. Therefore, the ancestral property claimed by the Swart family relates to a relatively short period but one of great importance to the narrative that constructs the settler (white) as the cornerstone of the contemporary South African nation, to the detriment of the history of that land and the humans and non-humans who belong to it.

Other Earthbeings, another Land

In the novel, I believe there are two realities, that of racist whites and that of liberal whites who believe they are anti-racist, which, although they seem distinct, are amalgamated by a common idea of (land) ownership. Or land as meant just to be owned, to be private property.

There are many investments in questioning the subjectivity of the various characters. Like Faulkner, the narrative voice is sometimes personal, of one of the characters, and sometimes distanced from them. However, when it lightly touches the black bodies of the characters who orbit around the plot devoted to the Swart family, this voice fails to raise the possibility of other realities, other motivations than that of the master's house. And here I want to make a pause. The author claims there are many voices in his novel: is it true? Or we better have the same voice coming from characters considered transparents (blankies)?

The Promise revolves around four funerals. At the end of the book, Salome indicates that she wants to retire and return to her homeland.

The idea of property shared by Amor and those who oppose the benevolent donation of Lombard House to Salome do not consider Salome's perspective on the meaning of land. She wants land next to her own. Not just any land, although she knows simultaneously that all that land should not be with the Swarts alone. The unsuitability of those people for the land is demonstrated in various ways. Not just by the violence with which they treat their black employees but by how they ignore non-humans' strength.

Let us remember Manie's lucrative business, which is in decline: a theatre in which people and snakes interact to entertain others who find that spectacle acceptable, amusing, and pleasurable.

No!

Snakes are also relatives, messengers between the worlds of the living and the dead. [XXXX]

White liberal policies and ethics allow humans to be confined to "compounds" on farms, their land and labour to be dispossessed, and snakes to be expelled and captive.

Snakes and humans need land to move around and appear to each other when they unequivocally carry a message, sometimes, a message from the ancestors.

At the top of the koppie, Amor has his feet struck by lightning, next to a tree notorious for being a kind of portal through which shamans and traditional healers can cross strata of existence and the kapoc tree is one of these portals.

The girl was not killed. She survived. It was only reasonable that her people should endeavour to promote rituals so that this event could be understood, to understand what was being said and, above all, to give thanks for the child's fate.

They would have to sacrifice an animal, talk to their ancestors. Nevertheless, on that farm, there were not even the cattle that any black person with land would surely have - cattle reserved for exceptional occasions like that.

Instead, the episode is ignored and perhaps ironically ignored by the author of the novel himself - which makes the power of fiction all the more instigating. Galgut mentions it but never gets back to the incident. Perhaps because a lightning is in his world just an electric phenomenon. Nothing else.

An attempt is made to prevent something unusual from disturbing the sequence of ordinary events that should make up the narrative of the lives of white colonisers who have nothing to fear: not even the power of the heavens.

The Swart family's arrogance can be read through those unsaid things that Galmut refuses or does not have the right means to explore, as he justifies.

The point, it seems to me, is to acutely realise that Amor and Lukas are not talking about the same land (here we have yet another opportunity to think along the lines of controlled equivocation a concept developed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Marisol de la Cadena).

Amor operates as her relatives: she wants Lombard House to be transferred to Salome. For Lukas, the land has always been his, but for another reason, because he belongs to the land and not the other way round (Mafeje).

Njabulo Ndebele warns us that literary art during apartheid had its imagination hijacked.

Almost all novels, poetry and theatre had to deal with apartheid - it was a burning, crucial, unavoidable issue that made art for art's sake impossible for black artists.

Let us consider whether something similar happens with the novel The Promise.

By thematising the unfulfilled PROMISE of a post-racist government that would ensure the peaceful sleep of the Swart family, the novel plot never touches the "communist" theme of land reform.

There is not a White liberal who does not condemn successive ANC governments for corruption. Alternatively, who doesn't fear the EFF of Julius Malema or the Black First Land First (BLF) movement.

In general, they do not realise that in their criticism, there is, or can be, nostalgia for the efficiency of apartheid times.

Once again, the South African experience provides us with a good mirror. In Brazil, for instance, the pieces on the board have not been moved either (amnesty here, reconciliation there - and in India, we can think about partition and its bitter fruits being harvested nowadays).

The white liberals' high expectations of democracy are being dashed in South Africa. Their criticisms resound in the mainstream media and academia. As Francis Nyamnjoh suggests, perhaps the great mistake lies in betting on the completeness of pristine and unblemished democracies, which leads precisely to intolerance of inefficient, family-orientated and corrupt governments - and to a crescent wave of conservative parties and their panacea to restore morality in the whole world.

From Amor's perspective, giving Lombard House to Salome was in her hands.

From Lukas' perspective, they had already taken it by storm, as Fred Moten reflects.

As my final remarks, I invite you to think about why narratives like that found in the novel The Promise, of descent and decay experienced in countries once colonised by white settlers, are globally acclaimed and easily shared.

The Booker Prize is not just for better fiction from former commonwealth countries. It demonstrates that a commonwealth mentality and sensibility are still alive, ignoring or at least not appreciating narrative plots in which the white settler point of view is not the primary and more meaningful way of giving meaning to the world.

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