

# Living and dying in the shadow of coal: Relocating social death and its contestations in Lephale

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## Abstract

Marapong, “place of bones”, is situated in the shadow of the coal-fired Matimba Power Station and Grootegeluk coal mine in Lephale, northern South Africa. Marapong was named after the bones of a local woman, Salaminah Moloantoa, which were found during the development of Grootegeluk in 1973. That same year her bones were buried on Naawontkome farm where she had lived. Thirty-four years later with the construction of coal-fired Medupi Power Station, Moloantoa’s bones became the site of industrial construction again in this current iteration of extractivism. Working from two provocations that emerged during fieldwork – *we are dead here* and *the mines turn our lives upside down* – I relocate social death and its relation to different kinds of violence that constitute racial capitalism in this city of coal. In so doing, I engage with literature on Afropessimism, the black radical tradition, and land and ancestral struggles and argue for reconceptualising social death as grounded in place and time rather than a totalising ontological condition. Such a rereading emphasises relationality and the processes of contestation over land, life, and death, that open up futures beyond that of bones becoming coal for fossil fuel development.

## Keywords

Social death, extractivism, violence, coal, South Africa

Marapong – “place of bones” – is the former black-only township and is situated in the shadow of the coal-fired Matimba Power Station and Grootegeluk coal mine in Lephale, in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Marapong acquired its name after the bones of a local woman, Salaminah Moloantoa, were found during the development of the area.

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Residents, who share and co-constitute a social memory of the place, say that she went missing in 1957 when she travelled from Naawontkomen farm, where the coal-fired Medupi Power Station now stands, to visit family for Christmas. Some believe she was attacked by lions; what is certain is that she died in the bushveld. Her bones were discovered in 1973 when surveyors began the construction of the Iron and Steel Corporation of South Africa (ISCOR)<sup>1</sup> hostels for the new coal mine. That same year her bones were exhumed and buried by her descendants on the farm where she had lived. Fast forward to 2007, 34 years later, to the construction of Medupi on Naawontkomen farm, and once again, Moloantoa's bones became the site of fossil fuel capitalism. Moloantoa is a figure who symbolises the meaningful and material structure of the place of Lephalale: a structure of loss and dispossession because of extractivist racial capitalism.<sup>2</sup>

In thinking through this site of coal as both material and meaningful, I hold two provocations together that emerged from conversations during fieldwork between 2015 and 2022: *we are dead here* and *the mines turn our lives upside down*. The first provocation was spoken by a traditional healer in his explication of the continuation of apartheid in Lephalale and the latter by an activist and evicted farm dweller while recounting the desecration of graves by mining companies. I work from these statements as starting points for understanding social death, relations to the dead, ongoing contestations over land, life and death. This provides an important inroad into recent debates regarding social death and black life in light of the ongoing brutalities of racial capitalism.

The article is structured as follows: first, I outline my methodological and ethical approach; second, I speak to literature on social death from Patterson, to Afropessimism to the #mustfall student movement in South Africa; and third, in three sections on analysis from the field, I show how social death unfolds in this place within different temporalities and through different kinds of violence. In my delineation, the spatio-temporalities of social death can be understood as dispossession of the past and consequent 'upside downness'; a future in which 'we are going to die' prematurely; and a present experience in which 'we are already dead' and count for nothing. In each case, I emphasise the contested and relational nature of social death – contra the totalising ontological condition conceptualised in Afropessimism – as well as the claim-making that animates life in the shadow of these coal-fired power stations. In so doing, I rework the meaning of social death as rooted in time and place and with and from a global south perspective.

## **Towards an anti-extractivist method**

The story of Moloantoa highlights the significance of attending to loss and devastation and to processes that render some lives unmournable or ungrievable in the wake of racialised dispossession (Butler, 2003). Smith (2021) stresses the importance of listening – not only to indigenous communities and scholars but also to the land. I understand this to mean paying attention to histories of the land, to happenings both above the surface and the subterranean, including the disruption of historic burial sites,<sup>3</sup> and material and meaningful relations to such.

As an intersubjective process, research requires cognisance of one's positionality. Hall (1990: 18) states, "[t]here's no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all." Power-laden differences in identities, such as those structured and constituted by race, gender, and class, can make identification between researcher and interlocutor near impossible (England, 1994). However, working from a feminist stance, empathy and solidarity remain important practices within research and activist relations across differences (Bondi, 2003). Positionality is not only about one's

embeddedness in power relations – and as a white researcher, complicity in settler colonialism and racial capitalism – but also how one positions oneself in research processes and everyday practices.

This research was facilitated through my political work with feminist, environmental and labour activists in Lephalale. Time spent with organisations – attending meetings, assisting with workshops and media statements – enabled activists to speak more openly in a context ridden with mistrust. Informed by feminist research principles, and employing critical ethnographic methods, I observed activities and participated in sites of the everyday such as working life at the power stations, community and trade union meetings, and environmental justice pickets. This article draws on the 80 interviews I conducted between 2015 and 2019, as well as more recent interviews conducted in 2022. I interviewed a range of residents, including workers, trade union officials, unemployed residents, traditional leaders, land claimants, and community activists from environmental and feminist organisations.

I adopted a process of slow research over the years, which entailed a commitment to the place and staying with its unfolding dynamics above and below surfaces<sup>4</sup> as well as taking the “time and care” necessary to build “relationships of trust, respect, and conviviality so essential for rigorous research and for understanding complex social and spatial processes” (Caretta and Faria, 2020: 2). However, it is also important to note that in some instances I was insufficiently embedded in relationships and there were epistemic and ethical limits to these encounters.

There are not only epistemic limits to grasping lifeworlds and the dynamics of a place but also ethical limits to the methodologies of research. For Nkosi (2018), the focus on reflexivity is a means to contain the demand of the Other in the ‘field’ through the safety of academia, while fundamentally, we are faced with the question of justice. He calls not only for an awareness of how we as researchers are transformed through the research process but also for a questioning of what it means to be ethical. This ethical demand is “radical, traumatic, infinite” (Nkosi, 2018: 49) and one begins from the point of failure of never being able to meet it. An anti-extractivist research method in a zone of extraction not only asks engaged scholars to reflect on their positionality, but also to do the slow work of attempting to meet the demands of justice in an ongoing endeavour to make research otherwise (Nkosi, 2018).

## On social death

The statement ‘*we are dead here*’ points toward an experience of living as death, a condition of social death. The concept ‘social death’ has been used in diverse ways but generally refers to how people may be regarded as “something other than human or no longer a person. Being perceived as such manifests itself in not being – either directly or indirectly – treated as a person and being denied the rights of a person” (Borgstrom, 2017: 4). Patterson (1982) first employed the concept in relation to the master–slave dialectic and the substitutability of slavery for death.<sup>5</sup> The slave exists “through and for his master” as a form of “living death” (Chassot, 2015; Patterson, 1982: 8). Here, slavery is conceptualised primarily not through a Marxist analysis as an exploitative labour relation but rather as a relation of property of the black body – a body turned into an object (Patterson, 1982).

Patterson (1982) delineated three elements that constitute social death: violent domination, natal alienation, and dishonour. The first involves the use or threat of direct violence – slavery began by violence and is maintained by such. Natal alienation indicates a condition whereby the slave’s ties of birth are not recognised and familial structures are intentionally broken. And lastly, general dishonour is a sociopsychological experience that is based not

on any action taken by the slave but simply on their being as such because the slave has no independent social existence. For Patterson (1982: 13), slavery is not a “static entity” but rather a “complex interactional process . . . laden with tension and contraction.”

In his exposition of Afropessimism, Wilderson (2020: 102) takes up Patterson’s concept of social death but roots it in the claim that “Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness: Blackness *is* social death”. Thus, there was no prior space or time when Black people were free. Within an Afropessimist frame, the concept of social death departs from that of a specific slave relation of domination as outlined by Patterson to that of a political ontology of the modern world whereby “*Blacks are not Human subjects*” (Wilderson, 2020: 102). Wilderson (2020: 248) shifts from Patterson’s concept of violent domination to that of “gratuitous violence” and marks a distinction between this form of violence and the “contingent violence of colonial, class, and gendered subjugation.” The slave is thus not an oppressed or exploited subject who could become otherwise, but rather an object of fungibility or non-entity in the modern world (Okoth, 2020; Wilderson et al., 2017). On this basis, Wilderson (2020: 102) argues that the “narrative arc of the slave who is *Black* (unlike Orlando Patterson’s generic Slave, who may be of any race) is *not an arc at all*, but a flat line . . . ‘historical stillness’” thereby emphasising the nonevent of emancipation in post-slavery United States (Hartman, 1997).

Wilderson lived in South Africa during the turbulent years of the late 1980s and early 1990s and as such his theorizations of Afropessimism have ties to his South African experiences.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Wilderson’s ideas circulate in the country intellectually and politically. Afropessimism was most recently taken up in the context of the #mustfall student movement between 2015 and 2017 as a tool for identifying the anti-black structures of social life in the post-apartheid context, alongside frameworks of Black feminism, Black Consciousness, Pan-Africanism, Marxism and the Charterist tradition. Discussing the meanings of Afropessimism for the student movement, GamEdze and gamedZe (2019: 217, 220) argue that “the image of the violated black body has strong ties to the politics of the Afropessimist . . . the cycle of protest and violent repression . . . continually produces and reproduces black people as ‘socially dead.’”

While underscoring the significance of ongoing violence that structures anti-black life, GamEdze and gamedZe (2019) question the ontological condition of total dishonour and natal alienation, which negates ongoing living connections to cultural practices, tradition, and heritage on the African continent, even if there are varying degrees of alienation from such. While not explicitly speaking to the psychosocial experience of dishonour, the authors call for a nuanced analysis of the ways black people navigate existence while confronting loss, which Afropessimism fails at. In other words, dishonour is not the *total* experience of black life. Afropessimism’s tendency to flatten out and homogenise black experiences is also highlighted in Mitchell’s (2020: 122) critique of an Afropessimist “view from nowhere” and Okoth’s (2020: n.p.) calls for an analysis not of a singular afterlife of slavery but of the “multiplicity of afterlives of slavery and colonization” and “how these exist within a global system structured by imperialism.”

The aim of this article is to theorise social death from somewhere. I think through the meanings of *we are dead here* and *our lives are turned upside down* from a zone of fossil fuel extraction in South Africa and the struggles over life and death therein. In so doing, I argue that the concept of social death holds explanatory power when careful attention is paid to place, process, and relationality, which Afropessimism falls short of. In my analysis, I re-ground Patterson’s triad temporally and spatially. I tease out intersecting forms of racialised violence (beyond a narrow focus on gratuitous violence) that produce living death, show

how natal alienation is not total but rather ancestral connections are constantly disrupted and reconnected, and while dishonour of the living and the dead continues, this experience is contested through claims of belonging and to dignity. Supported by the positions of Gordon (2011), who emphasises the relationality of social death, and Chassot (2015) who argues that the slave is both “living dead” and “not fully dead” creating a tension of possibility, I highlight the centrality of contestation and explore possibilities and futures imagined in the shadow of these coal-fired power stations.

### **The violence of dislocation and denigration of the dead**

As with many localities in South Africa, dislocation and displacement have been integral to the making of Lephalale spatially and temporally. White (2010) argues that throughout the 20th century, life in South Africa was socio-spatially dislocated – labour, life, and death were split between work and home, and urban and rural spaces. The Waterberg region has a long history of enclosing and racialising space, which involved forced removals, evictions of black residents and imposed divisions between rural homes, and work and hostel life, especially with the advent of apartheid and the development of industrial mega-projects.

In the 1970s and 1980s, ISCOR constructed Grootegeluk mine and shortly thereafter Eskom – the national electricity parastatal – constructed the Matimba power station. With the development of these two mega-projects, thousands of black people living in informal black ‘locations’ or white-owned farms in the Waterberg area were forcibly removed to the former Lebowa Bantustan, including the Ga-Seleka villages outside Lephalale.<sup>7</sup> In 1979, it was estimated that 20,000 black residents were removed from the region. The *Sunday Express* reported that “entire townships housing thousands of people are being methodically destroyed” (Le May, 1979: 20). The only remains of the black ‘location’ Pahama in town were the overgrown graves, some flattened to make way for a dirt road, and old plastic flowers (Le May, 1979). In Lephalale, the scene of desecrated graves is a recurring marker of violence and dispossession that is integral to the production of this zone of fossil fuel extraction.

After the 1994 political transition, a second coal boom in the early 2000s occurred with the construction of Medupi and with Lephalale projected as a coal mining and petrochemical city of the future.<sup>8</sup> The two massive coal power stations, Medupi and Matimba, pierce the arid bushveld, which is comprised of expansive farms, private game reserves, and nature reserves. Medupi’s boiler house stands 130 metres high, with a chimney of 220 metres. At full production, it will use 16 million tons of coal per year and is the fourth largest coal power station in the world (Eskom, 2014; Greyling, 2018).

Through the construction of Medupi, the African National Congress (ANC) government attempted to regenerate an image of great feats of engineering and modernity; however, constant technical failures, soaring debt, and corruption scandals have overshadowed the project and Medupi now represents a failed project of modernity, especially in the context of the ongoing and damaging energy crisis.<sup>9</sup> The neoliberalisation of the project through contracts with scores of private companies – with little accountability or oversight by the parastatal – generated high levels of mismanagement, corruption and labour disposability. The health and environmental costs of coal extraction generated further forms of disposability. Lephalale’s mega-projects thus not only produced affective landscapes of possibility and aspiration but also landscapes of dispossession, displacement, and rupture.

### *Spiritual violence and grave desecrations*

The emptying of a place, dislocation of people, and destruction of people's futures equally entails the destruction of people's pasts. In this section, I show how the dead have been dislocated and dishonoured in the making of Lephalale, severing relations between the living and dead. I focus on the concepts of natal alienation and dishonour and propose that spiritual violence and dishonour may be more productive analytic concepts than that of complete severance, which dissimulate ongoing struggles over the dead and the past.

The development of megaprojects dislocated people not only physically but also meta-physically, in time and space. Within African cosmology, this disconnection between living and ancestral worlds impacts the life of communities and their feelings of wholeness and disalienation (Motsemme, 2018). "High ones" or "ancestral spirits" – referred to as *Badimo* in Setswana – act as mediators between God and the living – they can be dead members of society or elder members of the family who have acquired sacred roles and play an important role in the welfare of families and communities (Dube, 1999). *Badimo* are threads connecting the present with pasts and futures (Dube, 1999; Setiloane, 1976). These connecting threads need to be maintained and honoured, often at place-specific ancestral sites.

The family of Moloantoa struggled for years to access her gravesite. Her grandson stated, "she was buried there [at Medupi] but you were never able to access her grave... because when they [Eskom] started the project, they did as they like, until we fought them" (Interview, 17 May 2017). Eventually, after several years, her family gained access to her gravesite. Contestation around grave desecrations and relocations is common in mining areas in post-apartheid South Africa, highlighting an ongoing struggle to mourn black lives in zones of extraction (Butler, 2003; Skosana, 2019).

Moloantoa's grave was not the only one over which Medupi was constructed; a group of affected families also laid grievances. Since 2007, affected families repeatedly raised their concerns with Eskom regarding the construction of Medupi on burial grounds: "Medupi knew there were graves, but they continued" (Interview, 5 May 2017). In 2015, after considerable pressure, Eskom commissioned an independent assessment. Eskom's commissioned report absolved Eskom, stating, "unbeknown to Eskom there were some graves at the site where the main infrastructural components of the power plant were to be placed on the Farm Naawontkomen" (Silidi et al., 2018: 13). The independent assessment found 20 heritage sites, including preserved gravesites, disturbed burial sites, unconfirmed graves, and buildings on the site. Affected families expressed frustration that Eskom failed to respond to their concerns; some suspected that the Eskom manager and municipal officials colluded to cover up evidence of human bones discovered during the preparation phases of construction (Silidi et al., 2015).

The mother of a boy, Jankie, whose grave was on the site, lamented that "no proper rites had been followed" for her son's reburial at Marapong cemetery. She reported "persistent stress disorders" due to the indecent exhumation (Silidi et al., 2015: 58), and explained that she experienced "a lot of pain" and was "hurt by the way things were done" (cited in eNCA, 2015: n.p.). She experienced a condition of disconnection: "where I live is not beautiful because my people are gone and I am left alone" (cited in eNCA, 2015: n.p.). Another member of Jankie's family recounted how he was forced to exhume Jankie's remains, which led to "deep psychological trauma" and "cast a bad spell", affecting his family life (Silidi et al., 2015: 58).

The infant burial site of Johannes was another desecrated site. His father tried to put pressure on Eskom to address this:

I had to fight because I don't know what they have done to my son, they dug up where he was buried. I don't know where he is... We had buried him according to traditional customs... Now as we speak my wife has many problems, she is always complaining about pains. (cited in eNCA, 2015: n.p.)

The families expressed psychological trauma, physical pain, and material hardship due to the dislocation and desecration of their family's graves. The inability to access gravesites also left family members feeling disconnected and dislocated in space and time. Similarly, Skosana (2019) in her study of grave relocations for coal mining in Mpumalanga found that families whose ancestral graves were desecrated suffered from psychological trauma as well as spiritual insecurity and material hardship.

The dishonour of ancestors in the Lephale area is felt deeply as an *upside downness*. Ketsile,<sup>10</sup> an activist from an informal settlement in Steenbokpan, 50 kilometres west of Lephale's urban centre, described the defilement and dislocation of the dead from the living in the following way:

[The mines] turn our lives upside down... 15 people were exhumed without the permission of the families... Lephale Municipality took out a vehicle that took 15 [dead] people without the permission of their families. When their families got there they found graves without bodies. (Fieldnotes, 14 May 2016)

He narrated a long history of farmworkers belonging to the land of their ancestors, with such relations being severed and defiled through regimes of racialised private property:

People [farmworkers] moved because they were being evicted, leaving their parents from 1909 who were buried in those farms. My brother stays in another farm whereby in that farm, the white farmer took a caterpillar and destroyed the graves... Another one where I was fencing, and when I was digging the holes, I said to him [the farmer], 'The place where I am digging there are graves' and he... organis[ed] for a caterpillar to come and destroy those graves. (Fieldnotes, 14 May 2016)

Similarly, a farmworker, Tumelo, described how he was evicted from his ancestor's farm, Vaalpensloop, in 2014 where his family graves were. His great grandparents were born on the farm after his family travelled from Botswana in the 1800s. The farm was bought by Exxaro coal mine and in 2017, most of the graves were relocated from the farm without his permission, leaving him physically and spiritually ill. He explained that he lost weight and nearly died when the graves of his grandparents were relocated and will only be at peace if his ancestors return to their land (Interview, 15 September 2022).

Residents understood problems in Lephale through the frame of restless and disturbed ancestors. For example, residents attributed the occurrence of work accidents to restless ancestors at Medupi (Pretorius, 2016). Kagiso, a traditional healer, explained, "when people talk about Medupi, they will tell you everything is wrong... they are messing with ancestral places, and do you know what kind of trouble that caused?" (Interview, 5 May 2017).

Another elder reported that “children are sick and many deaths are happening because of upset spirits” (cited in eNCA, 2014: n.p.). These accounts point towards the violence of dishonouring the dead and consequent ontological dislocation in time and space. Countering the progressive narrative of modernity and development, this ontological dislocation is not one in which modernity has displaced ‘tradition’ or a ‘backward’ past with a ‘modern’ future, but rather reveals the unfolding of the very contradictions and disruptions of racialised modernity (McEwan, 2008).

The experience of the mines ‘turn[ing] our lives upside down’ is indicative of an ongoing connection – that is being violently and repeatedly disrupted – to the land, heritage, and ancestors rather than complete natal alienation. Patterson (1982: 5) argues that the slave was “culturally isolated from the social heritage of his [sic] ancestors. He [sic] had a past, to be sure. But a past is not a heritage.” However, the above accounts of dishonour of the dead and the severing of threads to ancestors highlight gamEdze and gamedZe’s (2019) point that despite this, African cultural practices and traditions persist. Alienation from such becomes a form of dispossession and spiritual violence, resulting in dislocation in time and space. This spatio-temporal dislocation involves both a severance of relations to the past and with the land where ancestors are buried, as well as a severance of relations to the future, the possibility of becoming an ancestor. This creates an *upside downness* and *stuckness*. As Tumelo stated, “life is stuck because I can’t speak and communicate with my ancestors” (Interview, 15 September 2022). The upending of the cosmic order and dishonouring of ancestors is a spiritual violence inflicted on the living and the dead: “The outstanding fact here is that in post-apartheid South Africa the African body continues to be violated and marginalised *even when dead*” (Skosana, 2019: 160).

### *Graves as sites of claim-making*

In 2016, after nine years of contestation, Eskom held a cleansing ceremony at Medupi. The Kgoro Shrine Memorial site was built with a commemorative plaque, graves were moved and five heritage sites, including old settlements, were preserved. The ceremony was conducted at dawn and Kagiso, who performed the ceremony, described it thus:

We did what our ancestors need[ed]... The bones that were taken... we talk[ed] with them saying, ‘We are taking you from here and we are putting you where people are staying, then we will visit you’... they [the ancestors] are sleeping in peace. (Interview, 5 May 2017)

It is understood that this will prevent future strikes and accidents on-site and assist in securing the future. As White (2010: 508) argues, the relation to ancestors and the past is necessarily a relation to futurity, a way to “secure ongoing reproduction and expansion” of the family.

However, despite the cleansing ceremony, the gravesites, access to them and practices of memorialisation continue to be sources of distress. Two elderly women living in Marapong described how the ceremony excluded some claimants:

We went there and told Eskom that that was our place... I was the one who told them about those graves... They perform[ed] the ceremony last year... They are saying nothing to us. We get nothing... My heart is so heartbroken. (Interview, 22 May 2017)

This assertion of historical belonging, despite exclusion from the ceremony can be seen as part of the struggle to secure a future in the face of material and spiritual dispossession. This



is not unique to Lephhalale and is also evident in other zones of extraction. For instance, the claim to hundreds of graves in Kwanyana forms part of resistance to titanium mining development in the Wild Coast in the Eastern Cape, “of big concern is that the mining company says it has identified only three graves in the area . . . but this is untrue. We have hundreds of graves here . . . The graves will just be desecrated” (Dlamini, 2016: n.p.). As Skosana (2019: 24, 131) argues, graves “serve as a form of evidence which confirms the status of communities whose belonging was historically disregarded” and further “must be seen to constitute a form of material evidence that validates citizenship in the post-apartheid era.” Claims to graves are thus not only about refusing spiritual dispossession but also signify a means of material contestation, of attempting to secure one’s belonging to place and land.

The demand for reparations for desecrated graves is an element of material claims. Affected families called for land, housing, employment, and financial forms of compensation for emotional distress and material loss (Fieldnotes, 19 May 2017; Interview, 22 May 2017). Skosana (2019) argues through the Tweefontein Colliery case study in the Mpumalanga Province that demands for compensation are bound up with notions of ownership and belonging as well as recognition of historical labour on the land – sometimes dating back to the early 20th century when families were removed from farmlands – and were linked to their land claims. The deceased family members’ compensation demands were refused by Eskom on the basis that the cultural significance of gravesites could not be monetised. Eskom’s consultants reported where there was no “wilful or malicious action” and thus “no moral or ethical merit for compensation” (Silidi et al., 2018: 54). Eskom undertook some development initiatives intended to benefit affected families, such as employment opportunities, but at a meeting between Eskom and affected families, it was revealed that very few had benefited from such strategies (Fieldnotes, 19 May 2017). Moreover, while the loss and pain caused by desecrated graves indeed cannot be monetised, it was evident that the affected families experienced the failure of Eskom’s reparative interventions as a continuation of injustice.

The ceremony and construction of the Kgoro Shrine was intended to achieve closure. According to the commissioned report,

The Shrine, a simple structure of vernacular stonework, is juxtaposed to the imposing power station, creating a cultural landscape of contrasting elements with the message that a modern industrial project of such gigantic scale is operating on peaceful terms with the spirits of the land. (Silidi et al., 2018: 7).

However, I argue that this juxtaposition remains a haunting contradiction. Families continued to feel distressed and *upside down* despite Eskom’s attempts to put the “lid on the grave”. Furthermore, Kagiso expressed concern that every farm has graves but people are unable to make legal claims to protect their ancestral grounds:

People do mining here but every farm has graves . . . I have got nothing to say because I have no money. You will be able to pay lawyers and all that . . . I am not registered in that farm but I was born here, my father and my grandfathers are born here. (Interview, 5 May 2017)

Skosana (2019: 159) underscores the inadequacies of legal protection of heritage in the face of market-friendly mineral and private property regimes that result in “new forms of exclusion for African people” such that the grave becomes a key site of material claim-making in the post-apartheid iteration of racial capitalism. This is not a clash between the ‘modern’

and the 'traditional' but a way of claiming belonging in the face of the logics of capital and dominant narratives of progress and development (Skosana, 2019). The official narrative of memorialisation dissimulates contestation in relation to heritage and forms of remembering (Bhabha, 1990). And moreover, Barnard-Naudé (2009) contends that the lack of reparative justice in post-apartheid South Africa is a manifestation of the refusal to engage in the ongoing work of mourning and ethical responsibility for the other, as is evident in Lephalale. The infrastructures of the mining and energy industries alongside the shrine produces a haunting landscape, signifying a failed attempt at reparation in the face of the ongoing dishonouring and disposability of black life.

### **'Our generation and coming generations are going to die': Slow violence and disposability**

In the previous section, I looked at how the creation of zones of extraction for accumulation under racial capitalism dishonours the dead and inflicts spiritual violence on the living. In this section, I consider the experience of living with death. This is the second kind of social death that I unpack, which emerged from the stories shared by residents: the slow violence of environmental destruction and racism, and its concomitant, the slow death of 'surplus' people – in other words, the disposability of the living who are robbed of a future.

South Africa has a long history of creating of 'surplus people' whereby, in the main, women, the sick, and the elderly were deemed unproductive labour and were removed and barred from racialised urban spaces. As is widely documented, 'surplus people' were dumped in overcrowded rural areas with limited options for livelihoods.<sup>11</sup> However, these 'surplus people' were needed for social reproduction. As the Waterberg became a zone of extraction, it created surplus people who were forcibly removed to the former Lebowa Bantustan. Such practices of displacement and disposability continue into the present as relations to the land are severed, ecosystems destroyed through pollution and climate change, and residents forced to breathe the smog from coal-fired power stations.

The Ga-Seleka villages outside Lephalale have been devastated by drought. The land is dry and dusty where once villagers planted vegetables. Small-scale farmers have lost animals and struggle to feed and water their cattle. The Ga-Seleka Royal Council (who oversee 25 villages) stated that the mega-projects are a disaster causing villagers to die of hunger. A community activist explained, "we used to plough peanuts and maize... These mines came to contaminate our water and our trees and land" (Fieldnotes, 14 May 2016). The Council lamented that the mines and power stations disregarded them and brought no benefits: "they just do their own thing and lie" (Interview, 4 May 2017).

The Council further described how the mega-projects cause ill-health evidenced by an increase in rates of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and asthma. The area became the leading sub-district in Limpopo for tuberculosis, with 9.8 per cent of deaths recorded in 2012 caused by tuberculosis (Ramaliba et al., 2017). Residents in the area suffer from sore eyes and sinuses as well as respiratory infections from air pollution. In Steenbokpan, Ketsile stated, "Pollution kills the local people. What do you think will happen to us?... Our water cannot even be used by our animals even our drinking water [is] affected... They kill us with pollution" (Fieldnotes, 14 May 2016). In South Africa, the state has consistently exempted Eskom from minimum emission standards. It is estimated that coal-fired power stations cause more than 2 200 deaths annually from their emissions (Holland, 2017). Modelling predicts that under Eskom's planned retirement schedule and emission control retrofits, emissions would be responsible for a projected 79,500 air pollution-related deaths

from 2025 until end-of-life. Compliance with minimum emission standards on air quality could avoid a projected 34,400 deaths or 2300 deaths annually from air pollution (Myllyvirta and Kelly, 2023). This speaks to Mbembe's (2019: 179) exposition of 'zero worlds' where subaltern categories of humans are "superfluous and almost excessive . . . for which capital has no use . . . destined for zoning and expulsion." In these 'zero worlds', often centred around resource extraction, sovereign power over life and death unfolds in the determination of who counts and who is disposable, "conferring upon them [the subaltern] the status of living dead" (Höller and Mbembe, 2007: n.p.).

Slow violence is gendered in specific ways with working class, rural, black women carrying the burden of its consequences and attending to the disposable.<sup>12</sup> In a context in which homes become increasingly unsafe, air and water increasingly unhealthy, the burden of social reproduction escalates, as illustrated by the words of an environmental activist from Marapong:

I was surprised when he [my child] was three months and started to struggle to breathe and they told me my child has an allergic lung disease . . . these sorts of diseases are caused by pollution . . . Our elders lived for up to 100 years and now imagine if a child grows up with such illnesses . . . Our generation and the coming generations are going to die because of air pollution . . . A woman carries a baby [and] in about six months they have a miscarriage . . . We suffer . . . this place is damaged . . . These people take our resources, and we are left with nothing. It doesn't help us because the only thing we get is illnesses and our people live shorter. (Fieldnotes, 14 May 2016)

Here, structural violence (Galtung, 1969) and slow violence (Nixon, 2011)<sup>13</sup> are inextricably linked in the determination of disposability and, in this case, whose life will be cut short – the production of a premature future death. Nixon (2011: 2) argues that slow violence is driven inward into the bodies of surplus people as cells are somatised and remain untreated. Whose bodies this takes place in and on is not random. Davies (2022: 414) highlights that the slow violence of environmental pollution and destruction "is not simply about time and the uneven velocity of social harms; rather, it is also attuned to the uneven structures that allow such brutalities to gradually propagate." Thus, although these forms of violence experienced by black residents of Lephalale fall outside of any justificatory frameworks, they are not arbitrary. As such, in this inextricable linking of slow violence and structural violence, poor and black lives are made vulnerable to premature death, producing black life as disposable and without a future (Gilmore, 2007; Okechukwu, 2021).

### **'We are dead here': Living as death**

In this configuration of whose life counts and whose is disposable, there exists not only a sense of 'we are going to die' in the near future, but also an experience in the present that 'we are already dead'. Kagiso explained how the past under apartheid was an experience of death that continues into the present. He described Lephalale as a heart of apartheid during which black people were unable to speak or act and how this condition persists into the present: "If you talk about apartheid you are talking about people who know what death feels like. We don't live here in Lephalale, we are dead people . . . we are nothing here" (Interview, 5 May 2017). The continuing experience of a lack of agential power to affect the conditions of one's life was elaborated further by a former shop steward at Medupi, "people [company officials] come from wherever they come from and just do whatever they think is right without communicating with the community - that is why he is saying they are

nothing” (Interview, 5 May 2017). This third kind of social death that I think through from Lephale does not take on the temporality of ‘we are going to die’ but is rather an experience in that present that ‘we are already dead here.’ In this section, I argue that structural violence and direct violence are linked to produce an experience of social death in the present.

Historically, in the making of the urban centre of Lephale, development was controlled by ISCOR. Contemporaneously, its privatised form, Exxaro, exerts disproportionate control in the production and politics of the space. A former town planning manager explained,

the mine manager is [the equivalent of] the municipal manager . . . so they actually did what the municipality did, except if I was a mine manager, because it’s a private town, it belongs to me – I can make my own rules. (cited in Phadi and Pearson, 2018: 2)

Exxaro’s power was perceived as beyond residents’ influence: “the law is still of those people who built the first mine” (Interview, 5 May 2017).

The structure of land ownership is a key pillar in the extension of apartheid into the present. Within the outer limit of the urban area of Lephale, only 9.2 per cent of land belongs to the government, 13.6 per cent to Eskom, 20.7 per cent to Exxaro, and the remaining 56.4 per cent to private individuals – with vast lands owned by white commercial and game farmers (Lephale Local Municipality, 2019). Marapong remains encircled by land owned by Eskom and Exxaro, constraining municipal capacities for expansion and housing provision (Phadi and Pearson, 2018). Water provision is another instance of ongoing private control. When the Hans Strijdom Dam was established in 1986, the Municipality agreed to buy purified water from ISCOR, which the Municipality would then resell to residents. The 2010 *Water Supply Agreement* between the Municipality and Exxaro reflects a continuation of the same logic, with the Municipality as the “Water Services Authority” and Exxaro as the “Water Services Provider”. The reliance on the private sector, specifically the mining sector, for basic water infrastructure recurred in the Mokolo-Crocodile Water Augmentation Project – initiated by the Department of Water Affairs to increase water supply in the region to meet the needs of the power stations and for domestic use (Marcatelli, 2017). However, due to limited capacities, the Municipality handed over partial responsibility for the water systems to the mining companies in the area as illustrated by a Human Resources Municipal Manager who stated, “[t]he plan we have now is to turn that water over to other mining companies who must come in – not a total take over – but take over our purification plants” (cited in Phadi and Pearson, 2018: 31).

The mining and energy sectors therefore control not only large portions of the land but also provide basic services to the area. Hartman (1997) and Best and Ramírez (2021), writing from the context of the United States, highlight how property rights and property regimes are one of the ways that anti-blackness continues to structure the present. This is evident in Lephale as the afterlife of apartheid continues through regimes of property ownership and private control over basic resources, which produce relations of domination such that ordinary black people experience themselves as nothing – an experience of social death – in the face of corporate power. For Kagiso, apartheid continues in Lephale: “It’s a free country but we don’t have freedom. We are still in the apartheid system” (Interview, 5 May 2017).

Structural violence also intersects with direct violence to limit agential powers and close horizons of possibility. Historically, fear was instilled in residents through high levels of racialised violence and militarisation to prevent large-scale activism against the apartheid regime: “It was tough, when you toyi-toyi you go to jail, or they torture you. People were

very afraid to do anything” (Interview, 22 May 2017). When the construction of Matimba started, there was “9,5km of double, barbed wire-topped security fencing around Matimba’s 100ha [hectare] site, with patrol roads on the perimeter and para-military guards at all access points” (Willson, 1983: 10). At the same time, The National Key Point Act of 1980 was passed, which demarcated all Eskom properties as national key points in an attempt to protect the country’s Mineral Energy Complex industries. There were concerns from government that the only power station north of Pretoria, and close to the border, could become a target for “insurgents” (Freund, 2018). The Act remains in existence today, even though it has come under criticism for being outdated and unconstitutional (De Vos, 2012).

While residents and workers remain afraid in the current period, fear has less of a stranglehold over the present such that protest actions and strikes occur more frequently.<sup>14</sup> But even today, when the law (of the corporations) is challenged, the state and private security actively silence protests and strikes, instilling fear. Private security companies, such as Vetus Schola, known to hire mercenaries, visibly patrol Eskom properties (Field notes). Private security personnel have also been involved in the violent repression of strikes at Medupi, with shop stewards being hospitalised because of assaults (Interview, 16 May 2017). In 2016, the Lephalale Unemployment Forum<sup>15</sup> organised a protest to the Municipality to highlight issues regarding lack of employment opportunities, corruption, and environmental impacts of Medupi. Despite following legal procedures for permission to protest, the Municipality failed to grant such. The Forum proceeded with the march, which was violently stopped by police (Right2Protest Project, n.d.). Lesego, a community activist, explained:

The police came. They say, ‘no, you are not going anywhere’. We say, ‘why? We have an application form for that march’... They came with rubber bullets and start shooting while we are sitting down. People run away... That day, it was painful, but the community do nothing. (Interview, 16 February 2017)

Some of the leaders, including Lesego, were arrested. She described her experience thus: “I was crying the whole night [in a cell] because we didn’t do anything. What kind of public violence are they talking about? What have we done? Nothing”. The following day, Forum members went to the police station to enquire about their comrades and a further five were arrested and charged with public violence (Right2Protest Project, n.d.). Lesego elaborated how police violence created fear amongst the community, especially women: “After the march, the women got scared and disappear[ed]. They left me [in the organisation]” (Interview, 16 February 2017). Here, one can discern direct violence meted out that is not contingent upon any (legal) transgression and with specific gendered consequences.<sup>16</sup>

I contend that the fear generated through direct violence – and the threat thereof – used to maintain the ‘law and order’ of local ANC authorities and private and state corporations is part of the production of the experience of ‘we don’t count here’. In this section, I have demonstrated how direct violence and the structural violence of racial capitalism intersect to generate experiences of social death in the present: ‘we are dead here.’ A lack of force or power to affect one’s conditions of life is an experience of life as generalised dishonour (Douglass, 2022; Patterson, 1982). However, those who do not count and are deemed disposable, continue to disrupt the afterlife of apartheid through forms of claim-making, protests and a refusal of death. I argue that living as death in contemporary South Africa should be thought of as relational and contested rather than as an ontological condition of total impasse and impossibility. Affective animation and practical contestations to expand horizons and claim a future do occur. Despite the dislocations, disconnections and violence

imposed by material and social relations of domination, people still act to re-connect with ancestors, to locate themselves in community, to claim belonging to a place, and to protest in the hope of opening up possible futures.

### **Conclusion: Social death, futurity and repair**

In this article, I have attempted to show how social death unfolds within different temporalities and is produced by different kinds of violence in Lephalale: spiritual, slow, direct and structural. It can be argued that contained within all these is an element of gratuitous violence – violence beyond sense-making – that marks differentiations that structure life. However, the layers of different violences that I have unpacked assist in understanding the complexities of social death in this place. The temporalities of social death in this place can be understood as a dispossession of the past and a consequent ‘upside downness’; a future of ‘we are going to die’ prematurely; and an experience in the present of ‘we are already dead’. In my delineation, in each case, I emphasised the contested and relational nature of social death, rather than a flat ontologised condition. This entailed attending to the ongoing search for connectivity, home and belonging in a fractured land, where black life and death remain disposable.

The contested and relational nature of social death in this place – not only in its overt forms of protests and strikes, but also in the quieter daily reparative work of tending to death, life, and land – opens up alternative futures to that of ‘upside down worlds’ where a collective history of living and dying, of bones becoming coal, feeds racial capitalist imperatives. These alternative futures might be a place where ancestral bones and sites are not disturbed or mined for fuel but rather encompass a place of rest and justice for ancestors, past and future. In the details of everyday life in the shadow of coal-fired power stations, one can observe how those deemed disposable undertake “the endless labor of restoring that which has been destroyed . . . sewing up the holes, preventing the destroyed body from being completely torn apart, reconnecting the tissues” (Mbembe, 2019: 159). Attempts to make the present and future habitable are glimpsed when women attend to those made ill from the mining and energy sectors, when the elderly struggle year after to year to access and tend to their ancestral graves, and when youth engage in peer education regarding climate change and environmental justice – these can be seen as examples of “generation, re-creation and resignification of life flows in the face of the forces of capture, extraction, and desiccation” (Mbembe, 2019: 159).

The work of making futures habitable is necessarily bound up in struggles for the past and justice for the dead. This underscores the importance of attending to the multiple temporalities of social death and contestations thereof. Nkosi (2018) beautifully demonstrates how land is integrally about death and the future: the struggle for ancestral land is also a struggle for the future to make a different kind of death possible. In his discussions with dispossessed farmworkers, Nkosi (2018) contends that their anxiety regarding where one will die is not merely about the finality of the material body but also an insecurity about the future in which belonging to the land has been severed. A group of elder land claimants in Lephalale expressed that the land, the home of the ancestors, is not only a force that makes life possible, but also that which makes dying possible:

And we take you there [to your farm] and you only sleep there today and tomorrow, and those two days then make your heart to relax and say, ‘I agreed to come to where I belong’. And then your ancestors decide that because you have fought for their land, then you should join them in the afterlife and you pass away. (Interview, 17 May 2017).

In conclusion, in this article, I delineated three dimensions of social death and their relationship to different kinds of violence in Lephalale: first, the dishonour of the dead and consequent upside downness or dislocation in time and space for the living; second, living as waste surplus with a predetermined premature death; and third, an experience of already living as death or counting as nothing in the context of having little ability to affect one's conditions of life. Attending to the spatio-temporalities of social death as contested and relational opens avenues of inquiry with and from a global south perspective that challenges North American-centric conceptualisations. This counters the epistemic logic of "black studies in the diaspora as theorizing while continental blackness may be viewed as constituting anthropological data and as incapable of theorization" (Canham, 2023: 18) and accounts for the "thickness of which the African present is made" (Höller and Mbembe, 2007). Theorising from somewhere, in this case a zone of fossil fuel extraction, enables an analysis of openings and possibilities different to that of the flat, linear arc of time described in Afropessimism. Social death is resisted by insisting that things are not as they should be manifested through local contestations and the daily work of repair that holds fragments together. Here, perhaps, it is important to return the words of Solomon Plaatje (1982), written after the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 and the passing of the Native Land Act of 1913, "the South African native found himself [sic], not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his [sic] birth" as a marker of the ongoing struggle for justice, past and future.

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### Notes

1. ISCOR was formed in 1928 as South Africa's largest and state-owned steel producer (Freund, 2018).
2. Racial capitalism frames class and race as mutually constitutive in regimes of exploitation and dehumanisation. Here, I draw on Hall's (2018: 175–176) 'conjunctural' analysis, rather than an *a priori* one: "Unless one attributes to race a single, unitary transhistorical character... then one

must deal with the historical specificity of race in the modern world... The problem here is not whether economic structures are relevant to racial divisions but how the two are theoretically connected.”

3. See Bagelman and Kovalchuk's (2019) call for attention to *subterranean* spaces.
4. This has led to more explicitly collaborative work with organisations in the area. See, for example, Lockett and Bagelman (2023).
5. Conceptual affinities have been made with Agamben's *bare life*, referring to those excluded from the *polis* but included in their exclusion; Goffman's *non-person*, indicating a social exclusion, which brings one closer to death; and Biehl's *ex-human*, describing those who have fallen through the cracks of social protection and have no future other than death (Kralova, 2015).
6. See Wilderson (2015).
7. See Ballim (2017), Hallowes and Munnik (2018), and Lockett (2019).
8. These developments are volatile given economic constraints and increasing global pressure to shift away from fossil fuels, as well as local contestations. Munnik and Hallowes (2018) argue that many of the projected developments will not take place but in the process of prospecting, farms have been bought by companies, which now stand empty where once there was bushveld management and communities of farm dwellers (Kruger, 2019).
9. See Bowman (2020).
10. Names of interlocutors have been protected by using pseudonyms.
11. See Beinart (2012); Beinart and Bundy (1980); and Platzky and Walker (1985).
12. See also Cock (2007) and Fakier and Cock (2018) on women's care work in a polluted region.
13. Structural violence refers to the ways in which social structures and institutions cause harm by impeding the fulfilment of basic needs while slow violence refers to delayed or gradual harm, dispersed over time and space.
14. For example, the construction of Medupi resulted in widespread labour unrest due to frustrations such as racism on-site and overcrowding in accommodation for workers (NUMSA, 2012).
15. The LUF was a non-partisan organisational space of unemployed residents in Marapong.
16. This may, however, be better understood as violent domination rather than gratuitous violence given its ongoing repressive function. This line of inquiry requires further investigation. See Bruce (2010) for a discussion of the definitional complexity of gratuitous violence in the context of South Africa.

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