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# *Afterlives of Land Dispossession and Patterns of Climate Change: Intersections in South African Contemporary Art*

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*Climate change is a vast global relationship made manifest by experiences of variability in local weather conditions. In the South African context, this reality is inextricably tied to historical land dispossession and politics around land reform. Art offers new conceptual vocabularies for understanding and responding to entanglements between land issues and climate change in the country. This article discusses the works of Ledelle Moe, Simphiwe Ndzube and Dineo Seshee Bopape, three contemporary South African artists who explore land politics either explicitly as material or indirectly through metaphor. Three concepts – entanglement, hyperobjects and fabulation – are speculatively submerged into the land to analyse selected works by the three artists, additionally drawing from qualitative interviews, visual material and online news media. The article situates the artists' work in the nexus between land politics and climate change, exploring three mediums to offer new metaphors for meaning-making in South Africa's climate knowledge infrastructure, increasingly critical for understanding and responding to climate change in the country.*

**Keywords:** climate change; land reform; contemporary art; Ledelle Moe; Simphiwe Ndzube; Dineo Seshee Bopape

## **Introduction**

The effects of climate change, as a global problem experienced at the local level, differ according to all the physical and human particularities of place, from geographic to political, economic to cultural.<sup>1</sup> According to meteorologists Theodore G. Shepherd and Adam H. Sobel, climate science is constrained by this dichotomy, often taking the scale of the global as normative and the local as accidental, thereby detaching knowledge from meaning.<sup>2</sup> Writing about the idea of 'a climate knowledge infrastructure' in *Science and Technology Studies*, Paul N. Edwards suggests that, as a form of history (of the weather), '[t]he climate knowledge infrastructure is constantly opening itself, re-examining every datum and data set, reanalysing its data, adding to its metadata. Over time, countless iterations of that

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1 Climate is the average weather in a given area over a period of time, and climate change is any systematic change in the long-term statistics of climate variables, such as temperature, precipitation, pressure or wind sustained over several decades or longer. This can be due to natural external changes in solar emission or changes in the earth's orbit, natural internal processes of the climate system, or it can be human-induced. According to the World Meteorological Organisation, the classical period used for describing a climate is 30 years.

2 Theodore G. Shepherd and Adam H. Sobel, 'Localness in Climate Change', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 40, 1 (2020), pp. 7–16.

process have brought us shimmering data, an ever-expanding collection of global data images that will keep on growing'.<sup>3</sup>

One way in which climate knowledge has grown is through the recognition that communicating climate science beyond academia is necessary not only to enhance salience and engagement and accelerate action but also to question better the limits of purely scientific framings of climate change.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I argue that art can expand the frameworks within which we attend to the vulnerability of those who inhabit environments threatened by climate change and the vulnerability of those environments themselves.<sup>5</sup> I discuss the work of three contemporary artists from South Africa – namely, Ledelle Moe, Simphiwe Ndzube and Dineo Seshee Bopape – who address land either explicitly as material or indirectly through metaphor. Three key concepts – entanglement, hyperobjects and fabulation – are speculatively plunged into the land to analyse selected artworks, additionally drawing from qualitative interview, visual materials and online news media. The article aims to use visual art to highlight how historical land issues and related afterlives of land dispossession intersect with patterns of climate change in South Africa.

The article is based on original arts-based research, using a mixed methodology of formal interpretive analysis of the selected artworks, supplementary secondary materials and online news media, and an in-depth interview with Ledelle Moe. Arts-based research methods in social science research offer alternative ways of knowing and communicating in order to understand the social world in more nuanced ways.<sup>6</sup> Across three sections, detailing three media (sculpture, installation, and mixed media), this article situates work by the three artists in the nexus between land politics and climate change to offer new metaphors for meaning-making that are increasingly critical for understanding and responding to climate change in South Africa.

Researchers have shown that visual art employs novel metaphors, analogies or narratives typically lacking in climate communication that can offer viewers more personal experience with subject matter, an irreplaceable foil for the perception of the climate crisis.<sup>7</sup> Specific to South Africa, bringing art into climate communication is an opportunity to explore the intersection between climate change and questions around land reform since 1994.<sup>8</sup> The persistence of dispossession, displacement and disenfranchisement in the country is high on the political agenda: an important consideration, given that, for many South Africans, the lived realities of landlessness and politics associated with land reform have greater urgency than the often abstract threat of climate change. Many still struggle to grasp the African National Congress (ANC) national government's perceived incapacity to redress historical land dispossession and attendant structural violence that continues to characterise post-

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3 P.N. Edwards, *A Vast Machine: Computer Models, Climate Data, and the Politics of Global Warming* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2010), p. xviii.

4 C. Howarth, L. Parsons and H. Thew, 'Effectively Communicating Climate Science beyond Academia: Harnessing the Heterogeneity of Climate Knowledge', *One Earth*, 2, 4 (2020), pp. 320–24.

5 The term 'art' here refers to all forms of contemporary visual arts such as painting, drawing, photography, video, sculpture, installations and public art.

6 For more on arts-based research approaches, see A.S. Cohen Miller, 'Visual Arts as a Tool for Phenomenology', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/ Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 19, 1 (2018); A.L. Cole and J.G. Knowles, 'Arts-Informed Research', in J.G. Knowles and A.L. Cole (eds), *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues* (Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2007), pp. 55–71.

7 L. Roosen, C. Klöckner and J.K. Swim, 'Visual Art as a Way to Communicate Climate Change: A Psychological Perspective on Climate Change-Related Art', *World Art*, 8, 1 (2018), pp. 85–110. B. Schneider, 'Sublime Aesthetics in the Era of Climate Crisis?', in T.J. Demos, E.E. Scott and S. Banerjee (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change* (New York, Routledge, 2021), pp. 263–74.

8 For more on land reform in South Africa, see A.O. Akinola, I. Kaseeram and N.N. Jili (eds), *The New Political Economy of Land Reform in South Africa* (Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

apartheid South Africa.<sup>9</sup> It therefore follows that any investigation of climate change must first be contextualised within the pervasive historical condition of land dispossession; in other words, as a vast global relation that is experienced at the local scale in place-specific ways, climate change in South Africa is inextricably tied to land issues.

Philosopher David Macauley describes land (often used interchangeably with 'earth') as one of 'Philosophy's Forgotten Four' elements that have 'exercised an enormous, if often unnoticed, impact on philosophy'.<sup>10</sup> His inquiry into how the elements were construed is a useful reminder of the myriad ways in which land is encountered and conceived: 'as dirt, humus, soil, compost, stone, land, silt, mud, clay, loam, dust, sand, mineral, and excrement', and, even then, not just as ground but as planetary whole and life-supporting home, 'a creative matrix, material base, or generative mother for both human civilization and philosophical speculation'.<sup>11</sup> Lesley Green notes that land has a powerful presence in African literature, citing anthropologist Francis B. Nyamnjoh's argument that land is the ethnography of Africa from within.<sup>12</sup> Macauley observes, however, that, despite the pervasiveness of landscape painting, land is commonly overlooked or under-appreciated by art historians and critics.<sup>13</sup> This presents a compelling opportunity to investigate in art what Nyamnjoh identifies in literature. Mapping the earth in works of art, phenomenologist Edward S. Casey astutely differentiates between earth and land, deciding that where earth stands in for the 'basis-body' of all the animate and inanimate bodies residing in and on it, land is a more liminal concept, both literally as a threshold between earth and sky and in the more expanded sense: '[...]and turns earth inside out, as it were, putting its material contents on display, setting them out in particular places, so as to become subject to articulation in language and to play a role in the history of those who live on it'.<sup>14</sup>

## Situating the Intersection of Land Reform and Climate Change in Literature

There is a plethora of studies on land reform in South Africa, especially as recent years have seen a resurgence of 'the land question' at the centre of national politics.<sup>15</sup> Themba Kepe and Ruth Hall explain this surge by describing how land became pivotal to party-political battles with the emergence of the Economic Freedom Fighters in political contention in the run-up to the 2014 national elections, noting how the party's successful mobilisation of land as a symbol of economic disenfranchisement dovetailed with the critical decolonisation discourses of the Rhodes Must Fall and later Fees Must Fall student movements.<sup>16</sup> According to Virginia MacKenny and Lesley Green, 'land is thus more than a grounding metaphor within the South African context', stressing that 'historical black land dispossession is a desperately urgent national issue' that increasingly energises 'an emerging

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9 A. Akinola, I. Kaseeram and N. Jili, 'Expropriation and the Discontent of Land Reform in South Africa: An Introduction', in *ibid.*, p. 1.

10 D. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas* (New York, SUNY Press, 2010), p. 14.

11 *Ibid.*

12 L. Green, *Rock | Water | Life: Ecology and Humanities for a Decolonial South Africa?* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2020), p. 123.

13 Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, p. 321.

14 E. Casey, 'Mapping the Earth in Works of Art', in B.V. Folz and R. Frodeman (eds), *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 263.

15 B. Atuahene, 'South Africa's Land Reform Crisis: Eliminating the Legacy of Apartheid', *Foreign Affairs*, 90, 4 (2011), p. 122.

16 T. Kepa and R. Hall, 'Land Redistribution in South Africa: Towards Decolonisation or Recolonisation?', *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies*, 45, 1 (2018), p. 129.

populism that objects to the lingering relations of colonial rule in the neoliberal terms for which South Africa's liberators agreed to settle'.<sup>17</sup>

There is also an increasing number of studies on climate change as scholars investigate the implications for health, food security, environmental law and more.<sup>18</sup> Oluwole Olutola explains that, while climate change is recognised as a major factor responsible for land degradation and other ecological hazards such as soil erosion, the destruction of vegetation and desertification, 'the precise magnitude of the effects of climate change on the country's land-based resources are not yet known and of course, still unfolding'.<sup>19</sup> Further, aside from putting pressure on agricultural land, harsh, climate-induced weather conditions in South Africa constitute a major political concern for land redistribution. Successful land reform projects depend on proper evaluation of land, which is of the utmost importance to the search for 'scalable solutions to the country's perennial land issues, considering that most of the effects of climate change can be viewed as impacts on land'.<sup>20</sup> M. Timm Hoffman captures this well in his investigation of changes in land use and land cover since the 1913 Natives Land Act. In three different biomes, he finds that vegetation responses to changing patterns of political, social, cultural and environmental influences suggest that land reform programmes depend on clear understandings of land use for maintaining the proper functioning of ecosystems; so planning for future climate and land cover change is critical within the land-reform process.<sup>21</sup>

The gap in the literature, however, lies in how land issues and climate change are interconnected.<sup>22</sup> Recognising that climate change causes land degradation or that extreme weather has implications for the value estimations of agricultural land does not quite capture the entangled nature of land issues and climate concerns in South Africa: climate change not only depletes land-based resources, it is also intricately entangled with almost all facets of human existence.<sup>23</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument that anthropogenic climate change will 'spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history' has become a seminal starting point for interdisciplinary approaches to climate change.<sup>24</sup> Julia Adenay Thomas's investigation of the divide between the humanities and the sciences, which 'melts in the heat of global warming', is also interesting for complicating the view of who is threatened by the transformation of key earth systems and revealing how the risks of climate change cannot be treated as simple scientific facts but should be approached as vast questions of scale and value.<sup>25</sup> Enormous networks of cause and effect mean that, while many understand that climate change exists and recognise both extreme symptoms (hurricanes and wildfires) and mundane trappings (shipping art across the planet),

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17 V. MacKenny and L. Green, 'Extracting the Cost', in T.J. Demos, E.E. Scott and S. Banerjee (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change* (New York and Abingdon, Routledge, 2021), p. 18.

18 M.F. Chersich *et al.*, 'Impacts of Climate Change on Health and Wellbeing in South Africa', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15, 9 (2018), pp. 1–14; J. Verschuur *et al.*, 'Climate Change as a Driver of Food Insecurity in the 2007 Lesotho–South Africa Drought', *Scientific Reports*, 11, 3852 (2021), available at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-83375-x>; M. van der Bank and J. Karsten, 'Climate Change and South Africa: A Critical Analysis of the *Earthlife Africa Johannesburg and Another v Minister of Energy and Others 65662/16 (2017)* Case and the Drive for Concrete Climate Practices', *Air, Soil and Water Research*, 13, 1 (2020), pp. 1–11.

19 O. Olutola, 'Climate Change and Land Issues in South Africa: A Convergence', in Akinola, Kaseeram and Jili (eds), *The New Political Economy of Land Reform in South Africa*, p. 227.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 228.

21 M.T. Hoffman, 'Changing Patterns of Rural Land Use and Land Cover in South Africa and their Implications for Land Reform', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40, 4 (2014), pp. 707–25.

22 Olutola, 'Climate Change and Land Issues in South Africa', p. 227.

23 *Ibid.*

24 D. Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35, 2 (2009), p. 201.

25 J.A. Thomas, 'History and Biology in the Anthropocene: Problems of Scale, Problems of Value', *American Historical Review*, 119, 5 (2014), pp. 1587–1607.

locating oneself in relation to climate change, embedded as it is in the invisible infrastructure of modern life, is complicated. Art offers specific means and perspectives to communicate these intricacies.

The many challenges that climate change presents – scientific, cultural, personal, psychological – are difficult not only to solve but also to articulate or even visualise. In the vast body of work on climate visual imagery in mass media, Saffron O'Neill's longitudinal analysis of climate-change imagery in print media is important for investigating the evolution of this visual discourse and what this means within the cultural politics of climate change.<sup>26</sup> There are still, however, significant gaps in knowledge on visual representations of climate change outside research on mass media. Additionally, while the general increase in public engagement with climate-change discourses (through mass media or environmental activism) is positive, this does not automatically imply a deeper understanding of the processes that underlie climate change.<sup>27</sup>

## Conceptual Dislocation as Radically Situated Climate Knowledge

Against this research background, my article leans on the aforementioned philosophical understanding of land as an environment for thought, and the methodology is thus drawn from the field of elemental media, which engages with the idea that elements themselves function as media and asks what this means for representation. In *The Marvelous Clouds*, John Durham Peters writes about clouds as repositories of readable data about both the carbon overload in the atmosphere and superabundant data from digital devices, observing that

[t]he old idea that media are environments can be flipped: environments are also media. Water, fire, sky, earth, and ether are elements – homey, sublime, dangerous, and wonderful – that sustain existence, and we still haven't figured out how to care for them; our efforts to do so constitute our technical history.<sup>28</sup>

This approach is an exciting opportunity for forms of radically situated climate knowledge.

Melody Jue's research on the ocean as an epistemic environment is instrumental. In *Wild, Blue Media*, Jue develops a methodology of *conceptual displacement*, a science-fictional strategy that involves imaginatively submerging familiar media terms into the ocean to see how they hold up and how our understanding of them necessarily shifts under the ocean.<sup>29</sup> Following this, I similarly submerge three well-known concepts – hyperobjects, entanglement and fabulation – underground into what Lesley Green describes as 'the connectedness of soul to soil that has long been part of Southern African land'.<sup>30</sup> This methodology allows for an interpretive use of concepts to analyse selected artworks by the three artists to address how climate change is enmeshed with the history of South African settler colonial land dispossession.

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26 S. O'Neill, 'More than Meets the Eye: A Longitudinal Analysis of Climate Change Imagery in the Print Media', *Climatic Change*, 163, 1 (2020), pp. 9–26.

27 See K.M.d'l. Treen, H.T.P. Williams and S.J. O'Neill, 'Online Misinformation about Climate Change', *WIREs Climate Change*, 11:e665 (2020), available at <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.665>.

28 J.D. Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 3.

29 M. Jue, *Wild, Blue, Media* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2020).

30 Green, *Rock | Water | Life*, p. 126.



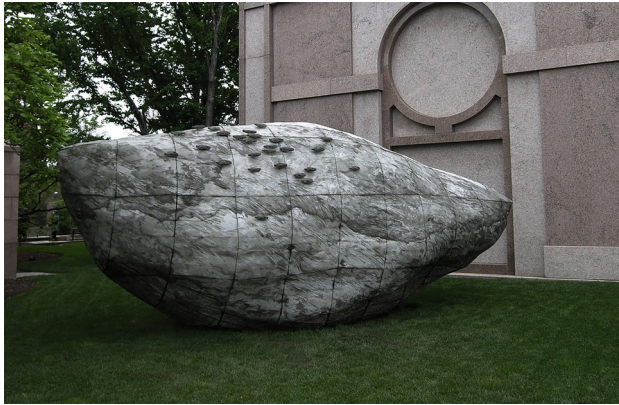


Figure 1. Ledelle Moe, *Land/Displacements* (2012–13).

### Ledelle Moe’s ‘hyperobjects’

Ledelle Moe explores complex notions of monumentality and the human form through a series of colossal and tiny sculpted figures that stand in as material representatives of Timothy Morton’s notion of ‘the hyperobject’. This concept was developed in 2013 in response to global warming and describes phenomena and entities of mind-boggling temporal and spatial dimensions. In addition to being about such mind-bending scales, hyperobjects do something still more disturbing to our conceptual frames of reference: they undermine normative ideas of what a thing is in the first place.<sup>31</sup> Moe’s works and her artistic process, which begins with the digging and gathering of soil from various locales and involves welding, casting, modelling and carving vast quantities of concrete, forces a reconsideration of human relations to land and the politics of both scale and material.

*Land/Displacements* (2012–13) is illustrative of this (see Figure 1). The massive sculpture was included in ‘Earth Matters’ (2013) at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, a panoramic view of approximately 60 works of art from the 19th century to the present, covering everything from colonial conquest to cosmological constellations, plants to pollution. The sculpture builds on previous work by Moe, combining *Land* (2006) (see Figure 2) and *Displacements* (2011–12) (see Figure 3). In the first, Moe was concerned with exploring land as verb and noun by creating a wave of concrete; in the second, she created sarcophagi-like structures drawing on the memory of her grandmother, who migrated to South Africa from Scotland. *Land/Displacements* was inspired by travels through the undulating landscape of a town called Eliot (since renamed Khowa), not far from Mthatha, in the Eastern Cape province. The land referenced forms the base of the Drakensberg mountains, a unique place in the evolution of colonial South African territorial history,<sup>32</sup> marking one of the many junctures of landownership issues that are pervasive throughout South Africa.<sup>33</sup>

The small figures attached to the larger form of *Land/Displacements* were made from an accumulation of soil that Moe gathered along the trip through the Eastern Cape, a gestural

31 T. Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 139.

32 See Calusa, ‘Eliot on a Steady Decline into a “Ghost Town”’: Factors Accounting for this Decline and What Can Be Done’, 23 October 2019, available at <http://calusa.co.za/elliott-steady-decline-ghost-town-factors-accounting-decline-can-done/#page-content>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

33 L. Moe ‘Guest Voices: Ledelle Moe’, *Earth Matters*, 14 October 2013, available at <https://earthmatters2013.wordpress.com/tag/ledelle-moe/>, retrieved 20 May 2021.



Figure 2. Ledelle Moe, *Land* (2006).



Figure 3. Ledelle Moe, *Displacements* (2011–12).

act in which she acknowledges the land while also removing a small part of it and displacing it. Moe explains: ‘in doing this, I felt it was a small gesture of “land claim” of taking what is not mine and acknowledging that act’.<sup>34</sup>

Contextualising Moe’s practice in a full genealogy of South African sculpture is beyond the scope of this article, but it is interesting to observe that her method and engagement with scale present a counterpose to the work of two iconic sculptors: Edoardo Villa’s mode of abstraction and metaphysical interest in the body and landscape similarly ‘draws on the African environment to establish a particular style’,<sup>35</sup> while Jackson Hlungwani’s large-scale wooden sculptures’ spiritual iconography appears, in Mary Corrigan’s words, ‘to be plucked from a natural environment’.<sup>36</sup> Like Hlungwani’s medium facilitating his art, so Moe’s material instructs her process. Book-ended this way, Moe’s huge sculptures certainly invite

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34 *Ibid.*

35 A. Nettleton, ‘Exhibiting “Africa” in Africa – an Impossible Conundrum? Take 2’, *de arte*, 48, 87 (2013), p. 3.

36 M. Corrigan, ‘On Jackson Hlungwani: A close encounter with an artistic deity’ M&G, (2020) 21 September. Accessed at <https://mg.co.za/friday/2020-09-21-on-jackson-hlungwani-a-close-encounter-with-an-artistic-deity/>





**Figure 4.** Ledelle Moe, *Congregation* (2005–19).



**Figure 5.** Ledelle Moe, Detail from *Congregation* (2005–19).

comparisons with those of Villa, Hlungwani and other prominent sculptors, but Villa worked primarily in steel and bronze and Hlungwani in wood; it is Moe's choice of material that is the real calling card in her works. Concrete both reveals and obscures some of the mystery of her metaphors.

*Congregation* (2005–19), for instance, is composed of concrete, like the rest of Moe's sculptures, except that, unlike the massive sculptures that Moe is known for, this work is composed of hundreds of tiny portraits, an amorphous mass of heads that has come to be just as idiosyncratic as her massive sculptures. Moe has discussed this confusing engagement with the possibilities of scale in her work by relating it to the context of the desert terrain of the Karoo, where sprawling distances easily fool the eye.<sup>37</sup> Concrete plays similar tricks: as a material it is both mundane, as neither inherently valuable nor attractive, but also magical, exemplifying permanence while crumbling round the edges. Sometimes an unyielding ally, sometimes a false friend, concrete can resist nature for decades and then

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37 S. Cross, 'Ledelle Moe: When', *When* exhibition catalogue, 2019, courtesy of the artist.

suddenly amplify its impact and magnify the extreme weather that it shelters from.<sup>38</sup> Reminiscent of the flocks and swarms referenced in other works, *Congregation* resembles a map without borders, suggesting multi-species migrations. Moe explains that everyone she meets and everywhere she goes find a way into the work, as she mixes soil from the location where she is working into the concrete, linking distant people and places.<sup>39</sup> Concrete does the same thing: it is considered the most abundant anthropogenic sedimentary rock on the planet, the building material of choice. After water, concrete is the most widely used substance on earth.<sup>40</sup> While ancient in origin, it was only in the 20th century that the material became prevalent in urban infrastructure, and its lightning-fast spread across the world has led to suggestions that it be considered a marker of the Anthropocene.<sup>41</sup> In this sense, Moe's sculptures might indeed be 'fashioned for archaeological investigation', as art critic Charles Giuliano attests.<sup>42</sup>

Much like her sculptures and choice of material, Moe's gestural land grabs are complicated to process, revealing themselves to be both material and metaphoric hyperobjects. The symbolism of the gesture is useful for raising questions about entitlement to lay claim to land in South Africa and the historic convergence of said land claims with migration and collective transient movements through the land. Conversely, there is an insinuation that those making land claims are attempting to take what is not theirs, that Moe's symbolic gesture is in fact calling into question the validity of current land claims. Adeoye O. Akinola observes that land has dominated public discourse in both apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa in different ways: the apartheid regime was noted for land dispossession, and successive post-apartheid governments for the daunting task of resolving the land question.<sup>43</sup> Recently, however, this question is being hotly contested in the light of the national government categorising land reform as 'an existential threat to the socio-economic and political stability of the country' and proposing a policy framework of land expropriation without compensation.<sup>44</sup> Moe's *Land/Displacements* was produced nearly 10 years ago, but these gestural land grabs remain both timely and difficult to reckon with.

Beyond the use of local soil as material mixed into the store-bought concrete, Moe uses the earth as a mould, digging little holes into the ground and pouring the concrete mixture into the excavation, where it will be set until ready for her to use to shape into the mini-portraits. In my interview with the artist, she described her processing of the concrete this way as itself another small displacement, disturbing the land to get closer to it.<sup>45</sup> These inversions bring to mind the vast quarries excavating sand for cement production – what Moe describes as 'inverse monuments' of extraction, gouging out the earth to start a process that involves an enormous amount of stress to mine minerals from the earth. These extracted materials are passed through a furnace, which separates the various mineral components until water is added, catalysing the extracted earth back to what it was and evoking a birth,

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38 J. Watts, 'Concrete: The Most Destructive Material on Earth', *Guardian*, London, 25 February 2019, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/feb/25/concrete-the-most-destructive-material-on-earth>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

39 Cross, 'Ledelle Moe'.

40 Watts, 'Concrete'.

41 C.N. Waters and J. Zalasiewicz, 'Concrete: The Most Abundant Rock Type of the Anthropocene', in D.A. Dellasala and M.I. Goldstein (eds), *The Encyclopedia of the Anthropocene*, vol. 1 (Oxford, Elsevier, 2018), pp. 75–85.

42 C. Giuliano, 'Visual Arts Review: Ledelle Moe's "When" — Figures Worthy of Awe', *The Arts Fuse*, 24 January 2020, available at <https://artsfuse.org/193826/visual-arts-review-ledelle-moes-when-figures-worthy-of-awe/>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

43 A.O. Akinola, 'Land Reform in South Africa: Interrogating the Securitisation of Land Expropriation without Compensation', *Politikon*, 47, 2 (2020), pp. 215–32.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 215.

45 Interview with Ledelle Moe, conducted by the author via Zoom, 9 February 2020.

death and resurrection cycle.<sup>46</sup> But, in the process, colossal amounts of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) are released. In 2018, the estimated amount of annual cement produced was 4 billion tonnes, accounting for around 8 per cent of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.<sup>47</sup> If the cement industry were a country, it would be the third largest CO<sub>2</sub> emitter in the world, surpassed only by China and the USA.<sup>48</sup> Concrete has direct environmental effects such as the constipation of rivers and entombing of tracts of fertile soil, but less is known about the more severe implications of choking habitats: the collapse of natural infrastructure without replacing the ecological functions on which humanity depends for fertilisation, pollination, flood control, oxygen production and water purification.<sup>49</sup>

According to MacKenny, the impact of South Africa's history as a 'mineral state' open to exploitation has been difficult for artists to explore because the unrelenting human toll of that exploitation makes it difficult to shift attention to ecological concerns.<sup>50</sup> But Moe's provocations shift attention constantly; her simulated land grabs are as compelling as her long-standing use of concrete, a material that raises different and more difficult ethical questions today than when she first started using it 20 years ago.<sup>51</sup> Her work resonates with Victor Burgin's analysis that, increasingly, attitudes to materials in art are based on the awareness of interdependence of all substances and all ecosystems, meaning that 'the artist is liable to see himself not as a creator of new material forms, but rather as a coordinator of existing forms'.<sup>52</sup> Moe's candid awareness of the costs and ethics of her choice of methods and materials invites inquiry into another hyperobject: the art market, an arena not only animated by exchanges of artwork for money but also populated by curators, enthusiasts, collectors, gallerists, brokers, businessmen and politicians. A closer engagement with questions of patronage, curation and collecting in the South African art market would be likely to yield fascinating insights into overlaps between cultural value in the South African art market,<sup>53</sup> art investment as a portfolio diversification strategy<sup>54</sup> and increasingly relevant concerns such as the carbon cost of shipping art, or art-industry air travel. Within the subset of cultural economics, the number of publications focusing on the South African art market is, however, small, suggesting that this is a subject in need of further investigation.

To conclude, Moe's sculptures embody the complexity that Morton envisaged when developing the 'hyperobject' notion: weaving together an awareness of human toll from and human impact on the land across scales. Her sculptures are situated in the politics of land in South Africa, the material implications of working with concrete and larger questions around climate knowledge. The complexity of the three pillars of land reform (redistribution, restitution and tenure reform) is itself a hyperobject, raising difficult questions about place

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46 S. Tanguy, 'Collapse: A Conversation with Ledelle Moe', *Sculpture*, 26, 2 (2007), p. 26, available at <https://sculpturemagazine.art/collapse-a-conversation-with-ledelle-moe/>, retrieved 2 February 2022.

47 J. Lehne and F. Preston, 'Making Concrete Change Innovation in Low-Carbon Cement and Concrete'. *Chatham House Report*, London, 2018, p. v, available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/2018-06-13-making-concrete-change-cement-lehne-preston-final.pdf>, retrieved 25 April 2022.

48 Watts, 'Concrete'.

49 *Ibid.*

50 V. MacKenny, 'Land Matters – a Visual Exploration of Land, Mining and Resources in South Africa', *Art South Africa*, 11, 4 (2013), p. 43.

51 Interview with Ledelle Moe, conducted by the author via Zoom, 9 February 2020.

52 V. Burgin, 'Situational Aesthetics', *Studio International*, 178, 915 (1969), available at <https://theoria.art-zoo.com/situational-aesthetics-victor-burgin/>, retrieved 9 February 2022.

53 M. Olckers, C. Kannemeyer and M. Stevenson, 'Art Critic Index: A Proxy for Cultural Value in the Context of the South Africa Art Market', working paper 500, *Economic Research Southern Africa*, Claremont (2015).

54 F. Botha, J. Snowball and B. Scott, 'Art Investment in South Africa: Portfolio Diversification and Art Market Efficiency', *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, 19, 3 (2016), pp. 358–68.

attachment and relational cultural values.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, understandings about climate have long-existed as embodied experiences and knowledges shared across generations, but questions about what exactly constitutes climate knowledge, who is in control of producing and sharing that knowledge and how this benefits or compromises marginalised groups illustrates the ‘unknowingness’ of hyperobjects that Morton alludes to.<sup>56</sup>

## ‘Entanglement’ in Dineo Seshee Bopape’s Installations

Where Ledelle Moe’s work easily reveals human–environment relationships in her choice of material and metaphors, Dineo Seshee Bopape’s installations involve more complex tensions that arise when considering land from a variety of entangled perspectives: history, the politics of place, memory and metaphysics, to name but a few of the many complex sets of relationships that she engages.<sup>57</sup> Her work brings together a vast array of symbolic materials, arranged into immersive constellations that vacillate between ‘concerns with spirituality, advocacy for a multiplicity of temporalities, and issues pertaining to land and landlessness’.<sup>58</sup> According to Bopape, ‘the aesthetics are in complete relation with the politics of how something is seen and not seen in relation to objects, in relation to people, in relation to time, memory over time and things that are re-presentable in memory and things that are not ...’.<sup>59</sup>

For Sarah Nuttall, entanglement is a ‘condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with’ that ‘gesture[s] towards a relationship, or set of social relationships, that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies a human foldedness’.<sup>60</sup> She illustrates this by describing how white settlers’ search for land on South Africa’s earliest colonial frontiers resulted in a search for black labour, in turn creating an intricate historical entanglement as whites became dependent on blacks, and blacks on whites.<sup>61</sup> Green affirms this in her description of how,

[i]n South Africa, fantasies of whiteness and blackness slow-danced through history from one side to the other. Native reserves – later Bantustans – were Labour reserves (economy) justified as cultural ecology (nature). Nature reserves were justified as natural ecology, separate from the economy’s agriculture and from cities and mines. In the current era, where economic imperatives are framed as black, whiteness has reconfigured itself around ecology.<sup>62</sup>

While Bopape does not directly address either economic or ecological imperatives, entanglement lays a firm foundation for thinking about Bopape’s engagement with land in her soil installations. For example, *sa \_\_\_\_ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke \_\_\_\_)* (2016) interrogates memories embedded and presences ‘held’ in the land and ways in which these might be

55 G. Cundill, J.C. Bezerra, A. de Vos and N. Ntingana, ‘Beyond Benefit Sharing: Place Attachment and the Importance of Access to Protected Areas for Surrounding Communities’, *Ecosystem Services*, 28, B (2017), pp. 140–48.

56 A. Chan, ‘Climate Knowledges’, exhibition at MAMA gallery, Rotterdam, 2020, available at <https://thisismama.nl/en/events/home-en/climate-knowledges/>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

57 Art in General, New York, *Dineo Seshee Bopape: sa \_\_\_\_ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke \_\_\_\_)*, Contemporary And (C&), Berlin, available at [https://contemporaryand.com/exhibition/dineo-seshee-bopape-sa-\\_\\_\\_\\_-ke-lerole-sa-lerole-ke-\\_\\_\\_\\_/](https://contemporaryand.com/exhibition/dineo-seshee-bopape-sa-____-ke-lerole-sa-lerole-ke-____/), retrieved 7 February 2022.

58 P. Malatjie, ‘A Constellation of Voids: Dineo Seshee Bopape’s Shrines to Nothingness’, *The Stronger We Become*, exhibition catalogue, 2019, p. 53, available at: <http://sapavilion.partsandlabour.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/The-Stronger-We-Become-Catalogue.pdf>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

59 D. Bopape, interviewed in H. Momodu-Gordon, *9 Weeks* (Johannesburg, Stevenson, 2015), p. 133.

60 S. Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2009), pp. 1–2.

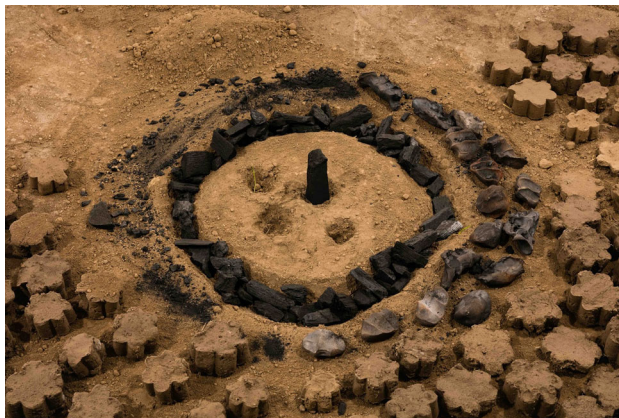
61 *Ibid.*

62 Green, *Rock | Water | Life*, p. 126.





**Figure 6.** Dineo Seshee Bopape, *sa \_\_\_\_ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke \_\_\_\_)* (2016).



**Figure 7.** Dineo Seshee Bopape, detail from *sa \_\_\_\_ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke \_\_\_\_)* (2016).

communicated or sensed.<sup>63</sup> The installation is both map and terrain, a thick slab of compressed earth that leaves only a sliver of perimeter around the room’s edge from which to view it, turning viewers into military generals ‘overlooking a plan of attack on a strategy relief’.<sup>64</sup> Extending the metaphor, some of the materials strewn across the surface of the soil could be read as legends or strategic markers, but they too are materials that need to be considered – clay, crystals, charcoal, flowers, feathers and more – as important as the rivets and depressions encasing them. These holes act as receptacles, voids – disrupting surface, continuity, and memory – and referencing local games *morabaraba* and *diketo*, where small rocks are continuously shifted in and out of small holes, depressions and pits.<sup>65</sup>

This brings to mind Robin Crigler describing William Kentridge’s artistic process as ‘a “promiscuous metaphor” with the potential to echo and refract through multiple layers of a single work’ and the difficulty of analysing his work in the context of a discursive morass where contemporary politics often serves as the single yardstick against which art is judged:

63 ‘Dineo Seshee Bopape’, *Artsy*, 16 September 2019, available at <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-artsy-vanguard-2019-dineo-seshee-bopape>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

64 B. Droitcour, ‘Dineo Seshee Bopape’, *Art in America*, 22 December 2016, available at <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/dineo-seshee-bopape-57354/>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

65 D. Bopape, *sa \_\_\_\_ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke \_\_\_\_)*, [https://contemporaryand.com/exhibition/dineo-seshee-bopape-sa-\\_\\_\\_\\_-ke-lerole-sa-lerole-ke-\\_\\_\\_\\_/](https://contemporaryand.com/exhibition/dineo-seshee-bopape-sa-____-ke-lerole-sa-lerole-ke-____/)



Figure 8. Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Marapo a yona Dinaledi (Its Bones the Stars)* (2019).

‘[t]he issue might best be understood as a problem of medium, not unlike the reductive enterprise of mapping: flattening curves and concealing distortions in an attempt to impose scholarly narrative on a painting, sculpture, or piece of music that actively defies narrative conventions’.<sup>66</sup>

Discussing Bopape’s multi-layered work requires multi-layered engagement with the complex ways in which she sees land as both a container of histories and a host for life and death.<sup>67</sup> She explains that she was inspired by Jacques Derrida’s lecture series on hospitality, in which he questions the host–guest relationship through a geopolitical lens and what it means to cross national borders and become a guest in a host country, and intrigued by the idea ‘that to be hospitable could mean playing host, and conversely being held hostage’.<sup>68</sup> This interest is evident throughout her soil series, which sprouts different meanings based on the location of their installation: in South Africa, Bopape was specifically thinking about politics of place but when *sa \_\_\_ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke \_\_\_)* was installed at Art in General in the USA, the exhibition coincided with the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. This coincidence revealed the fraught history of land in the USA and ‘underscored in a new and specific way what she had been trying to get at all along in her soil sculptures: that the land is far more than a material substance’.<sup>69</sup>

In both her visual treatment of her titles and her choice of material, Bopape layers meaning: for instance, clarifying that she works with soil, not dirt.<sup>70</sup> Where Moe’s material choice looms because of the shadow cast by concrete as a hyperobject, Bopape plays with granular details. Curators Nomusa Makhubu and Nkule Mabaso expand on Bopape’s use of land as material in their description of *Marapo a yona Dinaledi (Its Bones the Stars)* (2019), the installation included in ‘The Stronger We Become’, the South Africa pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale:

66 R.K. Crigler, William Kentridge: Process as Metaphor & Other Doubtful Enterprises; Awakenings: The Art of Lionel Davis, *African Arts*, 52, 3 (2019), p. 86.

67 Art in General, New York, *Dineo Seshee Bopape: sa \_\_\_ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke \_\_\_)*, Contemporary And (C&), Berlin, available at [https://contemporaryand.com/exhibition/dineo-seshee-bopape-sa-\\_\\_\\_-ke-lerole-sa-lerole-ke-\\_\\_\\_/](https://contemporaryand.com/exhibition/dineo-seshee-bopape-sa-___-ke-lerole-sa-lerole-ke-___/), retrieved 7 February 2022.

68 Dineo Seshee Bopape, *sa \_\_\_ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke \_\_\_)*, *Art in General*, 2017, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20200115140756/https://artingeneral.org/exhibitions/624>.

69 *Ibid.*

70 *Ibid.*



the mud and soil labyrinth is like a mind game, requiring that clues be found, and answers be unearthed. Above the labyrinth is a constellation of stars illuminating specific aspects of the installation. It is as though one is faced with the double-coded nature of soil, mud and clay as a medium used in fortification and in building homes, but also as something that crumbles to reveal socio-cultural fault lines.<sup>71</sup>

They describe Bopape's installations as exemplifying the importance of situated knowledge, reflective of its context and mindful that involvement in something changes the way it is understood, drawing attention to embedded knowledge in her engagement of land: 'as one navigates the soil, the mud, the clay, the grass, one is reminded that all knowledge is subjective and constructed on the basis of locatedness and relationality'.<sup>72</sup> According to Portia Malatjie, 'there is an incessant gravitational pull towards the geological' that reverberates across Bopape's practice, like the inclusion of soil from different parts of the world in *Azania* (2016), the representation of the sky and the cosmos in *is i am sky* (2013) and the gestures towards geological exits and entrances (such as the Gate of the Sun in Bolivia) in *kgoro ya go tSwa: even if you fall from a circle* (2013), all of which point to gateways between multiple worlds and multiple modes of being.<sup>73</sup>

This multiplicity brings forth a range of associations: from the extraction of minerals to the larger topic of the Anthropocene and what the land signifies beyond its sheer materiality – ideas of sovereignty related to landownership, occupation, absence and reclamation.<sup>74</sup> In this sense, Bopape's work demonstrates the urgency of engaging with issues of climate change across the highly charged concepts of occupied, unoccupied and forced occupation as they relate to space and place, continually centralising land (and landlessness). *The Stronger We Become* aimed to 'capture the zeitgeist of the socio-political moment in South Africa today by engaging with a multiplicity of conflicting views about justice and resilience within this country's extreme socio-economic imbalance'.<sup>75</sup> According to co-curator Mabaso

most interesting to me about Dineo's practice is her consideration of historical, present, and future time as it is linked to land. Her poetic meditations are especially poignant when we consider how, in our 'settler-colonialist' societies, indigenous people and their connections to land are 'legislated' to the past and basically written out of the future.<sup>76</sup>

Nuttall distinguishes between three rubrics for interpreting entanglement, all of which emerge in Bopape's installations: processes of historical entanglement, entanglement in the temporal sense and an entanglement of people and things.<sup>77</sup> Processes of historical entanglement are illustrated by the relation of dependency between white landowners and black labourers, but also by the enmeshment of land politics and climate concerns across sectors. In the mining sector, for example, changes in land use are often caused by the extreme environmental impact of mining operations on the land used directly and indirectly by mines, as shown by Gabrielle Hecht. She reveals how the mining industry's toxic residues inflect politics on to the land, digging into 'the entangled residues of mining,

71 N. Mabaso and N. Makhubu, *The Stronger We Become*, exhibition catalogue, 2019, p. 10, available at <http://sapavilion.partsandlabour.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/The-Stronger-We-Become-Catalogue.pdf>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

73 Malatjie, 'A Constellation of Voids', p. 53.

74 Art in General, New York, *Dineo Seshée Bopape: sa \_\_\_ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke \_\_\_)*, Contemporary And (C&), Berlin, available at [https://contemporaryand.com/exhibition/dineo-seshee-bopape-sa-\\_\\_\\_-ke-lerole-sa-lerole-ke-\\_\\_\\_/](https://contemporaryand.com/exhibition/dineo-seshee-bopape-sa-___-ke-lerole-sa-lerole-ke-___/), retrieved 7 February 2022.

75 Mabaso and Makhubu, *The Stronger We Become*, p. 9.

76 'Dineo Seshée Bopape', *Artsy*, 16 September 2019, available at <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-artsy-vanguard-2019-dineo-seshee-bopape>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

77 *Ibid.*

apartheid, and contemporary inequalities on South Africa's Rand plateau, which encompasses Johannesburg, Soweto, and hundreds of kilometres of abandoned mine tunnels'.<sup>78</sup> This has implications not only for the quality of the land but also for the well-being of the individuals living on it. Ross Shackleton's study of the implications of loss of land and livelihoods from mining operations in Limpopo province is one of many in the long extractive history of South Africa, where loss or degradation of communal lands is increasingly being compounded by extreme weather.<sup>79</sup>

Importantly, responses to the relationship between climate and land must be contextualised in broader histories and debates around environmentalism in South Africa. For example, Harald Witt's study of alien trees in South African forestry, conservation and 20th-century research and debate on climate change unpacks the environmental consequences of white settlers' tendency to inscribe African land and landscapes as known and familiar, interpreted in the light of research findings from elsewhere in the world. This resulted in local land conditions not being fully recognised, in the same way that local landscapes were not directly 'seen' in the gaze of colonial-era artists.<sup>80</sup> The legacy of 'other country' tropes is also discussed by Carl Death in his consideration of perceptions of contemporary environmental issues and green movements in South Africa.<sup>81</sup> Such careful considerations of both historical developments and contemporary politics are crucial for understanding how dynamics of race, class and state play out in terms of the technicalities of land use and reform, as well as the cultural and political framings of climate change.

In addition to these still unfolding historical entanglements between climate and land, Bopape's work illustrates the temporal dimension of entanglement, enclosing what Achille Mbembe describes as 'multiple durées made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another: an entanglement'.<sup>82</sup>

Bopape's working process is not linear, but rather oscillates across a spectrum of concerns. 'What is remembered and what is forgotten? What matters and what does not? What is visible and what is invisible?' These concerns are consistent with her approach to matter itself: Bopape describes the clay she works with as something that can be formed into an object, but that can also disintegrate back to dust and a kind of nothingness, echoing the SePedi title which can be translated literally as *that which is of \_\_\_is dust, (that which is of dust is \_\_\_)*.<sup>83</sup>

To conclude, Bopape's multi-layered use of soil, temporal-spatial reflexivity and metaphor of the land as host invite the kind of object and spacetime (re)configurings that Karan Barad engages when considering entanglement as a fundamental state. Mirroring Bopape's interest in guest and host relations, Barad invokes electrons as hosts, not just as a body to inhabit but as

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78 G. Hecht, 'Inside-Out Earth: Residues of the Anthropocene in Africa', *Politique Africaine*, 161–2, 1–2 (2021), pp. 385–402.

79 R.T. Shackleton, 'Loss of Land and Livelihoods from Mining Operations: A Case in the Limpopo Province, South Africa', *Land Use Policy*, 99 (2020), article 104825.

80 H. Witt, 'The Role of Alien Trees in South African Forestry and Conservation: Early 20th-Century Research and Debate on Climate Change, Soil Erosion and Hydrology', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40, 6 (2014), pp. 1193–1214.

81 C. Death, 'Environmental Movements, Climate Change, and Consumption in South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40, 6 (2014), pp. 1215–34.

82 A. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001), pp. 14–16, cited in Nuttall, *Entanglement*, p. 2.

83 Art in General, New York, *Dineo Seshee Bopape: sa \_\_\_ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke \_\_\_)*, Contemporary And (C&), Berlin, available at [https://contemporaryand.com/exhibition/dineo-seshee-bopape-sa-\\_\\_\\_-ke-lerole-sa-lerole-ke-\\_\\_\\_/](https://contemporaryand.com/exhibition/dineo-seshee-bopape-sa-___-ke-lerole-sa-lerole-ke-___/), retrieved 7 February 2022.

a way of thinking with and through dis/continuity – a dis/orienting experience of the dis/jointedness of time and space, entanglements of here and there, now and then, that is, a ghostly sense of dis/continuity, a quantum dis/continuity. There is no overarching sense of temporality, of continuity, in place. Each scene diffracts various temporalities within and across the field of spacetime-mattering. Scenes never rest, but are reconfigured within, dispersed across, and threaded through one another.<sup>84</sup>

Nuttall's interpretation of entanglement is useful for situating Bopape's attention to connectedness between soil and spirit, people and things within the historical processes, unfolding events and complex, irreversible and often invisible relations of land politics in South Africa. Barad's work on entanglement, however, reveals the pay-off of Bopape's work: Barad's interest in how matter comes to matter is reflected in the discursive and material entanglements embedded in Bopape's installations, and indeed in the land.

### **Simphiwe Ndzube's Fabulation**

Simphiwe Ndzube uses painting, sculpture and spatial interventions to stitch together a surreal, subjective account of post-apartheid South Africa from a mythological perspective. His characters, entities and archetypes span dream, allegory and myth.<sup>85</sup> Through 'the Mine Moon', an invented universe created by the artist, he deals with historical events that have marked South Africa using magical realism to tap into a 'subtle narrative arc of colonial conquest'.<sup>86</sup> The Mine Moon is fantasy, local legend and national history all in one.<sup>87</sup> Much like black people during the apartheid era, the inhabitants of the Mine Moon ('the Spirit natives') are victims of their oppressors ('the Mungu settlers') who have colonised and stolen the only source of water on the planet, meaning that the natives must fight for not only their rights but their resources too. Introducing 'Uncharted Lands and Trackless Seas' (2018), his exhibition at the Stevenson Gallery (Cape Town), Ndzube traces the history of the Mine Moon as follows:

[w]e are told it resembles a space untainted by modernity, such as the desert and Johannesburg mining sites. We are also told of the Mungu People, the extra-terrestrials that came and colonised the Moon to extract a bounty of its natural wealth, leaving a landless labour class, the Spirit People.<sup>88</sup>

Much attention has been paid to Ndzube's assemblage painting, but less to the artist's fabulist integration of nature, landscape and dwellings in his installations. Fabulation is the artistic practice of fostering the invention of a people to come, 'oriented towards the invention of futures, of becomings, rather than towards the memories of the past'.<sup>89</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Donna Haraway have both independently developed fabulation as a concept: while Deleuze claims a political approach to fabulation, interweaving peoples, earth and territory, fabulation for Haraway 'prevents all theoretical temptations to think of the earth as

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84 K. Barad, 'Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/Continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come', *Derrida Today*, 3, 2 (2010), p. 240.

85 'Uncharted Lands and Trackless Seas', Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, 2019, available at <https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/3644>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

86 A. Joja, 'Fictive World is Not Escapist', *Mail & Guardian*, Johannesburg, 15 February 2019, available at <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-02-15-00-fictive-world-is-not-escapist/>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

87 T. Bahadur, 'The Mine Moon: Simphiwe Ndzube's Imaginative Universe Influenced by Post-Apartheid Experience', 6 August 2020, available at <https://onartandaesthetics.com/2020/08/06/the-mine-moon-simphiwe-ndzubes-imaginative-universe-influenced-by-post-apartheid-experience/>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

88 'Uncharted Lands and Trackless Seas', Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, 2019, available at <https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/3644>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

89 A. Wiame, 'Gilles Deleuze and Donna Haraway on Fabulating the Earth', *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, 12, 4 (2018), p. 535.



Figure 9. Simphiwe Ndzube, *Demigod with Totem, #3 #2 #1* (2019).

an ethereal entity, as a mere concept', instead grasping with both hands the humus, the soil, the shady creatures from the underground.<sup>90</sup> In both formulations, 'fabulation is an addition to the reality it deals with'.<sup>91</sup> The two interpretations allow for analysis of 'arts practice and cultural research through "material-semiotic entanglements" of the factual, the fictional, and the fabulated'.<sup>92</sup> Much like Deleuze politically weaving together peoples, earth and territory and Haraway speculating about the invention of new worlds in their storytelling, Ndzube's 'makes potentialities appear and gives strength to the potentialities it develops'.<sup>93</sup>

The exhibition catalogue for 'Uncharted Lands and Trackless Seas' features a short story by Bongani Kona as well as 'notes on the text', in which Kona reflects on Ndzube's quest for new metaphors, a new vocabulary with which to speak of our time and place. Kona quotes novelist Ben Okri (one of Ndzube's influences): 'we're "*Homo fabula*: we are storytelling beings".<sup>94</sup> We make meaning of our lives – as individuals, societies, nations – through stories and metaphors'.<sup>95</sup> In his most idiosyncratic works, Ndzube combines paintings with sculptures, integrating pictorial and textile materials to create works that can simultaneously be seen as two- and three-dimensional, starting on the canvas with landscapes and flying birds but extending to ungended, fantastical figures who live suspended between the canvas and surrounding space.<sup>96</sup>

Ndzube's use of mythological frames to illuminate reality can easily be likened to Nicholas Hlobo's reliance on Xhosa mythology to address contemporary South Africa more easily. Physical similarities can also be drawn between Ndzube's characters and Hlobo's half-man, half rubber-bag figure in 'Ndiyafuna' (2006), which Andrew van der Vlies describes as 'a creature of liminal space *par excellence*, one either emerging or being swallowed,

90 *Ibid.*

91 *Ibid.*

92 J. Salazar, 'Speculative Fabulation: Researching Worlds to Come in Antarctica', in J.F. Salazar, S. Pink, A. Irving and J. Sjöberg (eds), *Anthropologies and Futures: Researching Emerging and Uncertain Worlds* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2017), p. 154.

93 Wiame, 'Gilles Deleuze and Donna Haraway', p. 535.

94 B. Okri, *A Way of Being Free* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997), cited in B. Kona, *Simphiwe Ndzube: Uncharted Lands and Trackless Seas*, exhibition catalogue, Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, 2019, available at [https://issuu.com/stevensonctandjhb/docs/simphiwe\\_ndzube\\_catalogue\\_issuu?e=9663888/68755094](https://issuu.com/stevensonctandjhb/docs/simphiwe_ndzube_catalogue_issuu?e=9663888/68755094), retrieved 7 February 2022, p. 9.

95 Kona, *Simphiwe Ndzube: Uncharted Lands and Trackless Seas*, p. 9.

96 L. Ficca, 'Simphiwe Ndzube's Metaphorical Universe', *Mutual Art*, New York, 14 January 2020, available at: [https://www.mutualart.com/Article/Simphiwe-Ndzube-s-Metaphorical-Universe/79782D0C35B55D85?source\\_page=Artist%5CArticles](https://www.mutualart.com/Article/Simphiwe-Ndzube-s-Metaphorical-Universe/79782D0C35B55D85?source_page=Artist%5CArticles), retrieved 20 May 2021.



**Figure 10.** Simphiwe Ndzube, *Uncharted Lands and Trackless Seas* (2018).

ingesting or being digested, collapsing the boundaries of the organic and synthetic, the strange rubber sack a cultural goody bag,<sup>97</sup> Ndzube's characters also offer a wealth of insight into the processes of fabulation behind his works. M. Neelika Jayawardane discusses the bricolage involved in the construction of Ndzube's characters, describing them as 'learning how to be subjects of their own making', assembled out of roadside construction site material and cast-off clothing and reflecting the ways in which South Africans struggle to face the impact of colonial and apartheid history on their fragmented families, communities and environments.<sup>98</sup> Interpretation of Ndzube's Mine Moon milieu has centred around the reservoir of magical realist metaphors evident in his carnivalesque portraits and humanoid figures; less attention has been paid to the environments in which they exist: the integration of nature, landscape and dwellings in his installations, evidenced by the constancy of representations of land in his installations, either heaps of soil or vast tracts of beach sand.

Masiphumelele, the Cape Town township in which Ndzube grew up, is situated between the charming surfing villages of Kommetjie, Capri Village and Noordhoek – all previously reserved for whites and, as a result of economic exclusion, still this way. Jayawardane describes the township:

[i]nitially known as Site 5, the township was renamed Masiphumelele – 'we will succeed' – by its residents. Site 5's purpose was to serve as a 'spillage area' for the growing population of Khayelitsha – the sprawling township outside Cape Town designated for black South Africans during the Group Areas Acts, laws that were designed to completely segregate South Africa's urban centres. Masiphumelele's residents were never meant to be mobile; their purpose was to be removed from sight; the most they could hope to do – if they were

97 A. van der Vlies, 'Art as Archive: Queer Activism and Contemporary South African Visual Cultures', *Kunapipi*, 34, 1 (2012), p. 105.

98 M.N. Jayawardane, 'Precarious Bricoleurs: Simphiwe Ndzube's Becoming', *Africanah*, Amsterdam, 23 June 2019, available at <https://africanah.org/simphiwe-ndzube-2/>, retrieved 20 May 2021.





**Figure 11.** Simphiwe Ndzube, *In the Order of Elephants After the Rain* (2019).

lucky enough to find employment as a cleaner – was to be in the service of maintaining the ‘prettiness’ of the surfing villages. But Masiphumelele’s residents did not remain still; it has been the site of numerous protests against existing conditions – lack of access to basic sanitation and healthcare, and failures by the present government to deliver housing projects as promised.<sup>99</sup>

A recent tragedy highlights the precariousness experienced by residents of the Masiphumelele community: more than 1,100 homes were destroyed in the wildfire that raged through Masiphumelele in December 2020, a devastating blaze that displaced more than 5,000 people.<sup>100</sup> Ndzube’s recent exhibition, ‘Like the Snake that Fed the Chameleon’ (2021), at Nicodim Gallery continues to develop the cosmology of the Mine Moon, but this time land, landlessness and associated questions of visibility take centre stage, an opportunity to call attention to the dire situation facing shack-dwellers in South Africa – not only from risks like the recent fire but also future ones brought about by climate change. In prior exhibitions, Ndzube’s figures reckoned with drought and desolate environments, but in this the landscapes have grown fertile and sensual: where once the earth was dry and barren, it has now been sown and is ready for harvest; in addition to the mounds of earth strategically scattered, ‘pink flowers rise to the sky and spread their fleshy petal-tongues to

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> S. Smit, ‘Sounding the Alarm on Shack Fire Losses’, *Mail & Guardian*, 25 January 2021, available at <https://mg.co.za/news/2021-01-25-sounding-the-alarm-on-shack-fire-losses/>, retrieved 20 May 2021.





**Figure 12.** Simphiwe Ndzube, *Rainbow Nation of God, Cities on the Sky* (2021).

the sunlight, begging to be kissed'.<sup>101</sup> Among this verdancy, next to a field of clay and steel corn stalks, is the centrepiece of the show: *Rainbow Nation of God, Cities on the Sky*, a stark sheet-metal shack resembling the one in which Ndzube lived as a child with his mother, who had built their home in Masiphumelele. The structure levitates above a patch of earth and mulch emitting a 20-minute sonic installation by Thabo K. Makgolo and Zimbini Makweth that invokes earth, wind, witch-hunting and nocturnal creatures.<sup>102</sup> Underneath the shack is a lone *Protea cynaroides*, the Giant or King protea, South Africa's national flower. Importantly, the shack floats at approximately the same height as the barrier walls that hid the townships during the 2010 football World Cup tournament. Ndzube laments this response by the City of Cape Town government.

After 20 years we haven't been able to fix the problem of the squatter camps and urban sprawl of people who were removed from their places. People got used to it, but when the whole world is looking we're embarrassed like we haven't been cleaning our underwear and socks. We didn't want to do anything about the problem just create a structure that hides, so this is floating, it's hypervisible and it's got this sound that gives so much weight to the lightness of its floating.

An earlier installation, *To Dream Without Land to Plough* (2016) was composed of a primitive wheelbarrow flanked by three suspended blocks of burnt wood and, according to Sean O'Toole, described the precariousness and frustration of township life.<sup>103</sup> By comparison, *Rainbow Nation of God, Cities on the Sky* (2021) is a triumphant fabulation that

101 S. Ndzube, 'Like the Snake that Fed the Chameleon', exhibition catalogue, Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles, 2021, available at <http://www.nicodimgallery.com/exhibitions/simphiwe-ndzube-like-the-snake-that-fed-the-chameleon>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

102 M. Slekse, 'Devendra Banhart and Simphiwe Ndzube: Kindred Spirits Connect at an L.A. Gallery', *Los Angeles Mag*, 15 February 2021, available at <https://www.lamag.com/culturefiles/devendra-banhart-simphiwe-ndzube/>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

103 S. O'Toole, 'Simphiwe Ndzube', *Artforum*, New York, 2016, available at <https://www.artforum.com/picks/simphiwe-ndzube-64536>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

re-imagines not only the fantastic figures populating his universe but also the homes that they occupy and the land they claim through the fluidity of the Mine Moon. According to Kona,

the Mine Moon echoes what the political scientist Achille Mbembe and the writer Njabulo Ndebele have each noted about present-day South Africa. That one of the main tensions is the realisation that the negotiated settlement which ushered Nelson Mandela into office in 1994 ‘did not erase apartheid once and for all from the social and mental landscape’. Instead, it led to a kind of historical interregnum. ‘[I]nstead of setting out to create a new reality, we worked merely to inherit an old one,’ Ndebele writes. ‘Redistribution was given priority over creation and invention. That way we reaffirmed the structures of inequality by seeking to work within their inherent logic.’<sup>104</sup>

Ndzube’s fabulation operates outside this logic, at once calling attention to perilous land relations and trying to transcend this status quo. Much as the inhabitants of his landscapes stride proudly into the present from pasts not of their making, Ndzube suggests, in *Rainbow Nation of God, Cities on the Sky*, imagining the same for the precariousness of South Africa’s land issues.

In a grotesque display of the reality of land inequality, the Noordhoek mountains, just a stone’s throw from Ndzube’s childhood home of Masiphumelele, are being transformed into luxurious and exclusive ‘eco-estates’ that preserve apartheid geography, protecting the rich from the reality of Masiphumelele in the same way as the Group Areas Act.<sup>105</sup> Nomusa Makhubu aptly describes the township as an ‘ecological tragedy’ – regarded by the provincial government as a ‘illegal occupation’ on ecologically rich wetlands, it represents a failure of government, as the City of Cape Town and South African National Parks (SANParks) continue to pursue long-standing interdicts to protect the wetland from what they see as an ‘invasion’ by the poor.<sup>106</sup> Makhubu argues that the ‘juxtaposition of extreme wealth with devastating poverty is bolstered by the differentiation between black occupants who are seen as illegal invaders and white residents who are fashioned as caretakers for nature’ and cites Bruce Baigrie and Henrik Ernston’s term ‘settler public spheres’ to describe the ways in which the exclusive, racialised eco-estates neighbouring Masiphumelele conceal what they destroy.<sup>107</sup> But Masiphumelele is one of many such ecological tragedies.

Official reports suggest that, between 2002 and 2016, informal settlements in South Africa have increased from 300 to 2,225, but, by mid 2020, assessed and recorded informal settlements were said to number about 3,200.<sup>108</sup> Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, there has been a staggering rise of new settlements, as many economically vulnerable township citizens lost their incomes when the country went into lockdown; those already living in shacks (often in the back yards of other homes) could no longer afford their rent and were forced to look for land where they could erect new shacks and live rent-free. Also in Cape Town, Izwelethu settlement, more popularly known as ‘Covid’ (in reference to

104 A. Mbembe, ‘Foreword’, in F. Forde, *An Inconvenient Youth: Julius Malema and the ‘new’ ANC* (Johannesburg, Picador Africa, 2011), and N. Ndebele, ‘Of pretence and Protest’, *Mail & Guardian*, 23 September 2009, available at <https://mg.co.za/article/2009-09-23-of-pretence-and-protest/>, cited in B. Kona, *Simphiwe Ndzube: Uncharted Lands and Trackless Seas*, exhibition catalogue, Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, 2019, available at [https://issuu.com/stevensonctandjhb/docs/simphiwe\\_ndzube\\_catalogue\\_issuu?e=9663888/68755094](https://issuu.com/stevensonctandjhb/docs/simphiwe_ndzube_catalogue_issuu?e=9663888/68755094), retrieved 7 February 2022, p. 9.

105 B. Baigrie and H. Ernston, ‘Noordhoek Eco-Estates Protect the Rich from the Reality of Masiphumelele’ *Groundup*, Cape Town, 23 January 2017, available at <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/noordhoek-eco-estates-protect-rich-reality-masiphumelele/>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

106 N. Makhubu, ‘Capturing Nature: Eco-Justice in African Art’, in T.J. Demos, E.E. Scott and S. Banerjee (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change* (New York, Routledge, 2021), p. 289.

107 *Ibid.*

108 S. Mbanga, ‘Policy Exists, but Shacklands Spring Up’, *Mail & Guardian*, 25 June 2020, available at <https://mg.co.za/analysis/2020-06-25-policy-exists-but-shacklands-spring-up/>, retrieved 20 May 2021.



**Figure 13.** Simphiwe Ndzube, *To Dream Without Land to Plough* (2016).

its origin), is an already densely populated settlement comprising more than 800 tin shacks and 3,000-plus residents and, in a grim example of sardonic South African humour, next to this settlement is another called ‘Sanitizer’, and nearby another called ‘19’ (as in Covid-19).<sup>109</sup> Informal settlements like these face intense risks associated with climate change.<sup>110</sup> Many are ill-prepared for the floods and landslides resulting from poor-quality buildings and a lack of infrastructure to prevent flooding, withstand heavy storms and cope with heat waves.

To conclude, Ndzube reveals the potential of working in a surreal, magical realist mode. By using his shack sculpture centrepiece to bring hypervisibility to the reality of the housing crisis and desperation of landlessness in South Africa, he offers another way to think about the extreme precariousness of informal settlements. Fabulation has been described by Aline Wiam as ‘an instinctive, imaginative act aimed at survival’ and a speculative device born out

109 S. Reinders, ‘PHOTOS: Why South Africans Built an Illegal Settlement Called Covid’, *NPR*, Washington DC, 15 November 2020, available at: <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/11/15/934003088/photos-why-south-africans-built-an-illegal-settlement-called-covid>, retrieved 20 May 2021.

110 V. Broto *et al.*, ‘A Billion of the World’s Most Climate-Vulnerable People Live in Informal Settlements – Here’s What They Face’. *Prevention Web*, 22 March 2022, available at <https://www.preventionweb.net/news/billion-worlds-most-climate-vulnerable-people-live-informal-settlements-heres-what-they-face>, retrieved 6 May 2022.

of the radical shift imposed by the Anthropocene.<sup>111</sup> Much like the bricolage of material and metaphors used in the construction of his characters, situated in a universe of his own making, ‘Ndzube casts objects in new roles, subverting their intended and original social roles by giving them new meaning and uses’.<sup>112</sup>

## Conclusion

Simphiwe Ndzube’s shack installation visualised the pervasiveness of land dispossession in South Africa and the precariousness thereof, but this is one work of many that employ fabulation to reveal the embedded potential of thinking differently about resources, property and ways of living. Similarly, analysing Dineo Seshee Bopape’s soil series installations as a container for multi-layered, refracting metaphors using Nuttall and Barad’s work on entanglement certainly sheds light on her thinking around land as a host; but the discussion also revealed how Bopape’s work throws up bigger questions about the myriad relations between matter and material, land and lives. Finally, viewing Ledelle Moe’s sculptures and gestural acts and the accompanying decisions around material choice revealed, through the lens of hyperobjects, that turning to contemporary art to highlight how historical land issues and climate change intersect is not without challenges.

Art critic William Smith has observed that many artworks and exhibitions designed to raise awareness of climate change or to present historical accounts of causes of and resistance to environmental degradation have their own blind spots, such as the carbon intensity of the global art system. He suggests that climate change isn’t simply a topic for some art to address but should rather be approached as a historical condition that informs all contemporary art, or, put differently, ‘climate change is the ground on which all cultural activities occur’.<sup>113</sup> This is ground that requires closer engagement with larger questions around patronage, curation, collecting and the art market. In much the same way, closer attention to the political economy of South Africa’s history of land dispossession and future land reform as it relates to climate change and knowledge thereof would enhance future scholarship.

Here, I have explored how climate change in the South African context is inextricably and complicatedly tied to a history of land dispossession that continues today, and how visual mediation of this presents new avenues of inquiry for conceptual approaches. By rethinking the familiar concepts of hyperobject, entanglement and fabulation according to the speculative methodology of conceptual dislocation, this article grounded the three concepts in an exploration of the differing interpretations of ‘land’ as material and metaphor in the work of Ledelle Moe, Dineo Seshee Bopape and Simphiwe Ndzube. Together, the combination of entanglement, hyperobjects and fabulation through the work of the three artists tells a vivid story: linking building materials like concrete, spiritual land connections and actual dwellings with the need constantly to seek new plots and metaphors to discuss the challenges presented by both land politics and climate change in South Africa.

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111 Wiame, ‘Gilles Deleuze and Donna Haraway’, p. 528.

112 Jayawardane, ‘Precarious Bricoleurs’.

113 W.S. Smith, ‘Climate Change has Already Transformed Everything about Contemporary Art’, *Art in America*, New York, May 2020, available at <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/climate-change-contemporary-art-1202685626/>, retrieved 20 May 2021.