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The ruins of the rural idyll: reconfiguring the image of the farm in *Homeland* and *Five Fingers for Marseilles*

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ABSTRACT

The symbolic importance of the image of the farm in South African cultural imaginaries can hardly be overestimated, even today. Historically placed at the nexus of the dualism between commercial agricultural areas and the communal areas of the Bantustans, farms are still deeply marked by the processes of colonisation and dispossession that made them possible. The material and symbolic infrastructures associated with the farm continue to sort access to the rural as idyllic and turn the farm into what Stoler has termed "imperial debris." In this article, I will analyse how Karin Brynard's novel *Homeland* and Michael Matthews' film *Five Fingers for Marseilles* stage images of ruined farms that nudge audiences away from the "love and ownership of the farm" as one of the privileged scenes of South African rurality. How do these two texts use the farm to draw attention to the disastrous tracks rural idylls, in their (neo)liberal, capitalistic and (neo)colonial guises, have left in the contemporary moment? What kind of rural futures, livelihoods and landscapes can be gauged from the farm in ruin?

KEYWORDS

Rural idyll; ruin; farm; imperial debris

Introduction: the farm as ruin

The symbolic importance of the image of the farm in South African cultural imaginaries can hardly be overestimated, even today. Historically placed at the nexus of the dualism between commercial agricultural areas and the communal areas of the Bantustans, farms are still deeply marked by the histories of dispossession that made them possible. Today, farming in South Africa mostly remains a matter of privilege, as many black and coloured rural poor have little to no access to arable land and depend on social welfare incomes or precarious, seasonal labour "in the midst of substantial agrarian wealth in large-scale capitalist agriculture" (Hall et al. 2013, 48). Despite problem-riddled efforts at land reform,[1] access to rural land is still almost exclusively skewed towards white commercial owners, who together possess close to 70% of South African land (Hall et al. 2013, 52). In recent years, some of these farmers have moved elsewhere on the continent to obtain "cheap land, water, labour and more lenient tax conditions from which to export to whichever markets appear the most lucrative," thereby replicating patterns of mercantilist colonialism (Hall 2012, 841). Locally, too, agriculture is not necessarily geared towards food security, as it tends to revolve around land-grabbing initiatives fed by

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complexes of regional and global commercial interests (Hall 2012). It seems clear that these trends do little to alleviate difficulties in giving shape to localised rural futures.

Amidst these developments, the South African countryside remains invested with idyllic imaginations of pastoral retreat that often give rise to conflict, especially around the space of the farm. The farm and the ideas related to it remain "a ground of contest that exposes the structural antagonisms between black and white, owner and migrant, human and animal, the tame and the wild" (Klopper 2014, 113). In this sense, they are infrastructures that not only materially circulate things, people and ideas, but also entrench specific modalities of power (Von Schnitzler 2016, 198). In the case of the farm, this means, amongst others, managing engagement with the land, setting up labour relations and bringing produce into circulation. These material and symbolic infrastructures associated with the farm, I argue, continue to socially sort access to the rural as an idyllic "good-life genre" (Peeren and Souch 2019, 39), to which people stay attached even "when the evidence of [this genre's] instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds" (Berlant 2011, 2).[2]

As Jennifer Wenzel has argued shortly after the end of apartheid, such pastorals are prominent in times of "profound change," when "new modes of agriculture and land ownership" are being forged (2000, 95). In this article, I explore how contemporary images of the farm repeat and rework its attendant infrastructures, asking how these renditions negotiate change in a context of protracted land reform and what modes of agriculture and land ownership, to speak with Wenzel, they (re)invent. In particular, I will analyse how Karin Brynard's novel *Homeland* (2016) and Michael Matthews' film Five Fingers for Marseilles (2017) stage images of ruined farms that nudge audiences away from "love and ownership of the farm" as one of the privileged scenes of South African rurality (Wenzel 2000, 94). If farms still symbolically prop up heightened ideologies of colonial possession that continue to affect South Africa, can renditions of their material decline also contribute to the conceptual ruin of the exclusionary idylls tied to them? How do these objects use the ruin of the farm to draw attention to the disastrous tracks rural idylls, in their (neo)liberal, capitalistic and (neo)colonial guises, have left in the contemporary moment? And how do they, from within these ruinous moments of crisis, rework colonial associations of the farm in ways that allow for "a creative orientation towards the unfolding of history" as multi-voiced and open (Titlestad 2016, 72)? In short, what kind of rural futures, livelihoods and landscapes can be gleaned from the farm as ruin?

*

The privilege generally associated with contemporary farms, especially large-scale ones, game reserves or vineyards, echoes histories of settler farming, the agricultural activity central to colonial imaginaries in South Africa. Once introduced, these forms of farming and their attendant imaginaries soon eclipsed indigenous farming traditions and hunter-gatherer relations to the land. Traditions and relations that were, to the agricultural colonial mind, deemed both practically and morally inferior because they represented a mere "scratching" of the surface of the soil, rather than a wholesome, deep ploughing that would enable a "proper" husbandry and enrichment of the land through fertiliser (Hofmeyr 1994, 72). As J.M. Coetzee has shown, this focus on the farm as a place of "cheerful toil" on a fixed plot of land served as an antidote to the wilderness of the

African continent that threatened to turn both its native inhabitants and idle white settlers into brutes (Coetzee 1988, 3).

In the early twentieth century, the farm was ideologically bolstered in the aftermath of the South African War (1899–1902) when the majority of Afrikaner farms in the Northern provinces was torched by the British (Foster 2008, 24). This traumatic event, in conjunction with the increased migration of both black and white rural populations to the cities in the following decades, firmly positioned the Afrikaner family farm as blissfully isolated, but also in need of protection from the outside world and its capitalist modes of production (Coetzee 1988, 78; Van Wyk Smith 2001, 17). This has led Coetzee to famously argue that

> In South Africa pastoral [. . .] is essentially conservative [. . .]; it looks back, usually in a spirit of nostalgia, to the calm and stability of the farm, a still point mediate between the wilderness of lawless nature and the wilderness of the new cities [. . .]. (Coetzee 1988, 4)

Malvern van Wyk Smith has described this role of the farm in Afrikaner national identity as a "valorized version of landscape," a "farmscape" "with a highly symbolic and emotive surplus value," in which closeness to the soil and survival are married to nationalism (Van Wyk Smith 2001, 18). This emphasis on the farm as a *scape* of Afrikaner nationalism makes clear that, like a landscape, it tends to ideologically order space into a specific type of scene rendered from a specific vantage point. In this typical, often pastoral scene, white people oversee the labour performed by people of colour.[3]

Historically speaking, farms are the inverse rural space of the homelands, which were created over the course of the twentieth century to safeguard cheap labour forces for South Africa's industrialisation process. Segregationist legislation, like the Land Act of 1913, made it impossible for non-white South Africans to own land outside of the homelands and effectively ended an economically independent rural life for people of colour. In this process, farms played a crucial role in fencing off large tracts of land for private and white use (Foster 2008, 34). Farms should thus be seen as a "concrete metaphor" for the racialised social sorting that differentiated South Africans' access to the rural as an idyllic scene (Gupta 2018, 63). For many farm workers, speaking "wistfully of a rural 'home'" in relation to the farm is often foreclosed or at least significantly complicated by structural dispossession (Coplan 2001, 242). Yet, the "legitimating tropes of colonization and land alienation," like "the Promised Land, the Vacant Land, and the love of the land through generations of family labor" (Wenzel 2000, 102) also resurfaced as a pastoral promise in the context of land distribution after the end of apartheid for those who have been dispossessed.

Nonetheless, the idyll of the farm is very "brittle," also as a site of white Afrikaner domination (Postel 2006, 25). As Gitte Postel makes clear, both English and Afrikaans language traditions struggle with the meaning of the farm because they cannot pay proper dues to indigenous populations without undermining their own position. Only by bracketing off the farm, and the cultural identity based on it, as a closed-off, peaceful, autonomous and harmonious world "outside of history" could "disturbing realities of land and labour [. . .] and justice and power" be translated into "questions of legal succession and personal relations between masters and servants" (Coetzee cited in Postel 2006, 26). Literatures from the 1970s onwards, which have predominantly been white-focalised narratives from English and Afrikaans speaking groups, tend to condemn

the farm for these ideological imbrications with Afrikaner patriarchy and maintain a "love-hate-relationship" with it (Van der Merwe 2001, 177–179).

After the end of apartheid, the myth of the farm was disrupted further as it came to be increasingly associated with excessive violence. The extent of government brutality revealed during the Truth and Reconciliation process came to be epitomised by the farm Vlakplaas, for instance. Since the 1990s, the farm has, however, perhaps been discussed most widely in the context of the farm attacks that sometimes literally turn farms into "a war zone, a limbo of menace and insecurity" (Van Wyk Smith 2001, 19). Against the backdrop of large-scale land reform in Zimbabwe at the turn of the millennium, these attacks tend to be treated as racially motivated by sensationalist media and several activist groups (Steyn 2019, 67). Research shows, however, that in their isolation, farms have become soft targets for rural crimes with robbery as a primary motive (like farm attacks but also stock theft), because police resources are spread thin in rural areas (Clack and Minnaar 2018, 114, 121; Burger 2018). The persistence of the farm as idyll, then, could partly be regarded as a "wounded attachment" to the family farm as a pillar of Afrikaner identity (Brown 1993).

Such a perspective, however, tends to obscure the idyll's role in the "slow violence" experienced by many rural poor, which takes place "gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence" that is "neither spectacular nor instantaneous" (Nixon 2011, 2).[4] This type of violence is a form of what Ann Laura Stoler has termed "imperial debris," a concept that traces "how empire's ruins contour and carve through the psychic and material space in which people live" and focusses on the "protracted imperial processes that saturate the subsoil of people's lives and [that] persist, sometimes subjacently, over a longer durée" (2013, 3, 5). So imperial debris is not just a material trace of bygone imperial pasts. Its lasting and continuous effects feature in the ways in which people interact with their environment and vice versa, making up "the microecologies of matter and mind," often in ways that tend to reinforce the power dynamics involved (Stoler 2013, 9, 10).

In order to bring these uneven "aftershocks of imperial assault" into view, Stoler turns to the concepts of ruin and ruination. Where ruination denotes an "ongoing corrosive process that weighs on the future," ruin serves to think that future. Rather than seeing the ruin "as a privileged site of reflection" that provides a romanticised image of the past, Stoler proposes an attunement to ruins "as sites that condense alternative senses of history" (2013, 9). Reading the farm as ruin entails the perspectives implied above. Images of farms in ruin could point to the decline of the farm as a popularly romanticised site of imperial violence and account for the ways in which the imperial formations of which the farm is a signifier persist in "their material debris, in ruined landscapes and through the social ruination of people's lives" (Stoler 2013, 10). Reading the farm as ruin, however, also requires an approach beyond questions of aesthetic mimesis in which the appearance of ruined farms only provide a gauge for larger ideological shifts. In order to start exploring the performative force of the farm in ruin as well, I will read the farm as a ruin of the rural idyll where "multiple historical tenses" can coexist in how the rural is imagined in the present and in the future (Stoler 2013, 10).

In what follows, I will analyse the Afrikaans novel *Homeland* (*Tuisland*, 2016) by multi-award winning author Karin Brynard, and the Sesotho-spoken film Five Fingers for Marseilles (2017) directed by Michael Matthews, which was shown on the

international film festival circuit to great acclaim.[5] Set in the borderlands between the Northern-Cape and the Kalahari Desert, *Homeland* revolves around the economic, sociological and psychological damage suffered by coloured communities in this area. It focuses on the ǂKhomani community, which is about to receive a tract of land in the context of land restitution. I will analyse the novel's staging of the social and affective structures associated with the farm by attending to the cruelly optimistic investment in the maintenance of its infrastructure. Besides the farm, the novel offers the ambiguous image of the greenhouse to think through living in tandem with the desert in ways that are more attuned to its ecological potency.

Five Fingers for Marseilles shares *Homeland*'s preoccupation with shifting idyllic ties to the past. In the film, which is set in the mountainous terrain on the border between the Free State and Lesotho, the farm first appears as the ruin of a nineteenth century farmhouse and later as a small sheep farm almost invisibly nestled in the folds of the mountains. Crucially, these farms involve reconfigurations of the racialised logic that traditionally scripts access to the space of the farm, while maintaining it as a liminal space from which futurity and renewal can be thought. By focusing on the farm as an occasion to rethink affective, economic and social relations between people and land, both texts thus offer important reinterpretations of the rural idyll in the South African context that leave the future of the farm open and move away from the nostalgic constraints that often attend its figuration.

Relinquishing the promise of the farm in *Homeland*

Homeland is a novel by Karin Brynard written in Afrikaans. Like her earlier work *Weeping Waters* (*Plaasmoord*, 2009), *Homeland* deals with the highly charged topic of land reform and its consequences for rural populations. Where *Weeping Waters* focuses on the spectre of farm attacks, *Homeland* fictionalises the ǂKhomani land claims in the Northern Cape in 1999 and 2002.[6] The San, of which the ǂKhomani are one group, were pushed off their territories by white and Bantu speaking stockowners in the mid-nineteenth century. Today, they are still "widely recognized as the most impoverished, disempowered and stigmatized ethnic group in southern Africa" (Sylvain 2002, 1074). Although the novel deals with the plight of the San in this area, the title of the novel, *Homeland*, also puts immediate pressure on the felicity of these land claims due to their resonance with the cultural essentialism of apartheid's reviled homeland policy. Despite these laden topics, the novel seems, as Sam Naidu has noted about farm crime novels in general, nonetheless to embark on a "recuperative project" in which "the symbol of the farm [...] functions in a complex way to evoke the past, to reveal the present in all its horror, and to imagine a future of justice and empathy" (2016, 15). Rather than staging the farm as an apple of discord as was the case in *Weeping Waters, Homeland* starts to relinquish the family farm model in order for alternative rural futures to come into view.

The novel is focalised through several characters, one of which is Inspector Beeslaar, who travels to Askham, a small town in the Northern Cape bordering on the Kalahari Desert, to investigate the suspicious deaths of several San elders. The murders are politically sensitive, as the town is getting ready for a visit by the President of South Africa, who is about to officiate the additional land claim. How exactly the restituted land will sustain the community is the topic of much debate amongst the

ǂKhomani in the novel (Brynard 2018, 149). Some favour commercial farming, others want to focus on cultural tourism, and yet others want to use the land to preserve their hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Working together with the latter group, the survival of the community is ensured, at least for the foreseeable future, by professor Eckhardt. This scholar from Germany creates a medicinal database based on the ǂKhomani's knowledge of the desert's flora and fauna and uses it to create a synthetic cure for prostate cancer.[7]

Eckhardt is violently pursued for the formula by a Swiss pharmaceutical company, as well as by the killer of the elders who considers him a thief of ǂKhomani knowledge. Eckhardt, however, refuses to relinquish his formula to the Swiss and continues with his plan to give the patent to the ǂKhomani during the inauguration so that they can use it to build a livelihood for their community.[8] Eventually, Beeslaar figures out that Optel,[9] a neglected member of the impoverished coloured population who falls between the cracks of the different white and coloured communities in Askham is the killer. Optel is figured as a victim of imperial ruination who has turned against everyone he considers a threat to "true" ǂKhomani heritage in an attempt to vouchsafe a sense of belonging. By making Optel the killer, the novel thus uncomfortably stages his quest for belonging as a consequence of imperial ruination, causing him to turn against the very people who try to ensure the future of the community to which he so desperately wants to belong.

As Optel is apprehended and the inauguration takes place, the novel invites reflection on two agricultural infrastructures. The first is Jaspis, one of the few farms around Askham that has kept its agricultural function and which has not been redistributed. This farm, where Beeslaar and his colleagues are invited to stay during their investigation and where they relax after a hard day's work, can be read alongside the greenhouse Eckhardt builds in the desert, in which he grows and studies local plants for his research. When thought together, these "farms" are ruins in Stoler's sense of the word. They function as sites from which to acknowledge imperial processes of ruination in Askham and to signal alternative ways in which the town's heritage can feed into its future. Jaspis, although the farm is well maintained, also deflates the promises of stability and growth generated by the successful farm's idyllic associations, while Eckhardt's greenhouse, although it is partly destroyed and risks falling prey to the exploitative logics associated with the greenhouse's colonial history, seeks to create a multispecies infrastructure based on the workings of the desert.

At the end of the novel, Beeslaar is called to Jaspis because its owner Boy Wannenburg is dying. Jaspis is one of the three farms owned by Wannenburg, but it remains unclear whether this success depends on crops, cattle, or the sideline implied by the hunting lodge where Beeslaar stays. Just as the novel remains vague about what happens to the land restituted to the ǂKhomani, the specificities of labour on the farm are eschewed. Instead, the novel works with the affect the farm produces. When Beeslaar first visits, he notices that the farm has a freshly painted signpost, and is stereotypically "surrounded by large trees and a trio of windmills." The comfort associated with the well-maintained farm is evoked further as "two white labradors ran up to sniff his hand, and accompanied him to a wide mesh-covered stoep," where Wannenburg's daughter Heilna welcomes him into the house (Brynard 2018, 131). As Beeslaar steps onto the stoep, however, these idyllic associations are quickly dispelled:

> A strong smell of cigarette smoke hit him. Its source was seated in a wheelchair in the lounge: Boy Wannenburg. He had a ball-shaped abdomen that seemed ready to burst. Hollow cheeks, withered and grey as putty. On a desk behind him stood two open laptops, both connected to external hard drives and a blinking modem – life support of a different kind, Beeslaar thought. (Brynard 2018, 131)

Beeslaar's thoughts about life support have a double meaning. In need of morphine and respiration aids in order to stay alive, Wannenburg is confined to his home and needs digital technology to stay in touch with the outside world. Besides signalling Wannenburg's life hanging by a thread, the blinking modem also implies a lifeline for the farm. Its functioning infrastructure makes it an updated, possibly lucrative site to repurpose in the future. Although the decline of this successful and up-to-date farmer is thus well underway, the brightly painted signpost and Jaspis' excellent Internet connection keep the promise of the farm alive so long as its infrastructure is kept from going to ruin.

As Lauren Berlant has emphasised, the maintenance and repair of infrastructure keeps the ways in which people, ideas or things circulate intact and is therefore fundamental "for any form of sociality to extend itself." However, this "extension of relations in a certain direction cannot be conflated with the repair of what wasn't working" (2016, 393). The mystery of maintained infrastructure on Wannenburg's farm, for instance, obscures the labour relations between Wannenburg and his mostly coloured workers, thus referring back to the occlusion of black and coloured labour that is so central to the pastoral's machinations (Coetzee 1988, 5). In this sense, the farm relies on idyllic but racially structured promises for the future and the optimism involved in its upkeep is precisely what allows its structural inequities to persist. Wannenburg's farm, in this sense, is a form of cruel optimism, in which habits of maintenance imply a nursing of the "fantasy of the good life" – a good life for whom one immediately asks – that is not corroborated by the reality in which the farm exists (Berlant 2011, 1).

On his deathbed, Wannenburg proves well aware, however, of the affective structure of cruel optimism as an "inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (Berlant 2011, 2).

> And the farm … Ag, it's just land. Nobody really owns it. Just the memory … one's memories … […] Yours only for a short while. Just for … just for a while you feel at home, as if you belong. Belong somewhere. Then … then you pass it on again. […] And … the earth … it takes you back again. (Brynard 2018, 403–404)

Although this scene can easily be read as a reinforcement of a classic *plaasroman* genealogy in which the patriarch benignly tends the farm until it is time to pass it on to the next generation (Coetzee 1988, 87), Wannenburg emphasises that it is just one's memories that connect one to the soil. The farm built on it in order to manage the land is a phantasmagorical construct that functions to anchor a person to the land for a while, before it is passed on to other people. In his final words, however, Wannenburg seems once more taken over by the "programme espoused by the *plaasroman*:" that of the "renewal of the peasant order based on the myth of the return to the earth" (Coetzee 1988, 79).

In the moment just before Wannenburg swaps a fantasy of belonging to the farm for a myth of renewal, however, the well-maintained and digitally connected farm suggests a glimpse of an open-ended future that moves away, if only marginally, from the farm's usual affective associations with patriarchy and genealogy. By leaving the farm to his daughter Heilna, who will probably sell it because she is already well provided for without it, the novel breaks through the patriarchal lineal consciousness that Wenzel identifies as the *plaasroman*'s primary trope (2000, 100). Ironically, however, the glimpse only occurs after the farm has fulfilled its purpose of offering lifelong security to its owners. As Beeslaar notes in his final ruminations, in a world that is "all cut up and fenced off" by large and unaffordable properties like Wannenburg's, it is not at all clear to whom such farms will be available in future (Brynard 2018, 381).

Another reconfiguration of the trope of the farm involves the plotline of professor Eckhardt, who inscribes the ǂKhomani's knowledge of the terrain's flora and fauna into the global economy by creating the medicinal database and the cure for prostate cancer. Eckhardt develops the medicine by synthetically reproducing the combination of the poison produced by bacteria in the larvae of *Diamphidia nigroornata*, or Bushman arrow poison beetle, with the plant *Dicerocaryum eriocarpum*, a kind of devil's thorn found in the area. Although the plant is quite common, the beetle that produces the larvae is much harder to find. As professor Eckhardt explains to Beeslaar:

> You need to have intimate knowledge of nature and the habitat. First they search for the dung of a smaller kind of antelope, see? [. . .] When they come across dung that looks looser at a particular spot, they know the buck has diarrhoea because it browsed on that plant. [. . .] The San search for the plant, and if they see it's been nibbled at, they dig down in the sand beside it. (Brynard 2018, 303)

As this quote makes clear, the ingredient that ensures the future of the ǂKhomani is located in the deepest recesses of desert life. The switch from "you" to "they" in Eckhardt's explanation to Beeslaar emphasises that the desert will remain closed off without the most knowledgeable San elders, who have been hunter-gatherers all their lives and know how to follow the traces left by the beetle in the desert. In this sense, Eckhardt's plan symbolically represents a correction of the colonial misreading of hunter-gatherer lifestyles as unsubstantial scratchings of the soil. It can only succeed in close cooperation with the San, and can only become durable if the desert, (human) animals, and plants form a multispecies infrastructure that circulates a less exploitative set of ideas.

Relying on the patterns of desert life in this way can have large economic, political and social consequences. As Kohn (2013, 161) shows in the context of the rubber trade in the Amazon in the nineteenth century, the form and eventual decline of the trade depended on a fungal parasite, making it impossible to grow the trees on plantations. Instead, the rubber had to be harvested from individual trees dotted throughout the forest, determining patterns of life in the Amazon. As soon as it was discovered, however, that the parasite did not affect trees growing on plantations in Asia, the trade in the Amazon started to dwindle, leaving an imperially ruined landscape behind. Similarly, Eckhardt's reliance on life in the desert and the people who know how to navigate it is extremely precarious, especially now that the elders with the most plant knowledge have been killed. Rather than allowing an exploitative techno-scientific conjunction like the rubber trade

to arise in the desert and creating more imperial debris, however, Eckhardt seeks, in Kohn's terms, to "become better attuned to the strange ways" in which the desert moves through Askham (160). He tries his hand at horticulture and builds a greenhouse in the desert in which he replicates specimens of local flora. By growing the plants he needs for his research in a greenhouse rather than irreparably harvesting them, Eckhardt tries to "farm" in a way that works with the knowledge of the desert.

The greenhouse plan, however, turns out to be fragile. It is not mentioned if the intricate ecosystem of which the plants are part can be replicated in the conditions of the greenhouse and the building is attacked twice: once by the Swiss pharmaceutical company and once by Optel. In addition, even if Eckhardt's scheme would flourish, it seeks to separate the San's knowledge from its direct surroundings and to inscribe it in the global economy in a way that requires a capitalist upscaling logic characteristic of agricultural monoculture and the plantation. This logic, as Anna Tsing has argued, causes ecological and social alienation amongst people, and between people and the environment (2015, 39–40, 5).[10] Indeed, the greenhouse is in itself already an emblem of horticulture's colonial history because as a technology that allowed fauna to grow out of context, it was integral to the Linnaean taxonomy that became so devastatingly crucial to legitimisations of colonial knowledge production (Kincaid [1999] 2001, 143–153; Pratt [1992] 2008, 36). Eckhardt's involvement is thus extremely ambivalent, even if he does manage to preserve some of the San's disappearing plant knowledge and gives the community the patent to a cure that could translate into a less precarious position in the global economy.

By implying an ambivalent stance towards the farm's tendency to order relations to and extricate from the land, *Homeland* allows for a reflection on the farm as imperial debris. It makes clear that the farm needs to change hands in the context of social justice and points towards the ways in which the farm's colonial legacies are kept in circulation by the affordances of its infrastructure. In the midst of running up against the limitations effected by the trope of the farm both Wannenburg's farm and Eckhardt's greenhouse also offer glimpses of changing relations to the land. In the next section, this discussion is furthered through an analysis of *Five Fingers for Marseilles*, which more readily seeks to reconfigure the promises implied by infrastructural maintenance and repair. More explicitly than the novel, the film explores the farm as a ruin in order to question the role of race in its accessibility. The farm is not abandoned altogether, however, but remains available as a place of contemplation and renewal that, as the farm almost completely disappears into the surrounding terrain at the end of the film, foregrounds care of the land, rather than ownership of it.

The land will decide: reconfiguring the idyll in *Five Fingers for Marseilles*

Five Fingers for Marseilles was directed by Michael Matthews and released in 2017. Set in the fictive rural town of Marseilles in the Free State near the border with Lesotho, the film is mostly spoken in Sesotho. In its focus on this region, it brings rural lives in settler towns that struggled with the decline of the railroad to a more mainstream screen (Production Notes 2017, 4). The film shows a strong affinity with Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) because it features a black cowboy protagonist. Unlike *Django Unchained*, however, this film avoids a white saviour plot by portraying its main character with sensitivity and autonomy (Vogel 2018, 26), allotting peripheral roles to

the few white characters that do appear. This portrayal of black rural lives is particularly powerful with regard to South African pastorals' inability to portray rounded black characters (Coetzee 1988, 5).

The film starts off in the apartheid era, when five youngsters form a gang to fend off police oppression in their town. One of them, the protagonist Tau, flees Marseilles after he kills two policemen and embarks on a life of crime that leads him to prison. Twenty years later, upon being released, Tau returns to Marseilles to make amends for the violent deeds he has committed and for the difficulties his initial crime and departure have triggered amongst his former friends. It soon becomes clear, however, that history is repeating itself in Marseilles. A vicious criminal gang violently rules the town together with the corrupt mayor and police force. Tau reluctantly emerges as a gun-slinging hero fighting to ensure a better future for the town as he tries to reconnect to the people close to him.

Five Fingers for Marseilles explores what happens to rural idylls once the farm is left to ruin. It features two farms: the ruin of a nineteenth-century farmhouse in the middle of nowhere and a small sheep farm to which Tau returns once he has arrived back in Marseilles. Both farms may seem peripheral to the plot, but are in fact crucial settings for the development of the main character. In the ruin, Tau decides to leave his life of violence behind and return to Marseilles. On the sheep farm, he manages to reconnect with his past and, at the end of the film, dies in a ritual of sacrifice that is intended to cleanse the land of harmful influences. Like in *Homeland*, the farm seems out of date in its traditional and idyllic form, but is critiqued more explicitly for its associations with the patterns of violence that characterise it as imperial debris. Rather than forming a source of future revenue, as was the case in *Homeland*, the farms in *Five Fingers for Marseilles* are liminal sites where the past is revisited and reimagined in order to redefine the racial logic of the farm, its attendant relations between people and their relation to the land.

The film's investment in the ruination associated with imperial debris first comes to the fore when Tau spends the night in the ruined nineteenth-century farmhouse with his two brothers in crime, Slim and Congo, after having been released from prison. At first sight, the medium-long shot of the ruined farm, which is tilted slightly towards a worm's eye view to make the farm look larger, comes across as a glorifying one due to the majestic backdrop of the surrounding mountains basking in the warm morning light. The shot appears, however, right after a scene that turns out to have taken place in the ruin, where the three friends talk about their future and swap suggestions over the fire about what to do after their stint in prison. Although it is clear that the men have no shared plan for the future, they do renew their pact of brotherhood. As the camera zooms in on the ruin at daybreak (Figure 1), Tau turns out to have left his six-shooter behind, and in the next scene, the viewer sees him arrive in Marseilles. The ruin of the farm thus functions as a temporary shelter and space of regeneration for the men's black and coloured bodies. Only when the ideologies associated with the frontier farm, the violence of which instigated Tau's life of crime, have come to ruin, does the function of the farm as retreat become accessible to Tau, Slim and Congo. The ruin thus reconfigures the pastoral "calm and stability of the farm" to suggest a liminal space from where open-ended attempts at renewal can be launched (Coetzee 1988, 4). In doing so, it invites contemplations of an "alternative sense of history" and accrues a layered signification as imperial debris rather than just an imperial ruin (Stoler 2013, 9).

Figure 1. The ruin of the farmhouse. Screenshot from *Five Fingers for Marseilles*.[11]

When Tau first re-enters Marseilles he finds the town much changed. At the start of the film, the town sign at the end of the railway line that welcomes visitors to Marseilles catches the eye (Figure 2). It presents an idealised image of a white nuclear family and is sponsored by the local vegetable grocer De Wet. Significantly, upon Tau's return (Figure 3), the sign has dilapidated as Tau enters Marseilles and no longer dominates the scene, providing a wider view of the landscape and relieving the town of its framing through the white nuclear family. Despite the demise of the railroad, Marseilles seems to be thriving. The empty plain that used to separate the white-occupied part of the town from the township of Railway up the hill is now filled with new houses and roads. As Tau enters the town, he passes crops in front of people's houses, suggesting sustenance farming, and cattle peacefully graze on the town fringes, denoting wealth and social security.

In other words, the depiction of New Marseilles follows a slightly different idyllic logic, in which the centrality of the farm is replaced by the democratic promise of a better life for all. This promise is often understood "as the progressive realisation of the opportunities that delivering infrastructure is held to enable" (Dubbeld 2017, 73). It is, however,

Figure 2. Marseilles early in the film, before Tau leaves. Screenshot from *Five Fingers for Marseilles*.

Figure 3. Marseilles when Tau returns. Screenshot from *Five Fingers for Marseilles*.

not clear how this post-apartheid rural idyll is maintained. In the bustling town of New Marseilles, nobody is seen to work their crops and the plains around the town are empty. As Esther Peeren has argued, although rural idylls have long histories and exist in different incarnations in different global contexts, they share a propensity to obscure and overlook "crucial aspects of 21st century rural life, from depopulation, poverty, and land grabbing to the emergence of mega farms and increasing environmental pollution" (2018, 64). The rural idyll of New Marseilles is no exception: it, too, entails a "certain 'mystification' of rural activities that works to naturalise and legitimate particular social relations" (Peeren and Souch 2019, 38). The town's portrayal thus repeats the South African pastoral's mystification of black labour as well as the rural's contemporary global connections in favour of the positive affective associations of infrastructure as a promise for a better life.

As Brian Larkin has argued, however, infrastructures almost never fulfil their promise of stability, growth and progress, not even for the privileged. Instead, infrastructures are "made up of expectation, desire, temporal deferral, sacrifice, and frustration" (Larkin 2018, 187). In *Five Fingers for Marseilles*, too, the promising new infrastructure of the town does not automatically map onto a better life for its people and complicates idyllic readings of the town. It turns out that in order to provide housing for his electorate and to fulfil a promise for running water that never arrives, Mayor Bongani, nicknamed Pockets, has made an unsavoury deal with Sepoko, the leader of the Night Runner gang that is wreaking havoc on the town and its inhabitants. In this deal, Sepoko is free to do as he pleases with the ruined old township of Railway up the hill, as long as the orderly infrastructure of the new town, down the hill, remains untouched.

Sepoko's name means ghost in Sesotho and resonates with the Fanagalo, Afrikaans and Dutch word *spook* and the Tswana word *diphoko*. In the 1910s, the adjacent word *shipoko* was used in the southern Mozambican countryside to denote people turned by witches into "a nocturnal agrarian workforce, masquerading by day as innocent children," who "could even induce young men to wander off to the Witwatersrand mines, never to return" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002, 794). In 1990s rural South Africa, a fascination with these *diphoko* resurfaced, not as a description of the zombie-like

state imposed on labourers under precarious colonial or neoliberal conditions, but to denote those who are said to work at night for people who suddenly come into conspicuous wealth. In this way, affluent members of society are "held to destroy the jobmarket" by creating the "threat of a spectral workforce" that steals jobs from day workers (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002, 788). Through his name, Sepoko thus evokes the devastating effects of the system of migrant labour that has determined rural life in Southern Africa for more than a century, and the more recent perceived disappearance of migrant labour as a reliable source of income. As such, he is the exacerbated personification of how colonial and neoliberal precarity come back to haunt Marseilles' new time of post-apartheid progress.

The second farm featured in the film goes some way to restoring this time out of joint and to rewriting the region's colonial history of rural disenfranchisement. When Tau finds out what is going on in town, he retreats to his deceased brother's small sheep farm in the mountains near Marseilles, hoping to prevent himself from getting involved in the town's violence. On this farm, as he tries to lay low, Tau finds some peace. He starts donning the cowboy hat used on the film poster, engages in manual labour on the farm, and smiles for the first time in the film. By creating the iconic image of Tau as a black cowboy, the film thus uses the spaghetti western's idealisation of the frontier to make a rugged, *trekboer*-like nineteenth-century aesthetic available for a positive reinvestment with an alternative black history.

One of the first things Tau does on the farm is repair the fence. As a direct reference to the erection of borders in the (social) landscape, the fence is symbolically charged in the South African context. It often functions as a site of racialised contestation over access, uses and ownership of the land that goes back to the mid-nineteenth century or further and serves to make claims about "what the [countryside] might be like in the future" (Steinberg 2002, 64). The depiction of the fence in *Five Fingers for Marseilles* relies on this charge, but also reworks it. The gesture of fencing off land is inescapably colonial, for instance, offering a nostalgic and pastoralist vision of escape and retreat as Tau reconnects to his childhood memories and engages in wholesome manual labour. In taking possession of the farm, however, Tau performs the role of a landowning black farmer, a class legislated into oblivion in favour of poor white Afrikaner constituencies in the decades preceding apartheid (Foster 2008, 34; Postel 2006, 40; Coplan 2001, 242). In this sense, the scene emphasises that apartheid was, as Antina von Schnitzler has argued, "precisely *about* infrastructures" (2016, 13). Following Von Schnitzler's line of thought about how citizenship can be negotiated through the use of and adjustment to particular infrastructures, Tau's work on the technology of the fence that kept Bantustans separated from privately owned land crucially underpins the ways in which the film attempts to rethink democracy and equity in the countryside.

In the case of Wannenburg's farm in *Homeland*, the cruelly optimistic maintenance of its infrastructure is likely to keep preventing access to the farm for formerly dispossessed groups. Tau's repairs, on the contrary, even if they cannot be fully conflated with "the repair of what wasn't working" in the segregationist relations that structure the traditional farm (Berlant 2016, 393), at least make it possible to imagine a reconfiguration of how the relations around the farm could change. This alternative direction is underlined and pushed further in the contrast between the small sheep farm and the ruin of the nineteenth-century farmhouse in which Tau spends the night before returning to

Marseilles. Where, in the case of the ruin, the farm stands in contrast to the landscape and sky surrounding it, the sheep farm almost completely blends into the earth-toned terrain of the High Veld.

In the shoot-out scene towards the end of the film (Figure 4), the fence is hardly visible and turns out to serve to pen in the sheep, rather than to mark off the territory of the farm. To the left of the sheep, four figures stand in a circle that mirrors the shape of the pen on the right. These are the men who have just survived the war over Marseilles between Tau, Sepoko and the corrupted police force. Sepoko, as the personification of the insidious ways in which the ruination of dispossession continues to haunt the South African rural, has been killed. Yet, the survivors cannot resolve their internal differences, and their involvement in local histories of crime and corruption threatens a prosperous future for Marseilles. They resolve to return to the farm, where, as children, they used to play at a ritual called "letting the land decide." In the childhood flashbacks interspersed in the scene, the Five Finger Gang stands in a circle and shoots at each other with slingshots, symbolically punishing those who bring blood and violence to the land, while instilling those who survive with the "duty to protect it, even from each other" (*Five Fingers for Marseilles*, 1:47:40). What was rehearsed in childhood play now comes to full fruition in another repetition of the *plaasroman*'s myth of return to the earth. In the ritual, Tau, the corrupt mayor, and the chief of police are killed as their blood seeps into the dust. Only John, the pastor, survives to tell the story to future generations.

In returning to the pastoral's religious charge, its reliance on cycles of renewal and nostalgic associations with childhood, the farm here maintains its ritualistic connection to stewardship of the land. As such, the scene suggests that, without the possibility of returning to the farm as a liminal space of retreat located away from the town, the future of Marseilles cannot be ensured. Tau's connection to the two farms in the film thus reactivates the ruins of the rural idyll in ways that rework the ruination the farm as imperial debris stands for and redirect regional histories of dispossession. In this way, Tau's return to Marseilles is not just a return to the past, but a reckoning with how this past, like the farm, was never accessible to Tau as idyllic in the first place. In the end, Tau's death does not denote a rejection of the rural idyll. Instead, as Tau, like the modest

Figure 4. The final shoot out scene. Screenshot from *Five Fingers for Marseilles*.

farm, bleeds into the landscape in the closing scene, it becomes clear that the idyll can also function to reconfigure the structures that have tethered people to the land and each other in violent and inequitable ways.

Recalibrations

Homeland and *Five Fingers for Marseilles*, each in their own way, negotiate the tension between inclinations to maintain the cruelly optimistic promise of the farm and the possibilities that might be gleaned from within its ruination. *Homeland* makes explicit that if the form of the farm stays the same it is bound to repeat, like the greenhouse, the social and environmental alienation and ruination tethered to the dominant logics of the global economy. As long as the affective and pastoral attachments to the farm do not change, the analysis makes clear, the far-reaching implications of these global connections will remain invisible in cultural imaginaries of the South African rural and become entrenched there. The greenhouse helps to see that the farm and its attendant ways of (affective) life need to be relinquished in favour of relations to the land that are more attuned to its ecological potency and the kind of life it supports. In *Five Fingers for Marseilles*, the farm as ruin becomes accessible to Tau in ways it never was before and emerges as a liminal site from which to imagine the future. In the symbolic mending of the small sheep farm's fencing, the happiness associated with rural retreat is repeated and makes it possible to reimagine histories of black land ownership and farming. The fact that the farm is almost indiscernible from the landscape and the way in which the groups of men and sheep mirror each other in the closing scenes of the film is telling. This arrangement significantly reshuffles the cruel legacy of the farm and, in returning to the question of care of the land, begs for a recalibration of (neo)colonial and (neo)imperial relations between humans, animals and the land.

In this sense, the rural idyll surfaces in both texts to invent ways of living-on in the continuous ruination of imperial debris, and results in the grafting of a more even-keeled evaluation of the past onto desires for the future. Together, the relinquished, ruinous and repaired farms in *Homeland* and *Five Fingers for Marseilles* suggest that the decline of the pastoral South African farm is needed to negotiate different ways of accessing and using the land, but that the idylls associated with it also offer, to speak with Berlant, "different kinds of potential openings within and beyond the impasse of adjustment that constant crisis creates" (2011, 6–7). By moving the image of the farm away from its function as ownership, property and revenue both texts open up generic expectations about what a farm is for, what it looks like, what kind of relations it supports, and what its connection to the surrounding terrain should be. They offer glimpses of change by shifting genealogical principles in terms of gender, by reconfiguring the relation between rural idylls and racial exclusion and by refocusing attention on the care of the land. There is no single way to face the challenges that dominate the contemporary farm, but, as I have tried to suggest, one way of doing so lies in the unique force of the glimpses offered by cultural expressions like those under discussion here. These glimpses can be picked at until they become glitches that can, in turn, be worried into gaps from which new solutions might become possible.

Notes

1. Since 2018, the South African government proposes Land Expropriation Without Compensation (LEWC) as the dominant policy framework through which to accelerate land reform (Akinola 2020).
2. I will refer to pastoral when discussing the genre of the pastoral in the context of South African literature and to rural idylls to denote the broader tendency to regard rural areas as places of happiness and retreat associated with "that moral-intimate economic thing called the good life" (Berlant 2011, 2).
3. For recent incarnations of the pastoral farm, see *Boer soek 'n vrou* (Boer soek 'n vrou 2008 – present), Treurgrond (2015), or one of the many Afrikaans spoken romantic comedies aimed at affluent white audiences (Steenkamp 2016; Steyn 2016, 2019). In many of these present day pastorals, black labourers remain a "shadowy presence flitting across the stage now and then to hold a horse or serve a meal" (Coetzee 1988, 5).
4. For an in-depth analysis of how (regional) colonialism and apartheid continue to affect black impoverished rural populations, see "Agrarian Change, Rural Poverty, and Land Reform in South Africa since 1994," a special issue of the *Journal of Agrarian Change* from 2013.
5. I will reference the English translation of *Homeland* and the English subtitles of *Five Fingers for Marseilles*. Since I speak Afrikaans but no Sesotho or Xhosa, I am resorting to the common linguistic denominator of their English versions.
6. The community received 40,000 hectares of land from six farms around the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park in 1999, to which an additional 28,000 hectares inside the park were added in 2002 (Dikgang and Muchapondwa 2016, 66).
7. This plotline resonates with the Hoodia case. When the medicinal properties of the plant *Hoodia gordonii* were isolated and patented by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in South Africa (CSIR) in 1996, the San wanted to communally claim royalties for this knowledge. The resulting legal processes have "had the effect of sedimenting and articulating San 'identity'" in the face of the "*socio*cide" that threatens them (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 92).
8. The novel eschews the intensive collaboration between the ǂKhomani and several NGOs in South Africa in both the land restitution and Hoodia case in favour of a white saviour trope that sits uncomfortably with the role of Germany during the San, Herero and Namaqua genocides between 1904 and 1908 in what is now Namibia.
9. In Afrikaans, optel is short for *optelgoed*, which according to the *Handwoordeboek van die Afrikaanse taal* refers to something lying around on the floor, but not belonging to anyone. It can also refer to a person born out of wedlock.
10. The greenhouses in Almeria, Spain, where thousands of illegal immigrants live and work in slavery-like conditions, testifies to the overlaps between the greenhouse and the plantation (The Guardian 2012).
11. The director confirmed that the ruin is indeed that of an abandoned farmhouse, probably about a hundred years old. It is not clear where exactly it is located, but the film was mostly shot in and around the town of Lady Grey in the Eastern Cape (personal correspondence, May 28 2019; Production Notes 2017).

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